

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (CONT.)

BLASPHEMY OF THE SPIRIT

Matthew 12:22–32 (ESV)

²² Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. ²³ And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” ²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” ²⁵ Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. ²⁶ And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹ Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. ³⁰ Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. ³¹ Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Mark 3:22–30 (ESV)

²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.” ²³ And he called them to him and said to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

²⁸ “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” — ³⁰ for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Luke 12:8–10 (ESV)

⁸ “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, ⁹ but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. ¹⁰ And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

There can be NO neutrality in our relationship with Jesus (Matthew 7:13-14)

KEY QUESTIONS

- *What does “blasphemes against the Holy Spirit” mean? Why is it unpardonable?*
- *What is the chief offense against the Spirit?*
- *Why can those who speak against the Son of Man be forgiven, but not against the Spirit?*
- *What happens if we “accidentally” commit this sin?*

SIN THAT LEADS TO DEATH**1 John 5:16–17 (ESV)**

¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. ¹⁷ All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

CONTINUING TO CRUCIFY / CONTINUING TO SIN**Hebrews 6:4–6 (ESV)**

⁴ For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Hebrews 10:26–27 (ESV)

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

CONVICT MEN OF SIN, RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUDGMENT / GLORIFY CHRIST**John 16:8–14 (ESV)**

⁸ *And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. ¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

FORGIVENESS OF SINS IF WE CONFESS**1 John 1:8–9 (ESV)**

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

BLASPHEMY OF THE SPIRIT

Matthew 7:13–14 (ESV)

¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE COMMENTARY, VOLUME 8 (MATTHEW 12:30-32)

30 Here several of Jesus' sayings are aphoristic. Their relation to the pericope is internal, not grammatical; and the relation to what precedes goes back to the tradition itself and cannot be ascribed to Matthew (cf. Luke 11:23).

The general thrust of v. 30 is straightforward: **in our relationship to Jesus there can be no neutrality.** As to some issues and persons, neutrality is possible and may even be wise. But in the great struggle (vv. 25–29), neutrality is impossible. The claims of the kingdom and the demands of Jesus are so exclusivistic that to be indifferent or apathetic to him is to be on the side of those who do not confess that he is the Messiah who brings in the kingdom of God (cf. 11:16–24). Jesus' claim implies a high christology, which is underlined by the harvest figure in v. 30b (cf. 3:12; 6:26; John 4:36). Jesus is the one who will harvest in the last days, a function the OT regularly assigns to God. Hill (*Matthew*) objects to the authenticity of the setting of this saying on the grounds that an affirmation about the impossibility of neutrality with respect to Jesus "is hardly likely to have been addressed to implacable opponents such as the Pharisees." But crowds were also present (Mt 12:23). And this form of statement could serve as both a rebuke to the Pharisees and a warning to the questioning crowd (v. 23) that failure to follow Jesus wholeheartedly is as dangerous as outright opposition.

The inverted saying—"whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40; Luke 9:50)—and this one "are not contradictory if the one was spoken to the indifferent about themselves and the other to the disciples about someone else" (McNeile).

31–32 "And so"—*dia touto* (lit., "on account of this")—ties the statements about blasphemy against the Spirit (v. 31) to the preceding verse. But the transition cannot easily be readily grasped till vv. 31–32 are understood. Introduced by the solemn "I tell you" (see on 5:18), these statements constitute a pair, one from Mark (Mt 12:31 = Mark 3:28), one from Q (Mt 12:32 = Luke 12:10, in a different context; cf. comment, above). "Blasphemy" is extreme slander (see on 9:3), equivalent to "speaking against" (cf. 12:32). Blasphemy against God was viewed by Jews with utmost gravity (26:65); but here Jesus makes a sharp distinction between blasphemy against the Son of Man, which is forgivable, and blasphemy against the Spirit, which is not.

His statement is remarkable because one of the glories of the biblical faith is the great emphasis Scripture lays on the graciousness and wideness of God's forgiveness (e.g., Pss 65:3; 86:5; 130:3–4; Isa 1:18; Mic 7:19; 1 John 1:7). A common interpretation of Mt 12:31–32 is that they originated with a Christian prophet speaking for the exalted Jesus and are here read back into the life of the earthly Jesus. The blasphemy against the Son of Man is rejection of him by nonbelievers, and this is clearly forgivable when a person becomes a Christian. But blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is committed by a Christian (Christians after Pentecost would understand that only believers enjoy the Spirit) and is equivalent either to apostasy or to rejection of a Christian prophet's inspired message. For this there is no forgiveness (so Stendahl, Peake, 684q; and in a highly structured scheme, M.E. Boring, "The Unforgivable Sin Logion Mark III 28–29/Matt XII 31–32/Luke XII 10: Formal Analysis and History of the Tradition," *NovTest* 18 [1976]: 258–79).

But there is strong and consistent evidence that the writers of the NT did not read words of Christian prophets back into the life of the historical Jesus (cf. esp. Bonnard; J.D.G. Dunn, "Prophetic 'I'-Sayings and the Jesus Tradition: The Importance of Testing Prophetic Utterances within Early Christianity," NTS 24 [1978]: 175–98). It is highly unlikely that "Son of Man" would be used as an object of blasphemy without some qualifications about "Son of Man" (i.e., as "earthly Jesus only," etc.), which do not appear until Origen. Moreover this does not explain what these sayings are doing in their Gospel contexts (esp. Mark and Matthew).

The views of many older conservative scholars are also unhelpful. Broadus, for instance, ties blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to the "age of miracles" when the Spirit's power could be directly perceived—and rejected. But apart from the question of whether miracles take place now, Jesus elsewhere warned that miracles are not *necessarily* the criterion of true discipleship (7:21–23), i.e., they do not *necessarily* reveal the Spirit's presence and power.

Among the many other interpretations of this difficult incident, the best treats it in its setting during Jesus' life. The Pharisees have been attributing to Satan the work of the Spirit and have been doing so, as Jesus makes plain, in such a way as to reveal that they speak, not, out of ignorance or unbelief, but out of a "conscious disputing of the indisputable" (the phrase is from G.C. Berkouwer, *Sin* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], p. 340; cf. pp. 323–53, to which this exposition is indebted).

The distinction between blasphemy against the Son of Man and blasphemy against the Spirit is not that the Son of Man is less important than the Spirit, or that the first sin is prebaptismal and the second postbaptismal, still less that the first is against the Son of Man and the second rejects the authority of Christian prophets. Instead, within the context of the larger argument the first sin is rejection of the truth of the gospel (but there may be repentance and forgiveness for that), whereas the second sin is rejection of the same truth in full awareness that that is exactly what one is doing—thoughtfully, willfully, and self-consciously rejecting the work of the Spirit even though there can be no other explanation of Jesus' exorcisms than that. For such a sin there is no forgiveness, "either in this age or the age to come" (cf. 13:22; 25:46)—a dramatic way of saying "never" (as in Mark 3:29).

If this interpretation is correct, the distinction between Son of Man and Spirit is relatively incidental. After all, blasphemy against the Spirit is also a rejection of Jesus' own claims: the christological] implications of the sin are not diminished but increased in moving from "blasphemy against the Son of Man" to "blasphemy against the Spirit." This provides a clue for understanding how the unforgivable sin of which Jesus here speaks compares with the sins referred to in Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–31; and possibly 1 John 5:16. In each instance there is self-conscious perception of where the truth lies and the light shines—and a willful turning away from it. This is very different from Paul's persecution of the church (1 Cor 15:9), which was not unforgivable (1 Tim 1:13).

C.K. Barrett (*The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* [London: SPCK, 1966], pp. 106–7) discusses this matter wisely, except for his assumption that the sin is committed within the church and "because it denies the root and spring of the Church's life, cannot rediscover the forgiveness by which the sinner first entered the community of the forgiven." But the biblical texts are more subtle than that. The author

of Hebrews says, with a surprising combination of tenses, “We have come [perfect] to share in Christ if we hold firmly [aorist subjunctive] to the end the confidence we had at first” (Heb 3:14). In other words our past participation in the blessings of the gospel is valid only if we continue in it. John presupposes the same thing—that those who leave the church show that they never really belonged in it (1 John 2:19; 2 John 9). Even Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–31 shows how much of the truth may be grasped, how much of the life of the age to come may be sampled, without coming to the place from which there is no turning back (cf. Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], in loc.). This is apostasy, and it involves a break with what one has formally adhered to.

The universal witness of the NT is that apostasy if persisted in not only damns but shows that salvation was never real in the first place. The NT reveals how close one may come to the kingdom—tasting, touching, perceiving, understanding. And it also shows that to come this far and reject the truth is unforgivable. So it is here. Jesus charges that those who perceive that his ministry is empowered by the Spirit and then, for whatever reason—whether spite, jealousy, or arrogance—ascribe it to Satan, have put themselves beyond the pale. For them there is no forgiveness, and that is the verdict of the one who has authority to forgive sins (9:5–8).

The significance of the transitional words “And so” now becomes plain. Neutrality to Jesus is actually opposition to him (v. 30); and therefore Jesus gives this warning regarding those who blaspheme against the Spirit, since the self-professedly neutral person may not recognize the inherent danger of his position¹

¹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, pp. 290–292). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

COFFMAN'S COMMENTARIES ON THE BIBLE ([MATTHEW 12:31-32](#))

Verse 31

Therefore, I say unto you, Every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.

There is an unpardonable transgression, and here is an example of it, "blasphemy against the Spirit." Boles' comments that the passage speaks not of "a sin against,"^[7] but of "blasphemy against" the Spirit does not exclude a class of sins which are unforgivable and known collectively as "the sin" against the Holy Spirit. From the gospel of Mark comes, "Whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is guilty of **AN ETERNAL SIN**; because they said, He hath an unclean spirit" ([Mark 3:29,30](#)). Significantly, Mark spoke not of "the" but "an" eternal sin, showing that the transgression under consideration in this place is one of a class of sins designated as "eternal."

We shall note the whole class of eternal sins first and then consider the example of it, committed by the Pharisees.

The word of God teaches:

(1) "There is a sin unto death; not concerning this do I say that he should make request" ([1 John 5:16](#)). Note that John spoke not of sin "until," but "unto" death. Such a sin is, therefore, not **UNTIL** physical death, but it is **UNTO** spiritual death.

(2) "For, as touching those who were once enlightened, and tasted the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then fall away, it is impossible to renew them" ([Hebrews 6:4-6](#)).

(3) "She that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth" ([1 Timothy 5:6 KJV](#)).

(4) And regarding certain violations of the Lord's table, Paul declared, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and some sleep" ([1 Corinthians 11:30](#)). "Sleep" in this place is a euphemistic expression for death.

(5) That the Holy Spirit in one's heart can be "quenched" is evident from the admonition, "Quench not the Spirit" ([1 Thessalonians 5:19](#)).

(6) Concerning apostates, "The last state is become worse with them than the first" ([2 Peter 2:20,21](#)), indicating a condition worse than being lost, and which is fulfilled only by being lost without possibility of recovery. Now of this general condition, variously described as death while one lives, a sin unto death, the quenching of the Spirit, worse than being an alien sinner, and impossible to renew, and for which there is no need to pray - all such sins qualify for Mark's description, "an eternal sin."

What, then, is **THE** sin that does all this? It may be any sin, hence the deadly and dangerous nature of all sin. In the physical world, what is **THE** fatal disease? It is the one the doctor writes on the death certificate, and may be any one of a countless number of maladies. The analogy holds in the spiritual realm; and the eternal sin is the one that destroys the soul of the sinner. That such may occur even while physical life is extended appears certain from all of the references noted above.

Now, with reference to blasphemy against the Spirit, Christ named it as "an eternal sin," making it unforgivable. It was not the only sin that could have destroyed the Pharisees, but it is the one that did. The peculiar aggravation of their wickedness springs from their reviling Christ although they knew him to be righteous. Contrary to what they **KNEW**, they said he had an unclean spirit. They put falsehood for truth, darkness for light, evil for righteousness, and shut their eyes and hearts against the Lord. Their blasphemy was of a kind that blotted out the hope of heaven; and there can be little doubt that the same type of blind, senseless opposition to the Lord today would have the very same consequences. Acknowledgment of the influence of the highly-esteemed Grover Cleveland Brewer in the understanding of this difficult question, is hereby registered. His convincing sermons on this subject are reflected in the above comments.

Seven different sins against the Holy Spirit may be noted in these references: (1) lusting against ([Galatians 5:16](#)); (2) resisting ([Acts 7:51](#)), (3) grieving ([Ephesians 4:30](#)); (4) lying to ([Acts 5:3](#)); (5) insulting ([Hebrews 10:24](#)); (6) blaspheming against ([Mark 3:29](#)); and (7) quenching ([1 Thessalonians 5:19](#)). It might be assumed that Ananias and Sapphira ([Acts 5:3](#)) committed an eternal sin, but it is not so stated in the word of God. It is implicit, however, in the very nature of all sin that **ANY SIN**, persisted in, can result in quenching the sacred fire within the soul and issue at last in eternal death.

Verse 32

And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in that which is to come.

Many did speak against Christ, but when the Spirit of God came of Pentecost, they obeyed the gospel message and were saved. Those who spoke against the Spirit, rejecting the gospel which he delivered through the apostles, were not saved. No other means of redemption was given. Those who rejected the Spirit received no forgiveness then, or ever. One should avoid reading into this passage any hope that some sins will be forgiven in the world to come which remain unforgiven now. We agree with Boles. "No sin, unforgiven here, or in this world, will be pardoned or forgiven hereafter."^[8]²

² Coffman, James Burton. "Commentary on [Matthew 12:4](#)". "Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament". "www.studylight.org/commentaries/bcc/matthew-12.html". Abilene Christian University Press, Abilene, Texas, USA. 1983-1999.

GOSPEL ADVOCATE: A COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW (H LEO BOLES) – MATTHEW 12:31-32

31, 32 **Therefore I say unto you, Every sin and blasphemy.** —This is Jesus' conclusion and application of his teaching. "Blasphemy" is injurious and malicious speaking against God or his attributes; to blaspheme in the scripture sense denotes improper and unworthy speeches against God, his attributes, works, or temple; it means to ascribe to God the weaknesses of men, or to attribute to men the perfections and works of God. Here Jesus fixes a limit of divine mercy. What is "the blasphemy against the Spirit"? Mark 3:30 tells us that the Pharisees had been guilty of blasphemy "because they said, He hath an unclean spirit." This sin was maliciously ascribing a miracle of divine power to the power of Beelzebub. It is not said here "a sin against," but "blasphemy against," which is explained by "speak against the Holy Spirit." The "blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven," but "every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men" but the one "against the Holy Spirit." Man may speak "a word against the Son of man" and "it shall be forgiven him," but "whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in that which is to come." There has been much speculation about "the unpardonable sin" and "the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." Jesus came in the flesh, dwelt among men, and revealed the will of God to man. God the Father revealed his will to the Jews through Moses, and Jesus revealed the will of God to us. The Holy Spirit was to come in person and complete the work of Jesus. He said, "It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you. And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." (John 16:7, 8.) Many misunderstood Jesus, his teachings, and his kingdom while he was on earth, and even denied him as being the Messiah, who afterwards repented and were pardoned, and became Christians. (Acts 2:37, 38; Acts 9:1, 17.) Many could and did reject Jesus while he was on earth, but when the Holy Spirit came and testified of him, they accepted Christ. But when the Holy Spirit came and gave the complete will of God, if men rejected this, there was no other evidence to be furnished, no other divine agency to be given, and if they finally rejected the Holy Spirit, there was no forgiveness for them. There was no forgiveness "neither in this world, nor in that which is to come." Mark says "hath never forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." (Mark 3:29.) No sin unforgiven here or in this world will be pardoned or forgiven hereafter.

[God bore testimony to men through the Old Testament scriptures; Jesus Christ bore testimony in person, given in the New Testament; and he stated that his testimony was incomplete, and he would send the Holy Spirit to complete or perfect that testimony. (John 16:7, 8, 13, 14.) (Read also John 14:14, 20-27; 15:26; 16:8.) They all teach that neither the revelations of the Father nor the Son were complete to guide into life eternal, save as people received the teachings of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would come, perfect the testimony, and guide into all truth. Without this guidance being followed, they could not know the full faith of God. It is in perfect harmony with all these scriptures and with all the facts recorded in the Bible for Jesus, when they charged him with acting by the power of the devil, to warn them that they might do this now to him and find forgiveness; but if they so rejected and treated the Holy Spirit when he came, there would be no forgiveness, for there would be no more testimony and no more opportunity to repent. It refers, of course, to the final rejection of the will of God. To reject the will

of God was to sin against God, to reject the words of Jesus was to sin against him, and to reject the teachings of the Holy Spirit was to sin against the Holy Spirit.

To blaspheme is to oppose and speak against. Many construe this to mean that Jesus defined the attributing the works of Jesus to the evil power as the sin against the Holy Spirit; but the Bible does not say so, nor anything that implies this. Read Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10. All classes and kinds of men, those that maligned, persecuted, and abused Jesus in every form and manner were warned and exhorted by the Holy Spirit to turn to Jesus and live. Paul was a persecutor and blasphemer of the Lord Jesus and sought the destruction of the whole church of God. Jesus did not mean to say that those who blasphemed and rejected Christ Jesus and regarded him as a servant of Satan might not turn to God when the Holy Spirit brought its message of love and power. He only meant to tell them: "You may reject my teachings, malign and abuse me as you are now doing; but when the Holy Spirit is come and bears his testimony, if you reject that, there will be no further offices of love and mercy, either in this world or the world to come." To disobey and reject God was to blaspheme him; to reject and disobey Jesus was to blaspheme him; to reject and disobey the teachings of the Holy Spirit was to blaspheme him; and when the Holy Spirit performed his work to teach and save men, God's provisions of mercy were exhausted.]³

³ Gospel Advocate Commentaries - New Testament Commentary – A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew.