

REFUSING THE HOLY SPIRIT

@5 Gathering — 15th JULY 2018 — Paul Symons

Matthew 12:30–32

- ³⁰ *“He who is not with me is against me,
and he who does not gather with me, scatters.*
- ³¹ *And so I tell you: every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men,
but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.*
- ³² *Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven,
but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven,
either in this age or in the age to come.”*

Mark 3:28–30

- ²⁸ *“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins
and whatever blasphemies they utter;*
- ²⁹ *but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit
can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” —*
- ³⁰ *for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”*

Luke 12:8–10

- ⁸ *“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others,
the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God;*
- ⁹ *but whoever denies me before others
will be denied before the angels of God.*
- ¹⁰ *And all who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven;
but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.*
- ¹¹ *When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the
authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or
what you are to say; ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very
hour what you ought to say.”*

[Editor’s note: the sermon focusses on the Matthew verses.]

Why look at these particular verses?

The same people who have discovered the Gospel to be inviting and attractive and God’s solution to the problem of their sin, are very often the

same people who have been troubled (even haunted) by these two verses in Matthew chapter 12. In fact, I doubt whether people who are disinterested in Christianity would be at all troubled by what we have just read. Many a time these verses have unsettled me as I am sure they have for many of you.

The Question

On more than one occasion, particularly when I think back over some of the destructive, hurtful, damaging things that I have done in the past, I have asked myself the question,

Have I committed this ‘unpardonable sin’?

Am I guilty (in the words of 1 John 5) of ‘the sin... that leads to death’?

And I tend to think that, even if we didn’t have this particular text, even if the verses were missing from Matt 12 and Luke 12, we would probably still ask ourselves the same question,

*Is there an act, some deed, something so horrendously dreadful,
something so wrong and so wicked that it simply can’t be forgiven?*

Is there such a thing?

Approaching What Jesus Says

I am sure that we all *know* that when we come to passages of Scripture like this one, it is vitally important to stop and ask who is primarily being addressed in the particular passage. *So who is Jesus primarily talking to here?* As we will see, that principal is important when considering this particular passage here in Matthew 12.

Moreover, it is also equally important to consider all that the passage says, and not just the confronting, difficult or disturbing portion of it.

As well as that we also need to take into account all else that Bible teachers, and, all that it teachers around the specific subject that’s being addressed, so that, we allow “scripture to interpret scripture”.

And yet, for all of our knowing that... for all of the wise and necessary *rules of engagement* that we must follow when we come to the Bible, still, when we land on a passage like this one, we tend to ignore those principles and go straight to asking “OK, so what is the sin?!? *What IS... the actual unpardonable sin, that’s being spoken of here?*”

When that happens we then *miss* the other things the passage is telling us. And in this passage what we *miss* and generally *overlook* is something that is really most assuring and truly remarkable, something that is most *important* — this passage has much to say about forgiveness.

What you may have noticed as v.31 and 32 were read, is that Jesus is using a literary device there that we are familiar with from our reading of the Psalms, a literary device we know as *parallelism*, where a statement is made in one line and then repeated in the next line. In other words, saying the same thing twice, but using different words to do so the second time round. **One example for you from Psalm 32:1–2.**

v.1 Blessed is *he* whose sin *is forgiven*

v.2 Blessed is *the man* whose sin *the Lord does not count against him.*

As you can see, the same idea in v.1 is repeated in v.2.

Matthew 12:31–32

v.31 *Every sin and blasphemy*
will be forgiven men

but the blasphemy against the Spirit,
will not be forgiven.

v.32 *Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man*
will be forgiven,

but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit
will not be forgiven.

Same idea said in two different ways.

‘Son of Man’

Lets look at v.32 where Jesus refers to himself as the *Son of Man* — an absolutely amazing title that Jesus takes for Himself. *G.E. Ladd*, the New Testament scholar says this about the expression,

Jesus called himself the ‘Son of Man’ ... because the title made an exalted claim. Great dignity was attached to it ... Jesus was laying claim to Messianic Dignity, but His messiah-ship was of a very different order.

And the Gospel accounts bear that out that is exactly what we find: Jesus takes that kingly, royal term and makes these baffling, humble, *servant-like* amendments to it. He says: “*The Son of Man came to seek and to serve.*”

That would have been (and indeed was) a profoundly difficult thing for Jesus’ hearers to comprehend. Something of an oxymoron to those hearing it — “*A seeking and serving ‘Son of Man’!?*” Elsewhere Jesus says, “*The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*” And “*The Son of Man must suffer...*” And although Jesus filled this title with new meaning, the exalted nature of the claim still remained.

Approaching Kings

The Son of Man is the figure spoken of in Daniel 7, where you have this divine figure coming in the clouds and who is leading the hosts of heaven — He’s a figure of enormous royalty. And in those ancient times, the dignity of the royal person was protected. It was defended. You couldn’t just ‘front up’ to ancient-royalty and expect to be received.

The book of Esther gives us great-insight into the dignity and protocol attached to ancient royalty. Esther wouldn’t dare approach the King of Persia unless first given permission to come near. And even then she had to be down on her knees until the King held out his golden scepter as a sign that she may now come closer. Queen Esther, the king’s favorite, even she wasn’t exempt from that! With these ancient kings, to come anywhere near, without being called for, was a capital offense. To thoughtlessly do so, you were killed on the spot. You couldn’t even look kings in the eye. When you took your leave, you couldn’t even turn around and had to walk out of the room backwards.

But what a different king we have in the Son of Man in Matthew 12:32 — what a different king this is! Jesus says, “You can speak against me, and I will forgive you.”

The Approachable King Jesus

We look into the New Testament, and we see a man on the one hand makes claims beyond what any human king ever claimed. He says *he* forgives sins. He says *he is* going to judge the heavens and the earth. And yet on the other hand we see children sitting on his knee. We see Him touching lepers. He is never offended. He never says, “*Do you realize just who you are talking to?*” Not once do we see that from Him.

The ultimate proof of this is when we consider what happened at the cross. Not only were people talking against him they were mocking him. They were cursing him. They were nailing him. And what did he say? *“Forgive them.”* is what He said.

We see this offer of forgiveness there in the “first half” of this verse 32 but we tend to sail straight past it! We are so worried about the *second half* that we overlook the *first half*. The first half of the verse says in Jesus Christ there is an infinite-willingness-to-forgive. Absolutely infinite — there is nothing that He’s not willing to forgive! He says, *“You want my forgiveness? I’ll forgive you”*

The totally amazing truth of the first halves of v.31 and v.32 stands true for **all** sinners for **all** time, *“Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men.”* and *“Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.”* But then, what are the “second halves” telling us?

v.31b, *“... but the blasphemy against the Spirit will **not** be forgiven.”* And v.32b, *“... but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will **not** be forgiven.”*

What are these second halves telling us relative to the first halves? For these latter halves appear to contradict what Jesus first says. *“Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will **not** be forgiven.”* First, He gives this great assurance that there is absolutely nothing that is beyond his willingness to forgive. There is nothing that is outside of His capacity to forgive, and then, there is the small print as it were. There *is* an exception... and so it does appear to be contradictory.

Getting Hearers To Think

But that really shouldn’t surprise us. Scripture, and especially the words and teaching of Jesus, abound in seeming contradictions. It was a common technique used by ancient teachers like Jesus, and they did so, in order to get their hearers *to think*. Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables? He spoke in parables because He was looking for those *who really wanted to hear, who really wanted to grapple with what He said and who’d be **serious** about thinking it through and then acting on it.* He was looking for people who were prepared to put in the hard yards and dig into the truths that He taught through the sometimes obscure stories of the Parables he told. Jesus wasn’t looking for the casual listeners who, if they found it all

too hard to work out, would then to give up! *“With the measure you choose to use (Jesus said) , that will be the measure that you get.”*

Scratch the surface of all Jesus said with a teaspoon, then a teaspoon’s worth is all that will be delivered to you. Come with a shovel, and come prepared to dig, come with ears that really want to hear, and a humble and contrite heart that wants to be taught, that wants to learn and receive, and so it will be delivered to you.

But as to this technique that was common to ancient teachers: Just look there at v.30 of our passage, *“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.”* And yet, in Mark 9 Jesus says, *“He who is not against me, is with me.”* Now you might say, *“Isn’t that a contradiction?”* Give it a casual, short consideration, then *“Yes it is contradictory”*... But, really look into it, be prepared to dig, and it isn’t a contradiction. Both passages have to be taken together, and when you do that you get the full picture, the complete, balanced truth on the matter.

It’s not *“either one is true or the other is true.”* Rather, each has to be thought-about in the context in which each is found, and when put together, Jesus is saying

- 1) firstly to the religious, who want to find fault with him as they did here, that *“There is no neutrality with me; you’re either for me or against me. There’s no ‘detached’ sitting on the fence”*
- 2) But secondly to his disciples he says in a different context, *“Don’t be too quick to think that just because these ‘others’ are not in your party, because they don’t believe exactly what you believe, that they are therefore against me.”* This is the way that teachers like Jesus, worked.

Ancient teachers would say these *seemingly* ‘contradictory things’ in order to get their hearers *to think and so arrive at the complete truth*. So when Jesus does this, his purpose is not to contradict and it is certainly not to confuse us, but to get us to think — by presenting us with a balanced and coherent truth about the reality of the situation.

Back to Matthew

So what is the coherent truth about this passage? Look again at the Part A’s of each verse, the first clause in v.31 and v.32, “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men.”

In other words there is no external deed that you can do; no word that you can say, that is, (as it were) *off limits* and *beyond* God forgiving.

There is no particular sin, no particular deed, no particular word, no particular action that, in itself, is intrinsically unpardonable! That is what we find throughout the Bible. That's the external reality. God forgives us because of Christ.

But the second clause in each of these two verses, v.31b and v.32b, are talking about internal reality — they have to do with what goes on inside us. What the second clause in each of those two verses is effectively telling us is, “*Internally, if you resist the Holy Spirit, if you resist His primary work which is intended to lead you to repentance, if you resist that, then **no sin** is forgivable — not just some particular sin, but no sin is forgivable blasphemy against the Spirit **will not** be forgiven.*”

So, on the one hand, speaking *externally* (in regards to action) *there is **no sin** that is un-forgivable*. On the other hand, speaking *internally* (with regard to “motivation and attitude), *if you resist the leading of the Holy Spirit as He speaks and as He draws you to repent, resist that, refuse that, and **no sin** is forgivable.*”

Why can we say that?

Well, in the context here, Jesus has just finished healing a demon possessed man whose also, blind and unable to talk. It is a remarkable healing. And because this miracle (and the one before it), because they are such spectacular displays of God's power, this is the Holy Spirit's way of showing those present that this is indeed the Messiah, and especially it's the Spirit's way of showing the Religious leaders that they have been wrong about the Messiah.

However, what do they do, in the light of what the Holy Spirit is showing them? They dig their heels in! They choose to deny what they must face up to. They know that they have been wrong.

It's not for want of the Son of Man's willingness to forgive. “*Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven **anyone** who speaks a word against the Son of Man.*” No, it's not for want of the gracious provision and offer of forgiveness. It's not for want of *proof*, that Jesus *is* who He says He is, that His words are true, that He's to be trusted. *No!* for they've witnessed first hand the miracles that have accompanied His words.

It seems that the Religious leaders are resisting that work of the Holy Spirit... They won't be shown that they are wrong. They won't have it. They won't humble themselves and admit, that *they-have-been-wrong*. They won't repent.

And so, while (on the one hand) there is **not a sin** for which the Son of Man is unable to forgive them (*even* their sin of wanting to get rid of Him, *even* their sin of falsely accusing Him, plotting His crucifixion) all forgivable by the Son of Man but not this sin, this *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*.

Externally, any sin can be forgiven for any man. But internally, resist the Holy Spirit and no sin can be forgiven for any of us. That's what these verses are saying.

The Work of the Holy Spirit?

He calls on you/me, without 'seeking to defend ourselves' without 'blame-shifting' without 'excuse making' without 'anger'... to get us to confess, to say, "*I was wrong,*" "*I was in the wrong here,*" "*I am responsible for this situation.*" His work is to get us to own up, to come-clean. "*If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sin ... from all unrighteousness.*"

Only the Holy Spirit can lead you to that, and lead you to it is all that He can do. He cannot confess for you. He cannot repent for you. *But*, if you resist Him when He does speak, then even the tiniest sin can absolutely destroy your life. There is a remedy for everything if you repent; there is a remedy for nothing if you do not.

Are you left wondering whether you have committed the Unpardonable Sin? Here is a word of assurance. If you are afraid you have committed the unpardonable sin, then you have not. If every second commentator does not make that point, then every third commentator certainly does! Because, *even* to entertain that concern, the fact of that concern that you might miss out on having God's forgiveness and presence means *you can take comfort because you yourself are just not capable of it.* Only the Holy Spirit can produce that kind of concern.