

November 22, 2009
Matthew 12:30-32 / Luke 12:4-12
The One Unforgivable Sin

I couldn't begin today without clarifying a couple things from last week's sermon! Last week some of you remembered that two weeks ago I mentioned how I'd like to leave time after each service for questions and answers in relation to anything that was said or shared in the message or service. And a couple of you did that in relation to my comments on human value — which I really appreciate!

Yet, since I'm assuming they were only representative of others who didn't come forward, I'd like to give three points I may have overlooked or not explained sufficiently last week.

FIRST is the issue of inherent worth vs. imparted worth. And here I apologize because I did address that issue in my manuscript, though I apparently skipped over it in my message. I did point out that we are not worthless, but we are unworthy ("unworthy" meaning that we have nothing of inherent worth that would make us deserving of God's love, call forth the sacrifice of Jesus, or merit the saving act of God on our behalf).

My point being this: Although we have no inherent worth that would merit God's love, we do, by virtue of being loved by God, gain an imparted worth. Thus as I've mentioned before in reference to the children's book, the "Velveteen Rabbit," the old, worn, ragged, torn, stuffed rabbit, with stuffing coming out and eye dangling by a thread, has no significant value in and of itself. Yet, value is imparted to it by virtue of being loved. And that is true with us in relation to God as well.

A **SECOND** thing I mentioned to those who spoke to me was that the Bible avoids "worth or value language" in reference to us, but rather uses "love language" or "grace language." Speaking of His people He calls us graced, adopted and precious. He delights in us, rejoices over us and quiets us with His love.

Why does it avoid worth language? Because using value language inevitably or eventually leads to the belief that love is bestowed on the basis of a person's value. A concept that is not only contrary to the Gospel, but has been used to justify prejudice, abuse, neglect, preferential treatment of some as opposed to unjust treatment of others, and has even used to justify slavery, apartheid, persecution, war, genocide and many other social evils.

I don't have to be valuable or even think I'm valuable in order to justify my being loved, I simply have to relish and rejoice in the fact that by the grace of God I am!

After all, Jesus point in the passage was that God cares for the insignificant sparrow; clothes the grass of the fields; and provides for even for the essentially "worthless" and irritating raven — assuring us that even though we are "worth more than many sparrows," we need not have (nor perceive ourselves to have) some infinitely inherent worth before God in order to be loved and cared for by Him. That would go contrary to the very thing Jesus is saying!

Rightly understood, His love is an expression of His grace, His undeserved favor to unworthy people. That is what He wants us to know. His love is unmerited and un-merit-able! It's an expression of mercy and grace and not something we can in any way be worthy of or deserving of. ***"Grace,"*** as Steve Brown says, ***"is doing good for someone when there is no compelling reason to do so, and every reason not to."***

Then, last, in reference to the question: What was it then that called forth the infinite sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf? The more biblical answer, it would seem to me, is not some inherently immense value in us, but just the opposite — the infinite nature of the sin-debt we have accrued before God. Our enormous sin-debt, committed against an infinitely holy God, necessitated a sacrifice infinite in measure.

Though as one pastor's wife (from out Pittsburg way) pointed out to me Tuesday night, the use of the word "infinite" should be avoided in reference to the sacrifice of Jesus, lest it give the impression that His sacrifice covered all the sins of all people and then some, thus opening the door to a belief in universal salvation.

The sacrifice of Jesus (as she pointed out) was really "finite in nature" because our sin-debt, though enormous, was also finite in nature. It did not pay the price for all the sins of all people. all inclusive, she said, but "all the sins of all the elect." (A finite number of sins from a finite number of people — that is, those and only those who ever have and ever will believe in Jesus). So I stand corrected!

Which brings us to the next 4 verses! Verses that don't quite cause people to recoil as much as last week's verses, but have still led to an enormous divergence of opinion in the church throughout the ages, and even to the present day!

In fact, last week I mentioned how I've received more flak from unbelievers in regard to my belief in hell than any other issue by far. And this week I can say there are few questions I've been asked more by believers, than what it is Jesus is referring to when He speaks of a sin that cannot be forgiven.

In today's text from Luke we read *"the person who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will NOT be forgiven."* Yet in Mark's Gospel its heightened, for there (on a different occasion) Jesus says that such a person, *"will NEVER be forgiven, for he is guilty of an eternal sin."* Which means that whatever this particular sin is, we want to make sure we avoid it like the plague!

Leading us to that common question:

What is the unforgivable sin? / What exactly does blasphemy against the Holy Spirit consist of? / Is it merely saying something blasphemous against the Holy Spirit, or is it more than that? That's what I want us to consider today.

So **FIRST**, let's look at the text, for I believe the answer to our question lies in the verses we have before us. There Jesus starts out in verse 8 by saying: *"I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God."* And since all verses must be interpreted in their context, this statement is surely connected to verses 4-7 where he has spoken about His disciples being persecuted and even killed for their allegiance to him — a theme that continues in verses 11-12 that immediately follow these, assuring us it is surely present in this verse as well.

The scenario Jesus paints for us, then, would not simply be acknowledging Jesus publically, but acknowledging Him publically when they are asked by unbelievers or people hostile to the faith, who will shun, or persecute, or abuse, or belittle, or shame, or imprison or kill them if they answer in the affirmative.

The word "acknowledge" which Jesus uses here, means, "to declare one's allegiance to publically," and quite possibly, as one commentator points out, "before a judge" as is unquestionably the case in verses 11-12 where they are brought before synagogues to be interrogated by the rulers and authorities for embracing what those people considered heresy.

It is confessing one's allegiance to Jesus when arrested, or brought to stand trial or be sentenced to some form of punishment because of one's faith in Him – all of the Apostles in Acts 5:12-41 / Stephen in Acts 6:12-7:60 / or Antipas, "God's faithful witness" (in Revelation 2:13) / being prime examples of the type of thing spoken of in this very text.

It's also a view supported by the fact that Jesus, "will acknowledge them "before" (or in the presence of) the angels of God." And here, though this picture is future (He "will" do this) I do not believe it means "on the Day of Judgment" (though that can't totally be ruled out).

Rather, the scenario (in keeping with theme of verses 4-7) is more likely this: Jesus is speaking of a time after He has ascended into heaven, and is therefore, "***before or in the presence of the angels of God.***" And as the spirits of the martyred saints, who are killed for declaring or acknowledging their faith and allegiance to Christ ascend immediately into His exalted presence, they hear Him (in accordance with His promise in these verses), acknowledge them "before" (or in the presence of) "the angels of God."

It doesn't rule out the fact that it may also take place on the Day of Judgment, but that is less likely, since many of the martyred saints will have been with Jesus for thousands of years by then, and it would be odd for Him not to acknowledge them before the angels of God long before that!

It would be more along the lines of His greeting them, as their spirits (like that of the thief on the cross) rise at death to be with Him in paradise.

And, of course, the opposite scenario is also cited: "If they, disown or deny any allegiance to Him before men (when asked by those hostile to the faith out of a fear of being shunned, or rejected, or shamed, or abused, or mistreated, or persecuted, or imprisoned, or killed by men), He will disown or deny them before the angels of God" (verse 9).

As I. Howard Marshall points out: These verses are spoken in reference to, "***the situation of persecution in which disciples may be tempted to (conceal or deny) their loyalty to Jesus out of fear of men... (It) contrasts earthly confession or denial of Jesus (by men) with denial or confession of people (by Jesus) in the presence of God.***" That, I believe, is the picture Jesus paints for us.

The message, then, is clear: If we expect Jesus to acknowledge, or "declare His allegiance" to us in the presence of the angels, then we need to be ready to confess and declare our allegiance to Him before men, regardless of what it may cost us.

Whether we be in a room full of Christians, or a room full of people hostile to Jesus; those who love Him or those who mock and hate him, we need, if asked or pressed for an answer, to own Him gladly and acknowledge our allegiance to Him — even if it will cost us dearly.

I've mentioned before, the time that a fellow pop-warner football coach, who I had coached with a couple years (and considered a friend) — a big guy, about 6 foot six and 280 pounds, walked up to me shortly after news of my conversion had leaked out, slapped me on the back, and in between a burst of laughter, said to me, "Hey Jeff, you know what I just heard? I heard you became a Christian! Isn't that hilarious!" And when I told him it was true, the smile turned to an unbelieving frown / he turned around / walked away / and has never spoken another word to me since!

Another friend, who I had hung around with for years (I can still remember changing out the engine of his VW with him by hand!) also came up to me as the funeral of another mutual childhood friend who had committed suicide, and with a look of disgust, said to me: "I can't believe you gave in and fell for it all." (His mother was a gentle and devout woman of faith.) He also has never spoken to me since.

And whether you believe it or not, it may happen to you too. My question is, what will you do when, or if, it does? Will you declare your allegiance to Him, or out of the fear of losing something — like friendship, or status, or acceptance, or some other thing — deny there's anything to it?

Think of this verse before you do. Not that you have to worry about exactly what you'll say in your defense, or how you'll say it, for Jesus tells us in verses 11-12: ***"The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."***

But know this: He DOES want you to be ready or prepared to verbally acknowledge and publically confess your allegiance to Him, even if you don't have to worry about the exact words you'll use ***"at that time."***

"Whoever acknowledges Me before men, the Son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God. But he who disowns (or denies) me before men, will be disowned before the angels of God."

It doesn't take much insight, therefore, to see that Jesus is very serious about our need to confess our allegiance to Him — regardless of what the cost to us may be!

Then **SECONDLY**, and in keeping with all that, we come to the crux of the question we have set before us today — What is the unforgivable sin? / What is the sin, which if we commit it, can NEVER be forgiven?

Here's what we have to go with: ***“Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven (and obviously it means if they relent or repent for doing so), but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”***

In the immediate context of this chapter, since it has to do with persecution, it is most likely a reference to the synagogue rulers and authorities (mentioned in verses 11-12), making blasphemous accusations against Jesus when they bring the disciples to stand trial for their allegiance to Him and in the process of doing so, call Him a heretic (as they did in Luke 5:21), or insane (as in Mark 3:21), or demon possessed (as in Mark 3:22).

Those words or accusations or blasphemies spoken against Him (or literally in the Greek – “into Him” – like a dig or the thrust of a knife — something much more personal than words simply spoken against). All those things will be forgiven, says Jesus, but not blasphemies spoken against the Holy Spirit — which still leaves us wondering what that is as opposed to what He's just spoken about. Knowing what blasphemies spoken against Jesus are doesn't help us know what blasphemies against the Spirit are — and it's important to know since the one is forgivable and the other is not!

And to help resolve the issue it may be helpful to understand that “blasphemy,” though it often involves words, is not always or exclusively restricted to words! One can have blasphemous thoughts and blasphemous attitudes and hold to blasphemous ideas or doctrines, and thus blaspheme without ever speaking a word.

As Darrell Bock points out: ***“This statement has led to considerable debate [which is an understatement!]. Is the blasphemy attributing Jesus work to the power of Satan (instead of the Holy Spirit, as in Luke 11:14-20)? Is it a reference to apostasy? Is it rejecting the apostles preaching about Jesus, since it was Spirit-empowered preaching? Or is it not so much a single act as a persistent rejection of the Spirit's testimony to Jesus?”***

You see (and here's a little history lesson for you!):

- 1.) The earliest or the most common understanding in the early church was that verbal blasphemy against Jesus was the pre-baptismal sin of unbelievers, committed in their unbelieving ignorance, and thus forgivable; while apostasy was a conscious turning from the faith by baptized people who were resisting the witness of the Holy Spirit and thus unforgivable (As some to this day would interpret Hebrews 6:4-6).

- 2.) Others believe this verse draws a contrast between the sin of speaking against Jesus during His earthly ministry or before the outpouring of the holy Spirit at Pentecost (when many people spoke ignorantly, blasphemously and accusingly against Jesus), and similar things done after Pentecost when doing so would be a to speak against "the manifest work of the outpoured Holy Spirit" which was so dramatically evidenced through the ministry of the Apostles (Marshall).
 - 3.) And still others say that verbal blasphemies or slanderous remarks spoken against Jesus are somewhat understandable and even excusable (and therefore forgivable if a person later repents) because His divine nature and glory was hidden by His humble appearance in the flesh, as a man. Whereas to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is blaspheme against One whose deity is manifestly unquestionable, and therefore inexcusable as well as unforgivable.
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So what are we left with?

- 1st) Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, as we see in the parallel passages in Mark 3 and Matthew 12, has to do with willful rejection, and malicious slander against the work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus, whereby the Pharisees and others attributed the Spirit's work to Satan. Not just accusing Jesus of being demon possessed, but attributing His miracles to the power of Satan rather than the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - 2^{ndly}) It was not simply a one time past thing spoken in unbelieving ignorance, otherwise I myself, and many others like me, would be in big trouble since I did indeed blaspheme the Holy Spirit verbally on numerous occasions in my late teens and early 20's.
 - 3rd) It is most likely, not only a past thing (as the aorist tense in the Greek implies) but a conscious, firm, unchangeable conclusion, as brother Matt pointed out to me.
 - 4th) It is helpful to understand, as I. Howard Marshall points out, that the older and less strict Jewish sense of blasphemy may be intended here, which sees blasphemy as, "The conscious and wicked rejection of the saving power and grace of God towards man." "Such rejection of the saving power of God," says Marshall, "deprives a man of the possibility of divine forgiveness."
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Thus I will give you my conclusion, which agrees with most all evangelical scholars: Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, or the unforgivable sin, is the continual, obstinate, unrelenting rejection of the saving power and witness of the Holy Spirit in relation to Jesus, be it His witness or testimony in the heart, mind, conscience, or spirit, of a person.

It is a conscious, firm, settled and wicked rejection of the Holy Spirit's constant manifest evidences in a person's life: His promptings in their heart, His stirrings in their mind, His affirming or condemning activity in the conscience, and His revelation in creation, the cross, the resurrection, the Scriptures, the Spirit-anointed preaching of the Gospel, and multiple others means as well, which constitutes the "unforgivable sin."

In essence, it is a settled rejection of Jesus to whom the Spirit constantly bears witness, and therefore makes their unbelief unforgivable, and their eternal rejection sure.

That, I believe, is the unforgivable sin, or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is. Though as Louis Berkof adds: The sin itself, consists *"not in doubting the truth, nor in a sinful denial of it, but in a contradiction of it that goes contrary to the conviction of the mind, the illumination of the conscience and even to the verdict of the heart."* A verdict, I might add, which one stubbornly holds to until their death.

Thus, as my professor in seminary used to say: *"If you are at all concerned that you may have committed it; if you worry about it, or better yet dread that you've committed it, you can be reasonably sure you haven't!"*

It's the person who could care less if they've blasphemed Jesus or the Holy Spirit that is most likely to be guilty of what this passage speaks of, since such wicked callousness, is evidence of an unbelieving heart.

A healthy fear of God, as we saw last week, is an indication of a believing heart. And thus, to fear that one has blasphemed against (or into) the Holy Spirit is evidence of faith and therefore not the type of thing that Jesus is speaking of in today's text.

Which means: The one way to be absolutely sure you never fall into the category of person spoken of here, who will never be forgiven, is to respond in faith to the inner testimony and ongoing witness of the Holy Spirit regarding Jesus.

"The Son of Man," as Bock points out, *"only accepts those who respond (in faith) to the testimony of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:12-14). Simple exposure to teachings about Jesus, or simple church attendance, or knowing even significant facts about Jesus and the Bible are not the same as 'receiving the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit.'"*

Thus I ask you: When the Word is preached, do you sense the promptings of the Holy Spirit in your heart moving you to want to obey?

When Jesus is spoken of, or the grace of God in the Gospel is explained, is your warmed?

When you hear of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, is there something inside that says, "Yes, this is true!"?

And when you hear the invitation of Jesus Himself, saying "Come unto me," do you sense in yourself a need to come? Better yet, do you sense something inside you moving you to run by faith into His arms?

If so, then you know what it means to receive the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The question is, will you respond to it, or reject it?

Will you receive Him and commit yourself to Him and acknowledge Him before men, or in hardness of heart turn away from Him?

Jesus calls you to come / the Father commands you to believe / and the Holy Spirit moves on the heart to soften all resistance with a grace that you don't want to resist. Just come!