

**MARK 3:20–35.** (EHV)

They went into a house. A crowd gathered again so that they were not even able to eat a meal. When his family heard this, they went out to take control of him, because they were saying, “He is out of his mind.” The experts in the law who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “He drives out demons by the ruler of demons.” Jesus called them together and spoke to them in parables. **“How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is finished. On the other hand, no one can enter a strong man’s house to steal his possessions unless he ties up the strong man first. Then he can plunder his house. Amen I tell you: Everything will be forgiven people, their sins and whatever blasphemies they may speak. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”** Jesus said this because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.” Then his mother and his brothers arrived. While they were standing outside, they sent word to Jesus, calling for him. A crowd was sitting around him. They began to tell him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you.” He replied, **“Who are my mother and my brothers?”** He looked at those who sat around him in a circle and he said, **“Look, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”**

Nearly every pastor with some experience under his belt can tell you a story of someone in his congregation who was worried that he or she had committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. I myself think of one man in particular, from one of my former congregations, who told me multiple times he was worried he had committed this sin, because he had ongoing, intense struggles with certain sins.

You can understand why a person with a sensitive conscience would be concerned about having committed this sin. Jesus says that “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” Committing the sin or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit means you are going to hell. And when you read the Bible’s description of hell—the prospect of spending eternity there is not pleasant.

This morning let’s take a closer look at the sin or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, so that we know what it is and how to avoid it.

Jesus was at a stage in his life and ministry where even his own family, his own mother and brothers—brothers who were probably natural-born sons of both Mary and Joseph after the birth of Jesus, and who were therefore younger than Jesus—even his own family thought he was crazy. Jesus was healing many sicknesses. He was driving out many demons. He was constantly teaching. He was doing all of these things day after day, without letting up.

As a result, he always had a large following. If he went out to the Sea of Galilee, they followed him there. If he sailed across the Sea of Galilee with his apostles, they would sometimes track his boat from shore and follow him on land and meet him when he landed. If he went up on a mountainside, they found him there. And when he came in from the country and

stayed in town, the whole town would gather at his door. It didn't matter whether it was late at night or the crack of dawn. In fact, so many came that there often wasn't even room outside the house. So many came that people were lowering paralyzed friends down to him from the roof, through the ceiling. So many came that, in this case, he and his disciples could not even eat a meal.

So on all sides, people were saying Jesus was crazy. His own family came to take control of him, thinking he was out of his mind. The experts in the law who came down from Jerusalem went a step further. "He is possessed by Beelzebul," they said. "He is driving out demons by the ruler of demons." Beelzebul was a name that came from the false god Baal, which many people worshipped who had contact with the Israelites in the Old Testament. Now it was a name mockingly used for Satan. So they were basically saying, "He is casting out Satan's minions by the power of Satan. He is cleansing demon-possessed people as someone possessed with the ultimate demon himself."

It is in response to these accusations by the experts in the law that Jesus warned them, "Amen I tell you: Everything will be forgiven people, their sins and whatever blasphemies they may speak. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."

In order to understand what Jesus is talking about, we first need to understand what it means to blaspheme. Blaspheming is basically the worst kind of badmouthing. To blaspheme is to speak irreverently or disrespectfully about God or things directly connected to him, like his word. Remember that when Jesus was eventually put on trial, the Jewish ruling council accused him of blasphemy when he said he was the Messiah, the Son of God. To them, this was the most irreverent or disrespectful thing you could say about God—to claim that you, a mere mortal, were his Son when you were not (even though of course Jesus actually was). Christopher Hitchens, a renowned atheist who passed away in 2011, wrote a book in 2007 titled *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. That title and book are also good examples of blasphemy.

But Jesus was warning the experts in the law against a particular kind of blasphemy, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Mark tells us that Jesus warned them against this "because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" The fact is that this claim was ridiculous on the surface of the matter. Jesus himself says here, "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is finished."

I myself have sometimes wondered about exorcisms conducted by priests who use the name of Jesus, but who otherwise teach work-righteous lies. I have wondered if the demon doesn't sometimes leave the person he is possessing, not because of the power and effectiveness of the exorcism, but so that it will *look* like the priest was successful and even more people will listen to and believe the lies of work-righteousness. I don't know if that actually happens, but even if it does, that would be very different from Jesus. Jesus cast out many demons from many people, just like that, with his word. And the people he cleansed were all clearly cleansed—able to think and speak rationally, at peace where before they were in turmoil, and now interested in leaving behind the works of darkness in which they were engaged before. Satan would not give

his own kingdom such steady and devastating blows. It was folly for the experts in the law to think that Jesus was in league with the devil, and even possessed by the devil himself.

But the fact is, they didn't actually think that. They were just saying that. Matthew tells us that these experts in the law were Pharisees (Matt. 12:24). And do you remember what Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, told Jesus? "Rabbi, we [Pharisees] know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (John 3:2). In their inmost hearts, the experts in the law knew that Jesus was from God, not possessed by Satan. The Holy Spirit had given them irrefutable evidence through Jesus's teaching and miracles. But knowledge is different than faith. Rather than believing what they knew to be the truth, they not only rejected that truth, but they publicly blasphemed it.

That is the blasphemy or sin against the Holy Spirit—when the Holy Spirit has repeatedly confronted a person with the divine truth, and has convinced that person that it is the truth, and that person nevertheless not only rejects the truth he knows, but also publicly speaks against it, bashes it, and seeks to suppress it at every turn, like the experts in the law did here.

Since this sin not only involves what a person says, but also what is taking place in their heart, and only God can read hearts, it is basically impossible for us to provide modern examples of this sin. We might suspect this or that person of having committed this sin, but we cannot say for sure. But the Bible does give us one clear example of this sin in the Old Testament—the example of Pharaoh. By the time Pharaoh had seen the first five plagues, he knew the one true God was at work and that his servants Moses and Aaron spoke the truth. Even his own magicians told him after the third plague that this was the finger of God (Exod. 8:19). But Pharaoh continued to harden his heart and blaspheme the truth by refusing to let the Israelites go. Finally we're told after the sixth plague, "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exod. 9:12).

Jesus even says elsewhere that speaking a word against him will be forgiven, but speaking against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Matt. 12:32). That's because Jesus is a real human being, a real character in human history, so you can speak against him out of ignorance. But you can only truly speak against the Holy Spirit, who is invisible, if the Holy Spirit has worked on your heart and shown you the truth, and you still speak against it.

So why is this sin not forgiven?

Some people call the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit the unpardonable sin—a sin *not able* to be forgiven. That's not technically true. Jesus himself says here, "Everything will be forgiven people, their sins and whatever blasphemies they may speak." Jesus would go to the cross and would suffer, die, and pay for all sins, including the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

But what Jesus goes on to say literally in Greek is that "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness into eternity." In other words, the forgiveness is there, but such a person will never have it or possess it. That's because you cannot blaspheme against the Holy Spirit without having stubbornly hardened your heart in unbelief against the truth to such an extent that you go past the point of no return. God finally says to that person regretfully, "Fine, have it your way," and relinquishes that person to the stubborn unbelief of his or her heart forever. It is a terrible judgment, but one that the person brings on him- or herself.

So how do we avoid this sin?

“Then his mother and his brothers arrived. While they were standing outside, they sent word to Jesus, calling for him. A crowd was sitting around him. They began to tell him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you.' He replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' He looked at those who sat around him in a circle and he said, 'Look, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'”

If Jesus calls you his brother and sister and mother, you are not someone who has committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And whom does Jesus called his brother and sister and mother? Those who do the will of God. The will of God is, first, to believe in the One he has sent, to believe that in him everything is forgiven for people, all their sins and whatever blasphemies they may speak, to believe that for his sake God doesn't want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. And the will of God, second, is to produce the fruits of that faith, like confessing faith in the truth instead of blaspheming it. The most notable fruit of faith here is the one produced by those in Jesus's audience. They were sitting around him in a circle, eagerly listening to his word. God's word is the only thing that has the power to raise us from death to life. God's word is the only thing that has the power to bring our hearts out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith. God's word is the only thing that has the power to change us from being self-centered to being God-centered and other-people-centered.

So what if you are worried that you have committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? I've often heard other pastors say, and I myself have said it too, that if you're worried that you have committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, that in itself shows that you haven't committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, because if you had, you wouldn't be worried about it. That can be a useful thought and one weapon in your arsenal against the devil. But I don't like leaving people only with that thought, because it could easily lead to looking to yourself for hope and comfort in the midst of your worry. It almost turns worry into a virtue. “I'm okay because I'm worried about it? I guess I had better keep worrying!”

Even better is to look to Jesus—Jesus who says that, far from being possessed by the devil, he has tied up the devil and plundered his house; Jesus who says that everything will be forgiven people, their sins and whatever blasphemies they may speak; Jesus who says that if the gospel call to faith reaches your ears in the Word, and touches you in the Word connected with water in baptism and connected with bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, that means you have also been chosen by God from eternity and declared innocent of all sin, and that you will also one day be glorified in heaven (Rom. 8:28–30). Look to Jesus who says he has won forgiveness for you and that it is right there, and take it by faith. For if you take it and say, “If Jesus has won it for me, then it is mine,” then you actually have it and are therefore not someone who does not have forgiveness into eternity. Look to Jesus, who warns us against committing the sin against the Holy Spirit because he loves us and doesn't want us to. He doesn't want us to be guilty of an eternal sin, but to be clothed in his eternal righteousness and to spend eternity in his house, with his family, as a member of his family. Amen.

Look to Jesus, and you will not have to worry yourself about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Amen.