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3 Pentecost

The Catch 22 of Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Mark 3:20-35

I was in a prayer group in New York City, at Grace Church, for many years. Every Wednesday night. Service, dinner, then we would break into our small groups. We used a commentary and worked through the gospels, and I learned so much. There was one woman in the group who was so well versed in scripture it was just stunning – and a bit intimidating. She was about my age, and could find any verse, any quote, any reference in a moment. Her bible was full of notes and markers and was clearly well loved and well used.

One week she was particularly quiet, and she vacillated between looking horrified and bereft. After our prayer group ended she asked to talk with me. She told me, almost in whispers, that she had done the worst thing ever. The thing that is totally unforgiveable, and that could not be redeemed. She said she knew that God would never, ever forgive her, and that all the beautiful time she had spent with God, the relationship she had built with him was now and forever ruined. I was stunned. I could not imagine what she was talking about, and she was so distressed that she could hardly speak it.

My mind was racing. I was a social worker on the lower east side of Manhattan, the co-founder and clinical director for shelter. Seventy-seven beds, all men, all homeless and drug addicted. I had heard some stories. I had identified one of our guys who had been found, dead from an overdose and rolled up in a rug in an alley. I had helped a young man get rid of a weapon (legally, but it was sneaky), and I had met people who had done awful things. I cried over guys that went back out to the streets and talked with all the neighborhood drug dealers about what we were doing and helped clean blood off the sidewalk in front of our building. Three weekends in a row there was a murder there.

I could not imagine what this beautiful, intelligent young woman sitting in front of me had done that could be so unforgiveable.

She finally managed to tell me – it was the one thing that God would never forgive – she had blasphemed against the Holy Spirit.

Honestly, I was so relieved I almost laughed. I had pictured... I don't even know what... but not that.

I didn't laugh, though, because she was so upset and distraught. I tried to talk with her, but didn't have any of the right words, and I know I wasn't helpful that night. It has sort of haunted me. And so, last week, when I looked at the Gospel passage assigned for today, I knew I had to focus on one section. Because I didn't have the words then, but perhaps I do today.

MARK 3:28-30 reads:

28"Most certainly I tell you, all sins of the descendants of man will be forgiven, including their blasphemies with which they may blaspheme; 29but whoever may blaspheme against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" 30—because they said, "He has an unclean spirit."

"Most certainly I tell you" - these words signal the listener that Jesus is ready make an important pronouncement. They say, "Listen carefully!"

"all sins of the descendants of man will be forgiven, including their blasphemies with which they may blaspheme". Jesus is about to pronounce a heavy judgment, but he first affirms the possibility of grace. We can be forgiven, not only for sins against other people, but even for blasphemy, a sin against God.

"BUT" (v. 29). When someone says "but," start listening. The part prior to the "but" is the setup. The part after the "but" is what the person really came to say. Jesus says, "BUT!" so LISTEN!!!

“BUT whoever may blaspheme against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin” (v. 29).

And just in case we need to hear it again in Matthew 12:31-32, Jesus says,

“Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy
will be forgiven men,
but the blasphemy against the Spirit
will not be forgiven men.
Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man,
it will be forgiven him;
but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit,
it will not be forgiven him,
neither in this age, nor in that which is to come.”

And again in Luke 12:10, Jesus says,

“Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man
will be forgiven,
but those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit
will not be forgiven.”

These verses strike fear in our hearts. Many Bible verses promise forgiveness, but this one warns that is a place where we dare not venture—a place beyond redemption—a place from which we can never return—a place where forgiveness is no longer possible. No wonder the woman in my prayer group was so distraught! It behooves us to understand this passage!

What prompted Jesus to issue this warning? It was the scribes’ statement: “He has Beelzebul,” and “by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons” (v. 22). The scribes declared Jesus’ work evil. They should have known better. They were, after all, trained Biblical scholars, responsible for helping people to understand God’s law. They were surely aware of the miracles that Jesus has worked.

While it was apparent to most people that Jesus was doing good works by the power of God, these scribes not only refused to see that—they also subverted the truth by saying that Jesus did his work by demonic power. They rejected the one who could have brought them forgiveness. They not only failed to see the light, but also called the light darkness.

The Greek word *blasphemeo* means “To blaspheme, revile. To hurt the reputation or smite with reports or words, speak evil of, slander, rail... To speak with impious irreverence concerning God Himself or what stands in some particular relation to Him.... Reviling against the Holy Spirit...means to resist the convicting power of the Holy Spirit unto repentance” (Zodhiates, 340).

The sin of blasphemy is the sin of refusing the power of the Holy Spirit, which connects us to Jesus, who offers forgiveness. The sin of blasphemy is the sin of refusing forgiveness.

The scribes have shown that they no longer recognize what is good—no longer value it—no longer strive for it. Having decided that Christ is satanic, they are not open to receiving his help and are therefore not candidates for the salvation that he offers.

Anyone who hates God and has hardened his/her heart to God is a candidate for this very harsh eternal judgement. Such people aren't likely to find forgiveness, because they aren't likely to seek it.

Keep in mind that the New Testament tells of NO ONE repenting and seeking forgiveness unsuccessfully. To join the ranks of the unforgiveable would appear to require a hardness of heart that would never ask forgiveness.

There is the person who recognizes evil—abhors evil—and yet finds him/herself doing what is evil. Paul talked about that problem in Romans 7, confessing, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15). He talked about the spiritual warfare that raged inside himself (Romans 7:22-23) and concluded that his only hope was Jesus Christ

(Romans 7:24-25). Spiritual warfare is not blasphemy. I think that if you are engaged in spiritual warfare, you are engaged, and that's good. Blasphemy is saying "There is nothing for me to be engaged with."

Sin is a common problem—if it afflicted the Apostle Paul, surely it must afflict the rank and file Christian—so we need to reassure Christians that their ordinary sins do not constitute the sin against the Holy Spirit.

If I could go back in time, in the dark library at the back of Grace Church, to a very scared fellow wanderer, I would say "Darling friend, if you are worried about sinning against the Holy Spirit you are okay. The fact that they are concerned reflects the work of an active conscience, and that is the work of the Holy Spirit".

It is like what I was told when I would worry if I was a good parent – bad parents don't worry about being a bad parent. If you are worrying, that's a good sign. It is unlikely ever to occur to the truly guilty person to worry about being guilty.

This passage should not scare us. I believe it should shake us, just to be sure we are awake, but remember that the moment we ask for forgiveness we are entering back into the relationship with God, we are walking back into Jesus' arms, and acknowledging that we find refuge and peace and love and hope there - and that is a safe place, where we are always welcomed and loved and forgiven.

Zodhiates, Spiros (ed.), *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, Tennessee: AMG Publishers, 1992).