

The Sin against the Holy Spirit

And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

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 the age to come.

(MATTHEW 12:31, 32)

From time to time questions arise concerning what is called the sin against the Holy Spirit. Matthew writes here about the *blasphemy* against the Holy Spirit or *speaking* against the Holy Spirit. In the parallel texts we find that Mark writes about blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and adds that persons who do so are guilty of “eternal sin” (Mark 3:28). In Luke’s version of the account, these specific words are not found (11:17-22).

In Hebrews 6:6 we read about the sin of apostasy (falling away), a sin from which it is impossible to be brought back to repentance. The apostle John refers to “sin that leads to death” (1 John 5:16) and he adds, “All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death (verse 17).”

From all the above, we might conclude that some sins are worse than other sins. One sin, the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit, is the most serious, for it leads to death, eternal death, and is unpardonable. In this line Romanist theology refers to pardonable and unpardonable sins, and we know of the list of the *seven* deadly sins. The churches of the Reformation have thrown this listing of seven deadly sins out, but there is still this evidence about one deadly sin: the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit.

Are all sins equal?

Are there gradations when it comes to sin? Are not all sins equal? If there is one sin that cannot be forgiven, what exactly is this sin? In my pas-

toral work I sometimes come across believers who think that they have committed the unpardonable sin, and it leads them to great fear and despair, because they have concluded that for them there is no salvation. If such persons are asked what it is exactly that they have done beyond other daily sins to merit eternal death, they often do not know. They just have an awful sinking feeling.

We tend to avoid speaking about this sin, because it is so serious in its consequences, and perhaps also because we cannot get a good grip on this sin. What exactly is it? Very seldom will you hear a minister in the preaching warn against this sin. It is not a sin that is easily mentioned, if at all, in pastoral visits. How many times have the office bearers (including the minister) warned against this sin in a particular case? Yet the Lord Jesus explicitly warns against it, and the apostles do so as well in their letters. How can we ignore it?

Undivided attention

One thing should be clear from the start. When the Lord Jesus mentions to the Pharisees the sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, he does not intend to frighten his church. Do not be afraid. But he does want to have our undivided attention in this matter. This explains his emphatic speaking, verse 31: and so I tell you... That means for us also: listen carefully, not to be frightened, but to be exhorted and edified. Christ warns against this sin so that we do not commit it. It is also here the preaching of God's love that drives the Lord Jesus.

In love the Lord Jesus warns for blasphemy against the Spirit. We will see when this warning is made by the Lord, how this warning is meant by the Lord and why this warning is marked by the Lord.

No constant mentioning of this sin

It is important to note that the Lord Jesus did not constantly go about mentioning this sin and warning against it. The accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke agree that it was done only once, and it was made in a specific confrontation with the Pharisees at a very crucial moment in his ministry. We want to note this very carefully, for it has decisive bearing on our understanding of the sin against the Spirit. I must restrict myself now to the account given by Matthew, because that gives us the immediate context for our text here.

The text begins with the words: "...and so I tell you..." Literally it says: and *therefore* I tell you. The Lord Jesus gives this warning as the conclusion of a process of thought about certain events. We will see how this came about.

Confrontation over the Sabbath

We read in chapter 12 how there was a confrontation with the Pharisees on the Sabbath about the healing of a man with a shriveled hand. The Pharisees had actually prompted the Lord, for they asked him: is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? They were looking for a reason (that is, an official reason) to accuse Jesus and to indict him for wrongdoing. The Lord did not back away from this confrontation. The Lord Jesus did heal this man, and we read that then the die was cast, verse 14, "But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might *kill* Jesus." The Jewish leaders have made up their minds and have chosen for a certain course: Jesus must be killed, because he is a breaker of the law.

Notice how the Lord Jesus himself does not yet want to have things pushed that far. In verse 15 it says: "Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place." It was not yet the time for the ultimate confrontation. But notice also how difficult, how impossible, really, it is for the Lord to escape the crowds. They follow him, and he continues to heal *all* their sick (verse 15). Many of these sick were possessed by demons. Christ sees himself confronted with the power of the evil one who with his demons tortures God's people.

It is not without reason that Matthew then refers us to a passage from Isaiah, specifically a messianic passage from Isaiah 42 that identifies the Messiah as one who is especially gifted with the Holy Spirit to bring salvation and relief to the afflicted.

In that passage two elements come to the fore about the Messiah which should be noted. First, the Messiah will be a man of great *humility*, who quietly goes his way, and does not cry out in the streets demanding attention and recognition. The Jewish exorcists engaged in such loud spectacles, but the Lord Jesus did not. Do not mistake this humility for weakness, for secondly, the Messiah will be especially endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit. He is humble but powerful. Satan and his demons must make way for the Holy Spirit. The battle is not only physical and earthly, but it is spiritual and heavenly. The Holy Spirit breaks the devil's power in the lives of God's children through the ministry of the Messiah.

Worst case scenario

In verse 22 we read about a man who is brought to the Lord, and this man has major problems, more than others who came to the Lord perhaps until now. He is not only possessed, but he was both blind and mute. The man could not see. The man could not talk. If he could hear, he could not interact with his environment. He had to be *brought to* the Lord. Note that verb. This man was locked up inside himself in a body that was also demon-possessed. Who can imagine the fear and terror in which this man lived? This man suffered from a horrible combination of physical handicap and mental illness. Everyone knew: there is no hope for this man. This combination of physical and spiritual problems surely would be too powerful even for the Lord Jesus.

What does the Lord do? It says simply in verse 22: he healed him so that he could both talk and see. Suddenly this man was completely healed. The evidence was there. People were simply astonished and it says in verse 23 that they began to ask, "Could this be the Son of David?" Is Jesus maybe the Messiah of whom Isaiah prophesied, the great King, the long-awaited Son of David?

Do you see how we have come now to a very critical moment? Now the question needs to be answered: is this Jesus the Messiah of God? Is the evidence not overwhelmingly clear that here the promised Servant of the LORD is manifest?

Damage control

The Pharisees who are still in the area hear about this question, and they sense that the crowd might be lost to their influence and be won by the Lord Jesus. They need to engage in damage control and quickly, too, otherwise this Jesus will soar to popularity. But how can they prove that Jesus is not the Son of David? How can they disclaim the evidence that is winning the crowd? They cannot deny that Jesus did mighty wonders and signs. The nature and content of these signs appear to be legitimately messianic. They cannot deny all this. What shall they say?

You either acclaim the Lord or you disclaim him. If what he did is not done by the Holy Spirit, that is, if what he did, does not show forth the power and glory of God, then there can be only one other explanation: it shows forth the power of the devil. Either God did it or the devil.

Beelzebub did it

They say: it is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons that this fellow (note the disclaimer, “this fellow”) drives out demons. The name “Beelzebub” was slang for Prince of Baal, or Lord Baal. By changing one letter, the name meant “lord of the flies,” and then you may think of the flies that hang around the manure pile. It became the derisive name for the devil.

The devil, the lord of the flies, is behind all this. This man is not the Messiah but a scoundrel, a cheat, an imposter, and his so-called signs are counterfeit, misleading and false. The kingdom of light does not manifest itself in Jesus, but the prince of darkness and the realm of the devil. Cast out demons? Why, it takes a devil to know a devil!

The instant damage control leads to an outright warning: do not believe this man, do not trust this man, and do not follow this man, for he is in league with the devil. The Spirit of God is not manifest in him, but he shows forth the power of the devil.

The breaking point

This is the breaking point, the cutting edge. The Lord Jesus shows that the viewpoint of the Pharisees does not fit with *logic*. One cannot drive out Satan except by the power of God. Demons do not go around driving out other demons. That is simply absurd. Instead, it is the other way around. Only someone who is more powerful than the devil, a stronger person, who binds Satan, can exorcise demons. Logically the Pharisees’ conclusion does not fit.

But even more: spiritually it does not fit. Only the Holy Spirit, who is God himself, has power over demons. Here the Holy Spirit is showing forth the glory of the kingdom of God. If that is the case, then indeed the Messiah has come. Then it is so: whoever is not with Christ is against him. Whoever does not gather with Christ scatters (verse 30). Now the Pharisees are blocking the way for people to come to faith and be saved. They place their own unbelief and hate for Jesus as a barrier between him and the people. Do not go to Jesus for salvation: he is a devil.

This is the context in which Christ warns for sin against the Holy Spirit. He does not say: you are blaspheming against me, the Son, or you are sinning against me. He says, this is blasphemy against the Spirit. You seek to prevent the Holy Spirit from doing his work, from leading people to faith and repentance, and from the only way in which they can be saved. When you do this, you block off the way of salvation to others by discrediting the glory

of God. You block the work of the Spirit in the ministry of the Messiah. This is the breaking point, the cardinal sin, the only sin that can not be forgiven. It is the sin of *apostasy* or deliberate unbelief in which the salvation of God, the working of the Holy Spirit, is denied as being manifest fully and completely in the ministry of the Messiah.

A critical moment

The Pharisees have come to the critical moment. They have to realize this. There is a point of no return. They have now arrived at that point. Therefore we have to understand exactly what this sin really is and how the Lord Jesus means it. It is a spiritual sin, and if the Pharisees do not yet know this, now is the time for them to take stock and to be very clear on what they are doing.

Often people get stuck with the fact that Jesus says in verse 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...” Principally speaking what difference is there between the Son of man and the Holy Spirit? Are not both God? If you speak against the one do you not speak against the other also? Why does the Lord Jesus make this sharp contrast?

I think that we can understand this as follows. You can be misled in your thinking about the Son of Man, who came in a lowly state without evident heavenly glory. You might at a certain point make all kinds of wrong and hateful statements against the Lord Jesus. You do not yet know better. No one made it clear and evident to you that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the only Mediator between God and men, and the promised Messiah. The rejection of Christ in this case is based on ignorance or incomplete information.

Ignorance or lack of information can be dealt with and rectified. Until now this was also the case with the Pharisees. Give them the benefit of the doubt. But calling the driving out of demons the work of Beelzebub is crass. They know better than that. What Jesus does is in the light of the Scriptures very clearly the work of the Holy Spirit. This man is anointed with the Spirit, as Isaiah prophesied about him: the Spirit of the LORD is upon me!

To call this work of redemption the devil’s own handiwork is not just crass and defiant of logic and Scripture; it is a blaspheming against the Spirit. This also implies that the Pharisees know better. God expects more from them than this pitiful, shallow, and unbiblical manner of reasoning.

Cold-blooded opposition

Make no mistake about it; the sin against the Spirit is also a sin against the Son and the Father. It is a denial of the work of redemption which God does in Christ. Why is it called sin against the Spirit? Because it is a direct and cold-blooded opposition of the evidence provided by the Holy Spirit and a falling away from truth, for the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. It is the sin of willful unbelief combined with an active, cold-blooded opposition of the truth.

The Pharisees should and do know better than to characterize Jesus' work as that of the devil. Christ here warns them that they have come to the breaking point. They stand before a line that once crossed cannot be crossed back again. Their unbelief will carry them right through to Pontius Pilate and Golgotha and even farther when they deny the testimony of the guards who saw the tomb being opened. They have made themselves so blind to the truth that they can not find it anymore, even though they are looking straight at it. Their unbelief will have an awful momentum; it will wash them right into hell.

The Lord's ultimatum

The Lord Jesus does not say here that the Pharisees have already committed this sin. Look for a moment at verse 33. The Lord Jesus speaks suddenly about a tree and its fruit. He says: make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. Here is the Lord's ultimatum. What is it now? Is the Lord Jesus a good tree with good fruit or is he bad tree with bad fruit. Look at the fruit to recognize the tree. Look at Christ's works: do they give evidence of the power of the devil or of the power of the Holy Spirit? Does not the Spirit of God alone rule over the demons of Satan?

You simply can not look at what Christ does and call this the work of the devil. That is a blaspheming of the Spirit. It is striking that blaspheming is always done in derision and anger, saying things about God that are untrue. Blaspheming is giving a false picture of God and misrepresenting his Word. "Speaking against" has the same effect: denying the obvious truth and so misleading others, keeping them from Christ, from faith in him, and from being saved through him. Apostasy is always a falling away from a known, proven truth despite being repeatedly warned and shown what the truth is. Our Lord here is drawing a line and saying: we stand here at a very critical point.

Hardening in unbelief

It has been said that the sin against the Holy Spirit can only be committed by those who grew up in the truth, who were taught the truth, and perhaps even at one point appeared to follow the truth. Were they ever really true believers? The point is not what they once perhaps were, but what they became: enemies of the Gospel of Christ and deniers of the grace of God, who boast in their own deeds.

This sin is not necessarily one that appears right away, or even fully at all, but it can not be hidden completely for always. It is the forming of and hardening in unbelief, and that unbelief will more and more also determine one's deeds or actions. Just as faith cannot be hidden or remain unfruitful, so unbelief also must appear. A bad tree does bring forth bad fruit, and is recognizable by this fruit.

It is remarkable that it is said of the antichrists: they went out from us (1 John 2:19). The fiercest enemies of the Gospel come up out of the church and they turn their backs to the very same Gospel with which they are fully acquainted. It is this process of ungodly growth that eventually brings you to the cutting edge and to the point of no return.

Hebrews 6

Let us turn at this point to Hebrews 6. There we have the same element of being acquainted with the Gospel but turning against it. It says in verse 4, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have *shared in the Holy Spirit* (please note that) who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance...." It is remarkable that these words are used in the letter to the Hebrews, because this is *covenantal* language, and the Hebrews (Jewish Christians) knew all about the covenant of God.

The things mentioned in verse 4 are the blessings which God gives in his covenant of love and which we must accept and use in faith. Some have said that this passage in Hebrews 6 proves that we can never be sure of our *election*, because we can always still fall away. But this passage does not speak about God's decree of election. It speaks about *God's covenant way*: he enlightens us, lets us live in fellowship with him and his people, in which all the benefits of the covenant, even the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are seen and shared. But where apostasy prevails, there is also a growing denial of truth and a refusal to live accordingly. The context here in Hebrews is clear: what do we do with the covenant blessings of the Lord? We should not hide

behind election or the lack of it to justify or excuse ourselves, but we should respond to the covenant of God's love in Christ.

Just as the Lord Jesus used the notion of bearing fruit, so also does the writer to the Hebrews. The land that drinks in the rain often falling on it must produce a crop useful for those for whom it is farmed. Such land receives the blessing of God. Otherwise it is useless and will be burned. What are we doing with the rain that is poured out over us by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God? Do we react as faithful covenant people?

You cannot get around Jesus Christ

What is presented indeed as a sin against the Spirit ("they have shared in the Spirit") is in fact a "crucifying of the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace." If we may say that we find in Hebrews 6 the same sin as the one for which the Lord warned the Pharisees, note again the element of something becoming visible and apparent. The Lord Jesus is subjected, it says, to *public* disgrace.

That's what the Pharisees said. They called Jesus' work devil's work. He does it by the power of Beelzebub. Jesus Christ was publicly disgraced by them, ultimately on the cross of Golgotha. He is an imposter Messiah, they said, and laughed. But he arose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. God gave him a Name above every name that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2).

You can not get around Jesus Christ. He is a stone over which you fall and break your neck forever or he is a rock on which you build to all eternity. Especially no covenant children can get around Jesus Christ, for they are baptized in his name. No matter how much we sometimes try, we cannot remove that claim, that mark, and that calling. Jesus Christ will be the life or the death of every covenant child.

Everything in Christ?

The sin against the Holy Spirit has eternal consequences because it brings to the fore whether you seek all your salvation in Jesus Christ or not. There is only one way to be saved and that is by faith in Christ in the way of his covenant. The Lord marked that way, not just for the Pharisees, but for everyone, when he said: anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or the age that is to come. As long as the world

lasts, this line will cut through everything and everyone. This question will stand into all eternity: who do you say the Son of man is? Eternal salvation is found in the answer: you are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16).

Otherwise there is no forgiveness, not now as long as the world lasts, and not then when the new world dawns. There is no forgiveness ever because the only Way is Jesus Christ. I am the way and the truth and the life, he said (John 14:6).

It is an unthinkable thought. No forgiveness, I cannot bear it. But remember that the Lord Jesus Christ did not say this to make us afraid. In Hebrews 6 we also read: God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown to him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. In his love the Lord grants us the reward of grace for all the good work we do in his service. Let us always remember that. God is not unjust or forgetful.

Not afraid but true fear

Our Lord did not speak about this sin to make us afraid. He did mention it to promote in us the true fear of God. He said it to have us properly focused. He gave all. We must give all, no matter what, even if we have to crucify our own flesh.

For that is the consequence. Whoever confesses Jesus as the Christ, must take up his own cross, deny himself, and follow the Lord Jesus (Matt 16:24). Then you have to make sacrifices, not to be saved, but as evidence of the joyous reality that you are saved, as a tree that bears fruit worthy of the Lord.

Only those who refuse to do this, who will not break with their sins, and fight against their weaknesses, will finally find themselves on a way of sin against the Holy Spirit. But then you are committed to the devil and have become a sworn enemy of the cross. It does not happen overnight, but it does come. Jesus said at this occasion: whoever is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters. We should note that the name "devil" actually means *one who scatters*.

We do not speak often about this blaspheming, this speaking against the Spirit. That is fine with me. Who wants to be an alarmist? We must think positive. Let it be clear, then, that Jesus was thinking positive when he said this. He was thinking of you and me.

Therefore, let us be aware of what this sin is, lest we crucify the Son of God all over again. Jesus Christ drew a line and said: do not cross, for here

you are faced with the work of the Holy Spirit, the only One who can bring to faith and keep you in the faith.

Let us adore God's grace that Christ has warned and does warn us for this sin, so that we may walk steadfastly on the path of eternal life. You know the road you are going on, and you also know where it will end. Make no mistake about it.