

# **“I Think I Committed the Sin Against the Holy Spirit!”**

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Jesse, a co-worker of mine during the summer, was constantly burdened with the idea that he had committed the unforgivable sin. Since he was WELS himself, Jesse would often approach the Seminary students at work to make this “confession.” The terror and despair that he felt seemed to become so overbearing that Jesse was even led to miss days of work due to depression, as he was so assessed. The Sem students tried to assure Jesse that if he was feeling guilty about committing this sin, that was proof that he was not guilty of the unpardonable sin. Although this would offer momentary relief, within a few weeks Jesse would find himself plagued by the same feelings of guilt. What a terrible weight it must be to feel as if there is no hope of forgiveness for your sin!

My experiences with Jesse have often led me to think about the unforgivable sin. It seems as if we know about its existence, but not much is mentioned of it. Perhaps the subject is avoided because it doesn't apply to Christians. It only applies to those who are already lost. But yet it is recorded in each of the synoptic Gospels, twice in the letter to the Hebrews, and once in the first epistle of John. In addition, it is alluded to in at least four other references. So shouldn't we be concerned with it as well? Definitely. Yet, there is some mystery concerning this difficult question which may lead preachers and dogmaticians to only touch on the subject briefly.

Augustine gave the following explanation for his avoidance of the issue:

I tell you, my Beloved; perhaps there is not in all holy Scripture found a more important or difficult question. Wherefore (that I may make you a confession about myself), I have always in my discourses to the people avoided the difficulty and embarrassment of this question; not because I had no ideas of any sort on the subject, for in a matter of such great importance, I would not be negligent in 'asking,' and 'seeking,' and 'knocking;' but because I did not think I could do justice to that understanding of it which was in some degree opened to me, by words suggested at the moment.<sup>1</sup>

But even after such a statement, Augustine did go on to discuss the unforgivable sin. It should be a part of our knowledge and teaching since it is a part of the “whole counsel of God.” There are five questions which I wish to address concerning the sin against the Holy Spirit. First of all, what is it? Who commits it? Why is this sin “unpardonable” and others aren’t? What’s the purpose of having the sin mentioned within Scriptures? What comfort can we offer those who feel the weight of this sin?

### *What is the Unforgivable Sin?*

Many definitions for the unforgivable sin have been offered, each containing an extra detail or a minor twist. For example, Karl Barth asserted that “work-righteousness is the one and only and ultimately unforgivable sin.”<sup>2</sup> Basing their definition on I Corinthians 6:18-19, others have claimed that the sin against the Holy Spirit is a sexual sin. Still others have attempted to define the sin against the Holy Spirit by defining what it isn’t. In order to clarify any misunderstandings, Laetsch eliminates those sins which are not to be designated as the unpardonable sin. He says in *Abiding Word* that it is not: a) final impenitence or unbelief. b) every act resisting the Holy Spirit. c) blasphemy uttered against the Gospel while a man is in unbelief or ignorance. d) every public renunciation of Christ by an oath and every sin against conscience.<sup>3</sup>

Looking at the six chief passages concerning this sin, we are able to determine some qualifying characteristics. First of all, by examining the principal passage, Matthew 12:31-32<sup>4</sup>, we see that the sin is not against the third person of the Trinity, but against his office. For the Holy Spirit’s person is not exalted above the Father or the Son so that blasphemy against him is so much worse. Walther handles this passage by saying, “The blasphemy to which our text

refers is directed *against the office*, or operation, of the Holy Spirit... The office of the Holy Spirit is to call men to Christ and to keep them with him.”<sup>5</sup>

A second qualification of the sin is that it is uttered by the mouth. Verse 32 of Matthew says that “anyone who *speaks* against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.” Walther again comments on this portion of the passage to comfort dear Christians who “imagine they have committed this sin when they are visited with horrid thoughts of which they cannot rid themselves.”<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, it is a deliberate sin after receiving the knowledge of truth. Hebrews 10:26, warns, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.” Lauersdorf points to the three phrases of Hebrews 10:29 as an indication of the deliberateness of this sin. “With deliberate and dirty feet such a sinner stomps all over the highest and the best of all beings... With unbelievable insolence such a sinner thumbs his nose at the blood that he had once valued as having cleansed him, now considering it no more than anyone else’s blood.”<sup>7</sup>

Fourthly, it is a persistent sin. This, too, we draw from Hebrews 10:26. The Greek word for sinning here is *anartanohtwn*, which is a present participle in form. Thus this is not just a one-time act, but a person who “keeps on sinning” as the NIV translation adequately reflects.

The first epistle of John highlights a fifth attribute of the unforgivable sin. I John 5:16 instructs us that this sin is a “sin that leads to death.” For such a sinner, we should not intercede.

Based on these five characteristics, Pieper bodes well to quote Hollaz’ definition for the sin against the Holy Spirit. “The sin against the Holy Ghost is the malicious denial of the divine truth which a person has clearly understood and approved in his conscience, a hostile assault on

it, horrible blaspheming, and an obstinate rejection of all the means of grace, which lasts to the end.”<sup>8</sup>

*Who commits this sin?*

This was briefly touched upon with the third characteristic of the definition above. This sin is committed after receiving the knowledge of the truth. Hebrews 6:4-6 support the necessity of prior knowledge as the writer says, “It is impossible for those *who have once been enlightened.*” They no longer walk in the darkness, but they have been shown the way by the Light of the world.<sup>9</sup> “[It is impossible for those] who have *tasted the heavenly gift.*” For the gift of God offers them the living water.<sup>10</sup> “[It is impossible for those] who have *shared in the Holy Spirit,* 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, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

Having been enlightened and having tasted the heavenly gift, we know that this sin is not just one of common unbelief. But we also know from the I John text that the sin against the Holy Spirit is more involved. For in that passage we are told not to intercede for those whose sin does not lead to death. But when we look at Paul’s first letter to Timothy, we are urged that “requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone... (for God our Savior) wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”<sup>11</sup> This implies that we are to pray for those who have not yet come to a knowledge of the truth, those who are in unbelief. In contrast, Lenski writes, “The sin against the Holy Ghost may be committed, not only by former believers, but also by men who have never believed.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the reason offered, Lyle Luchterhand offers three more reasons why unbelief is not the unforgivable sin. First of all, the Bible does not charge all unbelievers with

the unforgivable sin. Secondly, every unbeliever who comes to faith is proof that not all unbelievers have committed the unforgivable sin. Finally, though all unbelievers reject the gospel, there is no evidence to conclude they all do so blasphemously or against better knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, we are not to assume that all who blaspheme are guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul was a “blasphemer and a persecutor”<sup>14</sup> who went around from one synagogue to another to have the believers punished, and he tried to force them to blaspheme.<sup>15</sup> Nor is everyone who publicly renounces Christ with an oath guilty of the unpardonable sin. Peter was guilty of renouncing Christ with an oath but “this blasphemy [against the Holy Spirit] Peter had not, who presently repented, when ‘he wept bitterly,’ and who after he had overcome the spirit who is divided against himself, and who had desired to ‘have him to harass him,’ and against whom the ‘Lord prayed for him that his faith might not fail,’ even received the Very Holy Spirit whom he resisted not, that not only his sin might be forgiven him, but that through him remission of sins might be preached and dispensed.”<sup>16</sup>

Even the ones who nailed the Savior to the cross were not guilty of the unforgivable sin since they acted in ignorance<sup>17</sup> and they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory if they had known it.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind--that not even the crucifiers of the Lord are guilty--we should be extra cautious in charging anyone with this sin. Luther exhorts, “Do not rashly charge anyone with this sin. There are poor, burdened consciences which the devil is driving to despair by causing them to think they have committed the unpardonable sin.”<sup>19</sup> “For the forgiveness of sin is preached to those who feel their sin and are seeking grace of God. *But these persons* [who have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost] *are not frightened by any scruples of conscience, nor do they recognize and feel their sin.*”<sup>20</sup>

*Why is this sin unpardonable?*

Doesn't Scripture assure us that the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin?<sup>21</sup> Or doesn't it say that Christ is the "atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the *whole world*?"<sup>22</sup> Didn't John the Baptist say of the One whose sandals he was not fit to carry, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of *the world*?"<sup>23</sup> If where sin increased, grace increased all the more<sup>24</sup>, how then can we say that an unpardonable sin even exists?

We may be quick to jump on Calvin's bandwagon and say that "the gracious will of God and merit of Christ extends not over all men, but only over a part of mankind."<sup>25</sup> Or we may join the Romanists who believe that those guilty of the unpardonable sin lack the required merit to obtain salvation. Or we may join the synergists who say we didn't cooperate enough in our conversion. As a result, the Holy Spirit was never able to work in us.

How do we respond? Martin Chemnitz adds, "not all sins are equal. But one sin is more grievous than the other."<sup>26</sup> In John 19:11 Jesus answered Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." So, in fact, some sins are more serious than others. Chemnitz enumerates five points in which some sins rank more serious:

- 1) Depending on the person who commits the sin.
- 2) According to the person who is offended.
- 3) According to the value of the things to which damage is done.
- 4) Sin which is done with purposeful maliciousness.
- 5) Sin is aggravated because of continuation, multiplication, repetition, or because sins are excused or defended.<sup>27</sup>

As one can see, the sin against the Holy Spirit falls into the above categories of being a “serious” sin. “In short, we must say also in regard to this sin: a) If a person does not commit it, it is due solely to God’s grace and in no wise to a good human quality or accomplishment, call it what you will. And b) If a man does commit the sin against the Holy Ghost, it is not caused by a lack of God’s grace or of Christ’s merit or of the saving operation of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

*Why does the Bible mention this sin?*

The Bible mentions this sin as a warning to all those who have not yet fallen away. This was the context of the Matthew passage as Jesus was warning the Pharisees lest they fall into this sin. The letter to the Hebrews also points out that the threat of this sin is a warning. “Even though we speak like this, dear friends... We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”<sup>29</sup> And again in chapter ten we are cautioned, “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.”<sup>30</sup> In these verses we have clear warnings against those who falsely claim, “Once saved, always saved.” The warning of I Corinthians 10:12 applies as well, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”

But notice, the passages concerning the unforgivable sin serve as a *warning*. This is the general rule for the church to apply, to use this sin as a warning rather than a condemnation. It is a call to repentance. As Ezekiel called to Israel, “Repent! Turn away from your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... Repent and live!”<sup>31</sup>

If we would be so bold to use this sin as a condemnation, we would be meddling in “what ‘has not been revealed to us’ and ignoring the command ‘always to keep urging the Word’”.<sup>32</sup> The Formula of Concord counsels us not to use this sin as a condemnation for “Thus without any doubt God also knows and has determined for every one the time and hour of his call and conversion [and when He will rise again one who has lapsed]. But since this has not been revealed to us, we have the command always to keep urging the Word, but to entrust the time and hour [of conversion] to God.”<sup>33</sup> Just as Acts 1:7 instructs us, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.”

Some argue that the sin against the Holy Spirit is not applicable today. Such arguments say only those who were able to witness the miracles and life of Jesus Christ were truly enlightened so that they had no excuse to resist the Spirit. Therefore the unforgivable sin is nothing we need to worry about. Far from it! “For the mystery has now been revealed in the *proclamation of the full light of Christ*... When the sun arose on Easter morning and the message of the cross was preached abroad and confirmed by the Spirit in the resurrection of Christ and Pentecost, a *new era* was given birth and men no longer could differentiate their sinning against Christ from their sinning against the Holy Spirit.”<sup>34</sup>

Yes, the sin of the Holy Spirit is just as stern of a warning as we head into the new millenium as it was at the time of Christ. Preachers today are to “sound forth the siren of this warning as clearly as did the first century author of the letter to the Hebrews.”<sup>35</sup> For God is still not the meek grandfather who invites us to sit on his lap and says everything will be okay. But he is serious when he says, “Whoever does not believe will be condemned.”<sup>36</sup>

*What comfort can we offer to those who fear  
they are guilty of the sin?*

Perhaps it is in this area that I was less than adequate in speaking with my co-worker, Jesse. Although I assured him that his feeling guilty was proof that he had not committed the sin, Jesse still felt burdened. And this makes sense to me now that such “advice” does not provide any real comfort. “The rationalistic idea that anxiety itself brings comfort to those who are discomfited will never suffice.” Rather, “the Christian pastor must deliver the only message of comfort which can possibly bring relief to those who need it most: the glad tidings of the Gospel.”<sup>37</sup>

The next time I see Jesse, or anyone else whose conscience is burdened by the thought of this sin, I can offer them the words of Philippians 2:13. “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” About this passage the Confessions say:

“To all godly Christians who feel and experience in their hearts a small spark or longing for divine grace and eternal salvation this precious passage is very comforting; for they know that God has kindled in their hearts this beginning of true godliness, and that He will further strengthen and help them in their great weakness to persevere in true faith unto the end.”<sup>38</sup>

Or I could direct Jesse to the words of the LORD recorded by the pen of Isaiah:

“Come now, let us reason together,”  
says the LORD.

“Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool.”<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps I would turn Jesse to the many psalms of comfort. For example, as Psalm 130 assures that although we could not stand before the LORD if he kept a record of sins, but with him there is forgiveness.<sup>40</sup> Or as David prayed in Psalm 86:5, “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.”

Yes, the sin of the Holy Spirit is something that could happen. But as we go about our ministries, we will recognize this sin as a warning for all those who have been enlightened. And we will go about our ministries assuring all those whose hearts are “kindled” with fear have forgiveness. We can offer the sweet hope of the Gospel to those who are overwhelmed by their sins. We can say to the Jesse in our congregation, “When we were overwhelmed by sins, God forgave our transgressions.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine p.3

<sup>2</sup> Berkouwer, p. 327

<sup>3</sup> Laetsch p. 169

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 12:31-32 "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 in the age to come."

<sup>5</sup> Walther p. 393

<sup>6</sup> Walther p. 394

<sup>7</sup> Lauersdorf p. 123

<sup>8</sup> Pieper I, p. 573

<sup>9</sup> John 8:12

<sup>10</sup> John 4:10

<sup>11</sup> I Timothy 2:1,4

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, p.483

<sup>13</sup> Luchterhand p. 99

<sup>14</sup> I Timothy 1:13

<sup>15</sup> Acts 26:11

<sup>16</sup> Augustine p.13

<sup>17</sup> Acts 3:17

<sup>18</sup> I Corinthians 2:8

<sup>19</sup> Pieper I, p.575 (quoting *Luther's Works* St.L X:1209)

<sup>20</sup> Walther p. 398

<sup>21</sup> I John 1:7

<sup>22</sup> I John 2:2

<sup>23</sup> John 1:29

<sup>24</sup> Romans 5:20

<sup>25</sup> Pieper I, p. 576

<sup>26</sup> Chemnitz, p. 214

<sup>27</sup> Chemnitz, p. 214

<sup>28</sup> Pieper I, p. 576

<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 6:9a, 11-12

<sup>30</sup> Hebrews 10:35-36

<sup>31</sup> Ezekiel 18:30,31,32

<sup>32</sup> Pieper II, p. 469

<sup>33</sup> *Triglot* p.1081, ¶56

<sup>34</sup> Berkouwer, p.341

<sup>35</sup> Lauersdorf, p. 124

<sup>36</sup> Mark 16:16

<sup>37</sup> Berkouwer, p. 345

<sup>38</sup> *Triglot*, p. 885 *Formula of Concord*. Thorough Declaration. II ¶14

<sup>39</sup> Isaiah 1:18

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 130:3-4

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 65:3