

CAN THE UNPARDONABLE SIN BE COMMITTED
TODAY? A DISPENSATIONAL VIEW

by
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To accurately answer the question, "Can the unpardonable sin be committed today?" one must discern the conditions and the context within which it occurred. After His temptation, Jesus returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" and proclaimed the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy in Himself. Great miracles followed which verified His claim of Messiahship, one of which was the healing of the dumb and blind demoniac in Matthew 12:22. Realizing that many of the bystanders understood this miracle to be a fulfillment of Isaiah 35:5-6, the Pharisees immediately attributed Christ's power to cast out demons to Beelzebub. Because of their slanderous attack, Jesus warned them that they were in danger of committing a sin which "shall not be forgiven." A closer look at Jesus' remarks indicates that He was far more concerned with slandering the Holy Spirit than their rejection of Him.

That "blasphemy against the Spirit" was none other than slanderous defamation of the Messiah's source of empowerment can be seen in the nature of blasphemy as it is used throughout Scripture. Blasphemy always referred to harmful speech toward God or man, and because of its exclusively verbal nature could not be generalized to refer to mere unbelief or rejection in Matthew 12:31-32. Thus the nature of the term "blasphemy against the Spirit" must be a reference to the verbal assault made against the Holy Spirit who empowered Christ.

The Jews did not understand Jesus' offer of the Kingdom, for their perceptions of Messiah were far different than what they saw in His humanity. First, they looked for a political savior and not a righteous king. Second, they tended to overlook any scriptural references to Messiah as a suffering servant. And finally, they looked for a supernatural return of the dispersed Jews when Messiah came. These factors contributed to their unwillingness to accept Jesus as their King.

Certain conditions must be present to commit the unpardonable sin according to New Testament accounts. There must be a literal Spirit-empowered Messiah present, offering the Kingdom and performing sign miracles. There must also be slanderous remarks made against His power source in order to "blaspheme against the Spirit." Only during Jesus' ministry and the future millennial Kingdom will these conditions be present. Therefore, the unpardonable sin cannot occur during the Church Age.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological Seminary
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Irvin H. French

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone seems to have his own pet interpretation of the unpardonable sin. Scholars of great renown are at odds concerning this issue and numerous theories abound. The great need is for someone to explain the two passages in Matthew and Mark in such a way that all the mystery concerning their proper interpretation is removed.

A contextual study of the unpardonable sin reveals a Messianic environment that makes it totally unique. The conditions surrounding the sin are so unique that it might be questioned whether it is possible for this sin to be committed today. There are many who insist that one can commit it today.

The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a sin of peculiar character. Analyzed in its grammatical, historical context, it is a sin that must be accompanied by the presence of a literal, visible Messiah, who performs sign miracles by the power of the Spirit. Since these essential Messianic conditions are not present during the Age of Grace, it is impossible for one to commit that sin today. Only during the millennial Kingdom will one again be able to commit such a serious sin.

CHAPTER I

THE MESSIANIC FLAVOR OF
THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

No accurate answer for the question, "Can the unpardonable sin be committed today?" is available without first trying to discern the conditions and the context within which it occurred. Matthew and Mark describe the same event in Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-30, yet each account has its own unique contribution toward a better understanding of this notable occurrence.

In his research, the writer was amazed to find that many commentators have failed to even distinguish the Messianic context that surrounds the occurrence of the sin that "will not be forgiven." Often this oversight is a result of seeing the initiation of a spiritual kingdom at the first advent of Christ, and seeing very little connection between Messianic prophecies and their literal fulfillment during the earthly ministry of Christ. The amillennial approach tends to see the miracles of Christ as ways Jesus used to draw men to salvation or else they become mere examples of caring for disease and social injustice, as some social gospel adherents are advocating. Few today are able to see the Messianic significance of those miracles.

The Messianic Background of the Sin

To gain a better understanding of the events of Matthew 12 and Mark 3, a brief chronology of significant events in the life of Christ is in order. After about thirty years of obscurity, Jesus came forth to be baptized by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11 and Luke 3:21-23). When the Spirit of God descended upon Him like a dove, Jesus received power to pursue His earthly ministry. Being very God, He had chosen not to exercise the independent use of His divine attributes (Phil 2:6-8), and was therefore empowered for service by the Holy Spirit. This was the exact fulfillment of Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 61:1 which declared, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me." It is also a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1 in which the servant of the LORD is described as having God's Spirit upon Him. One must therefore note that the Messiah was to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, a fact which was fully understood by Rabbinical writers¹ and a fact which will heavily influence the ensuing discussion.

After His season of temptation, recorded in Luke 4:1-13 and Matthew 4:1-11, in which Jesus proved His suitability to be God's anointed servant, Luke records that Jesus returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (4:14), and entered into the synagogue in Nazareth.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 50.

Turning to Isaiah 61:1-2, He proclaimed that this prophecy was already being fulfilled in Himself. The Jews recognized His claim of being the Messiah immediately, for they promptly questioned its validity asking, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

Not long after Jesus' great Messianic revelation came the Sermon on the Mount, which included rules and principles of life that will be characteristic of the future millennial Kingdom. This sermon prepared the way for the great sign miracles that follow in chapters eight and nine of Matthew. John Walvoord observes that the purpose of Matthew in those two chapters "is to offer the credentials of the Messiah as predicted in the Old Testament."¹ There are no less than nine significant miracles recorded in these chapters, each bearing witness to the multitudes that Jesus was the Messiah.

The Immediate Context of the Sin

The blasphemous accusation made against the Lord by the Pharisees took place in the second phase or what is often called the second tour of the Great Galilean Ministry. This large segment of Christ's early ministry is found in Matthew 4:17-14:12, Mark 1:14-6:29, Luke 4:14-9:9, and very briefly in John 4:46-5:47.² Only Matthew and Mark record the Lord's stern warning concerning the

¹John F. Walvoord, Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 63.

²A. T. Robertson, A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1922), pp. 30-71.

sin that "will not be forgiven." A similar blasphemous indictment is recorded in Luke 11:14-36 which takes place somewhere in Judea on Christ's and His disciples' extended journey toward Jerusalem. However, no mention is made of an unpardonable sin.

Matthew records the particular instance which inspired the accusation of the Pharisee scribes in 12:22-23 in which the Lord cast a devil out of a blind and dumb man. When the man was miraculously able to speak and see, many in the house (see Mark 3:19) began to wonder whether this miracle was a sign that verified Jesus truly was the Messiah (Matt 12:23). This was flatly denied by the Pharisees, for they attributed the power that Jesus had to perform miracles to Beelzebub, or Satan himself. Jesus quickly reacted to this accusation by using three arguments to reveal the absurdity of their claim.

One: The Divided Kingdom

(Matthew 12:25-26; Mark 3:23-26)

First, the Lord reasoned that if Satan was casting out his own, he would be weakening his cause, and "such action on Satan's part, as they suppose, would be self destructive."¹ William Lane, approaching the argument as it is recorded in Mark, provides an excellent description of Jesus' logic.

¹A. Lukyn Williams, "Matthew," The Pulpit Commentary, ed. Canon H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, vol. 1 of 2 vols. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, n.d.), p. 488.

If what you say is true, there exists the impossible circumstance that Satan is destroying his own realm. For it is self evident that a kingdom divided against itself will fall, while a household divided against itself cannot be established. If your accusation is factual, then Satan has become divided in his allegiance. This should mean that he has become powerless. Yet this is clearly not so. Satan remains strong, and this fact exposes the fallacy of your charge.¹

Satan would not allow his forces to tear down those things that they have taken so much time in building. Thus, Jesus shows that only the Spirit of God could be responsible for such actions.

Two: The Imminent Kingdom

(Matthew 12:27-28)

The second argument against the Pharisees' accusation is perhaps the most significant, in that it gives the strongest indication that Jesus' miracles were definitely Messianic signs. This second defense will be discussed in a later chapter, so for now it will suffice to mention only the point of Jesus' reasoning.

In possible reference to exorcisms of that day, Jesus asked by whose power the Jews were able to cast out demons. Since the Jews would most assuredly say that they received their power from God, they would be hard pressed to prove that Jesus did not cast out demons by the power of God. If He was empowered by the Holy Spirit and performed acts that were prophetically designated signs, then

¹William Lane, "The Gospel According to Mark," The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 143.

He must have been the Messiah and the Kingdom was at hand. It is significant that Jesus describes His miracles as signs of an imminent kingdom; a declaration of His Messiahship. They showed "such a strange putting forth of God's strength, that it can mean nothing else but the coming of the Messianic Kingdom."¹

Three: The Stronger Kingdom

(Matthew 12:29-30; Mark 3:27)

As the coming Messiah, Jesus was the mighty King who exercised power over the kingdom of this world. This is stated simply and to the point: Only one who is stronger can bind and plunder the goods of a strong man. Jesus demonstrated that He was indeed greater than Satan, and thereby must be the Messiah.

The very next section is the focal point of discussion. In Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-30, Jesus warns the Pharisees that they are guilty of blasphemy; specifically blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Although it may already appear evident what the blasphemy consisted of, there is much debate as to what Christ really meant by the term blasphemy. Clearly an understanding of this word will help to determine the nature of the sin, and may give some insight into the possibility of it being repeated today.

¹Williams, "Matthew," p. 489.

CHAPTER II

A STUDY OF THE NATURE OF BLASPHEMY

What is blasphemy and what does one have to do to be guilty of blaspheming? These are questions that can only be answered by first understanding the nature of blasphemy itself. Can it really be applied to a host of general sins such as mere unbelief, or does the character of the word involve specificity?

βλασφημία

The English word "blasphemy" is an almost direct transliteration of the Greek term βλασφημία, which in its universal sense refers to "railing, reviling, slander, detraction, or speech injurious to another's good name."¹ In its specific sense it may refer to "impious and reproachful speech injurious to the divine majesty."²

The Septuagint rightfully used βλασφημία to translate several related Hebrew words, which all suggest the idea of verbal abuse, slander or reviling. The Hebrew

¹ Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 102.

² Ibid.

root נָסָה , for example, means to "condemn or spurn,"¹ and its Piel form which is rendered "blasphemy" is defined by Koehler and Baumgartner with the German noun "Schmähung (reviling or defamation)," and by two key verbs, "verunglimpfen (to slander or revile)" and "verachten (to despise or disdain)."²

In Judaism, βλασφημία always occurred with reference to God and was a serious offense. It could manifest itself in four different ways, all of which sought to detract from the ultimate glory of God. One might blaspheme God by "disputing His saving power," by ungodly speech and action, "by human arrogance with its implied depreciation of God," and in the desecrating of His name by the Gentiles who capture and enslave His people."³ According to Leviticus 24:16, it was also to be quickly dealt with by capital punishment or stoning.

To understand the Jewish conception of blasphemy one must find particular incidents in which the Jews felt blasphemy was involved. A clear example of βλασφημία as

¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 622.

² Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, Hebraisches und Aramaisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. 622.

³ Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "βλασφημέω, βλασφημία, βλάσφημος," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 621-25.

the Jews perceived it is found in John 10:30-33. After the Lord proclaimed, "I and My Father are one," there was an almost unanimous rush by the Jews for stones to stone Him. They understood Jesus to be equating Himself with God (verse 33). They doubted His claim of deity, for He appeared to them as an impious man whose very claim of equality with God cheapened and depreciated the holiness of Jehovah God of Israel. For a mere man to equate himself with God was slanderous defamation.

When looking at βλασφημία from an etymological perspective, a further understanding of the nature of the act it stands for can be grasped. W. E. Vine suggests that it came from two Greek words; βλάπτω, meaning "to injure" and φήμη, meaning "speech."¹ The resulting combination yields the meaning "injurious speech" and indicates an attempt to verbally harm and discredit another.

If blasphemy amounted to slander, reviling, defamation and other forms of harmful speech, it must follow that "blasphemy against the Spirit" is related in character. According to its normal usage, the blasphemy committed by the Pharisees must be embodied in their slanderous accusation, "This fellow doth not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons" (Matt 12:24).

¹W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1962), p. 131.

βλασφηεμέω

The act of blasphemy is equally important to the discussion of the "sin against the Spirit," as one must see the relationship of the actual execution of the sin to the nature of the sin itself. For some reason, the English translators of the Bible often chose to anglicize the Greek verb βλασφημέω instead of giving its literal meaning. The result is great confusion over the actual meaning of the word. Without consulting a lexicon, it is possible for one to let his mind lead him to some spiritualized meaning, or he may apply it to some action that is not correctly implied by the verb. It is not surprising then that several different authors might offer several different interpretations of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, five different Hebrew words are translated "blaspheme." What is most important to note is the general lexical meanings of the various verb roots and the way they elucidate the nature of the act of blaspheming. The root בָּרַךְ, for example, frequently refers to the pronouncement of a blessing, but twice (1 Kings 21:10 and 13) it refers to cursing "God and the king."¹

As one continues to study the four other Hebrew verbs, the character of the act of blasphemy becomes even more clear; קָטַף may mean to "revile or cut into," קָטַף

¹Robert Young, Analytical Concordance to the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 77.

found solely in Isaiah 65:7, may also mean "to cut into," כָּרַךְ might generally mean "to pierce," and finally נָצַע may be translated "to pierce or sting" when not associated with a particular context.¹

What can be easily noticed is the hurtful verbal attack spoken against another that is described when each of the five words are used in the Hebrew text. It seems conclusive that whenever the act of blasphemy is found in the Old Testament it never involved any other act than that of the verbal desecration or depreciation of God or man.

The act of blasphemy in the New Testament is identical in nature to that of the Old Testament. Liddell and Scott have suggested that of all the instances that βλασφημέω is found in the New Testament, there is usually one of three different nuances of meaning. It can either mean to "speak profanely of sacred things," "to speak ill or prejudice of one or slander," or "to speak impiously or irreverently of God."²

It is most significant that blasphemy in the New Testament involves a verbal sin, resulting from harmful words spoken against another. This must be taken into account when one attempts to define blaspheming against the Spirit. Suggestions that the "blasphemy against the

¹ Ibid.

² Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 317-18.

Spirit" amounts to unbelief or rejection is not entirely correct. There might be unbelief or rejection that accompanies blasphemy, but it remains a sin that may be committed independent of the other two actions. Blasphemy is not a general sin, it is a specific "sin of the mouth."¹

Before a further study of the blasphemy of the Spirit and important grammatical considerations that apply, it is important to understand some of the reasons why some of the Jews refused to believe in Jesus' Messianic mission. It might be said that certain misconceptions of the coming Messiah clouded the view from the beginning of His ministry.

¹Barnard Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit," Bibliotheca Sacra 93 (January, 1936):223.

CHAPTER III

JEWISH MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE MESSIAH

To believers of the twentieth century it seems ludicrous that anyone would attribute the sign miracles of Jesus to Satan, when these works were the exact fulfillment of familiar Messianic prophecies. It is harder to escape this assumption when one further considers the wicked, unbelieving nature of many of the Pharisees. One cannot fully understand the accusation made against Jesus, without first considering the current trend of thought toward the Messiah in Jesus' day. Only then can one adequately understand why the Pharisees, despite His signs, were so quick to disregard the initial offer of the Kingdom.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some insight into what thought patterns were present that may have encouraged the Pharisees to reject Jesus' Messianic offer. If the Jews were familiar with the predicted signs, why then did they yet reject Him? It was clear that some saw the Messianic intent of His miracles, for the reaction from the people in Matthew 12:23 indicates that some believed that He could be the predicted "son of David" that should come. The Pharisees were men of biblical knowledge who were well acquainted with prophecy, yet it

is strange that they should fail to grasp the significance of the miracles, while others immediately saw their Messianic character. One must therefore consider possible reasons why they still rejected the Messiah.

A Lost Conception of the "Son of Man"

At the time that Jesus walked the earth, the belief in a personal, literal Messiah had grown to impressive proportions. In fact, H. L. Ellison states that "the 150 years before Christ show an increasing fervour in Messianic belief."¹ With such an awareness of matters dealing with the Messiah, it is not surprising that Jesus' response to the Pharisees' slanderous accusation in Matthew 12:32 included the Messianic title, "Son of Man." Jesus knew that they would recognize His claim to be the Messiah by using this name for Himself.

The Jews believed that the name בר אנש or "Son of Man" used by the prophet Daniel was a reference to the predicted Messiah. Concerning this historical fact, it can be clearly stated that

Judaism which apart from Da 7:27 always interpreted the בר אנש of Daniel 7:13f messianically, retained all the characteristics of the Son of Man, though His name was changed usually to בר אפלי or Son of the clouds, or else it was quoted in the original context and implicitly related to the Messiah.²

¹H. L. Ellison, The Centrality of the Messianic Idea for the Old Testament (London: The Tyndale Press, 1953), p. 6.

²Carsten, Colpe, "ὁ υἱος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 8 of 10 vols., ed.

From the description given in Daniel 7:13-14, the Jews anticipated a superhuman Messiah who was to be worshipped by all nations and would establish an everlasting kingdom. It was believed that this coming Messiah would be closely related to deity, if not deity Himself. However, this attitude seemed to change with time.

By the time Jesus had arrived and had presented Himself as the King, the belief in a supernatural Messiah had dwindled to such a point that he had become a mere man.

Among the Jews the old links between deity and the Messianic king which we find in pre-exilic prophecy rapidly die out. It is clear from the New Testament evidence and from much pseudepigraphic literature that, whatever speculation some might have carried on, for the vast majority the Messiah was no longer expected to be more than a purely human figure.¹

Under great oppression from Rome, the Messiah had finally come to be perceived as a great political leader who would some day lead the Jews to freedom from their enemies. This Jesus standing before them claimed to be the predicted King, yet He did not demonstrate any effort to free the Jews from Roman domination. Consequently, His miracles fell upon hard hearts; for they were looking for a political savior, not a righteous king.

Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 430.

¹Ellison, The Centrality of the Messianic Idea for the Old Testament, p. 6.

Deliberate Oversight of the
Suffering Servant

Many sincere Jews who looked for a supernatural Messiah were plagued by interpretive problems which they could not reconcile. The most common problem was the synthesis of a suffering Messiah and a conquering King. After the Jews had been taken away into exile and later had to live under the thumb of various regimes, there seemed to be an overemphasis upon the Messiah as subjugating sovereign rather than upon a suffering servant. This persisted until there was only the conquering aspect which was emphasized.

The lowliness of the man Jesus was not compatible with their conceptions of the coming and He was therefore rejected. One common belief was that the Messiah would "live forever," but Jesus' continual references to His coming death was not compatible with the eternal Messiah of Daniel 7:13-14.¹

A second belief was that the Messiah would come in great majesty and power to bring in His Kingdom. However, that was far from the manner in which Jesus came into the world. This disqualified Jesus in the eyes of many since He had not come in the clouds in the way they had expected.

The rejection of Jesus came about primarily because there was laxity in the study of the Scriptures. Many

¹Cullen I. K. Story, "What Kind of Messiah Did the Jews Expect?" Bibliotheca Sacra 105 (January 1948):110.

chose to overlook significant prophetic passages that dealt with a suffering Messiah. Concerning this oversight Story writes,

There seems to be a slight parallel between the conviction of the Old Testament prophets and the Jews of our Lord's time with respect to the sufferings of Messiah. Both were confused as to the connection between the sufferings and the glory--but there the parallelism ends. The prophets, we are told (1 Peter 1:10-12), believed both events and searched diligently for the key to their harmonization. The Jews, however, passed by Messiah's sufferings and accented his kingly character, so much that they evidence no heart-knowledge of those Scriptures which speak of His sufferings.¹

Having been without new revelation from God for over four hundred years, the Jews had left the emphasis upon biblical scholarship in order to concentrate on legalistic interpretation of the Law. They became so caught up in asceticism that their study of the Scriptures became more and more neglected. They falsely chose to emphasize only those prophecies that served their immediate purposes. With the oppression of Rome so acute, the idea of a suffering Messiah was very unpopular.

It must be understood that the various interpretive problems did not provide an excuse for rejecting the offer of the Kingdom. It was plain that Christ's miracles were an exact fulfillment of Isaiah 35:5-6 that had been almost universally accepted as a reference to the coming King. They were therefore without excuse. One author

¹Cullen I. K. Story, "What Kind of Messiah Did the Jews Expect?" Bibliotheca Sacra 105 (April 1948):238.

refers to their accountability for the rejection of Messiah when he writes,

It is understandable that Israel expected both a king and a kingdom. And in the abundance of prophecies relating to this subject, God told them how they would recognize their king The credentials of the king were demonstrated before the eyes of the Israelites.¹

No Return of the Dispersion

The Jews refused to accept Christ as their Messiah, because He failed to bring any of the masses of dispersed Jews back to Palestine. To the Jew, "the coming of the Messiah undoubtedly implied the restoration of Israel's kingdom, and as a first part in it, the return of the dispersed."² It was a bothersome thorn in the side of any Hebrew to be reminded of the thousands of Jews who had been permanently separated from their homeland. There was great hope, however, that Messiah would soon come; for the prophets predicted that at His coming, He would gather the scattered Jews from all over the world back to Palestine. A typical Jewish prayer dating before 70 A.D. expresses this expectation,

Proclaim by thy loud trumpet our deliverance, and raise up a banner to gather our dispersed and gather us together from the four ends of the earth. Blessed be Thou, O LORD! Who gatherest the outcasts of thy people Israel.³

¹Theodore H. Epp, "The Unpardonable Sin," Good News Broadcaster (September 1968):21-22.

²Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, p. 78.

³Ibid.

Because the return of the dispersed was no more imminent than before, it is possible that the Pharisees found it hard to believe that Jesus was truly Messiah and that God was the power behind the signs. With a better understanding of Jewish thought in Jesus' day, it is now appropriate to look at the events surrounding the unpardonable sin and some of the grammatical considerations involved.

CHAPTER IV

A CONTEXTUAL-GRAMMATICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

Thus far, several important facts have been established. First, the early ministry of Jesus was Messianic in nature, complete with a Kingdom gospel and Messianic sign miracles. Second, the sin of blasphemy must be considered in its almost universal relationship to slanderous verbal speech and attempted defamation of another's character. And third, the Jews had several misconceptions and interpretive problems concerning Old Testament Messianic prophecies that may have influenced their rejection of Jesus' Kingdom offer.

In this chapter a study of the events and significant grammatical considerations surrounding the unpardonable sin will be undertaken, in order to discern the precise nature of the sin. The discussion will begin with the reaction of the people to the healed demoniac, and conclude with a general understanding of what the unpardonable sin consisted of.

The Reaction of the People

Matthew 12:23 provides a significant reaction of the people to the healing of the demoniac. He explains

the way the people were affected by what they saw and suggests the reason for the blasphemous accusation of the Pharisee scribes. First it must be noted that the people were in a state of astonishment. The word ἐξίσταντο is noteworthy in that it is a form of ἐξίστημι which in certain contextual situations, such as this one, indicates a "feeling of astonishment mingled with fear, caused by events which are miraculous, extraordinary, or difficult to understand."¹ It is while in this feeling of great amazement that the question was asked, "Is not this the son of David?"

The mention of the name "son of David" was alarming to the Pharisees, since the very mention of this "popular title for the Messiah" indicated that the idea of Jesus as the Messiah was being entertained.² Such a remark was occasioned by the people's knowledge of Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 35:5-6 which proclaim the specific signs by which the people of Israel could identify the future Messiah: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing" As an exact fulfillment of this

¹William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 276.

²Alexander Balmain Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, vol. 1 of 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 186.

prophecy the people had just seen a dumb and blind man speak and see.

The way the question in verse 23 is stated indicates that a negative answer is expected.¹ This is grammatically understood by the word μήτι. A. T. Robertson observes that the question asked in a negative manner might be a conciliatory gesture to the Pharisees who are hostile to the presence of Christ.² However, the question may have been stated in such a way as to indicate that they already believed in His Messiahship, but asked the question purely for effect. "The form of the question," μήτι οὕτως ἐστίν, "suggests that it seemed altogether too wonderful to allow an affirmative answer being returned."³ With the people believing or contemplating belief in Jesus as the Messiah, it is not surprising that the Pharisees quickly responded.

The Accusation of the Pharisees

Understanding that the comment made by the people indicated their willingness to believe in his Messiahship, the Pharisees countered in Matthew 12:24 with what they believed was proof that He was not the Messiah. They charged that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub. The

¹ Ibid., p. 186.

² Archibald Thomas Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, vol. 1 of 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 95.

³ Williams, "Matthew," p. 488.

word οὗτος, coming at the beginning of their response and placed in first position, was a question in itself which seemed to imply, "should it be this one?"¹

Of great interest is the fact that in order to refute His Messiahship, the Pharisees did not attack Jesus personally, but rather directed their vicious assault against His source of power. It is improbable that they being aware of Messianic signs from prophecy, were not also aware that the Messiah was to be anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Not being able to disprove His sign miracles, they sought to discredit Him by saying that He was empowered by the "prince of the demons" or Satan himself. It was this stinging accusation that Jesus addressed later in the passage.

What must be understood is that the Pharisees had not spoken flippantly and without thought. Even before this confrontation with Christ, they had seen his Messianic credentials miracle after miracle. By this time they had willingly suppressed what they knew to be the truth and set out in their wickedness to oppose Him. That "the blasphemous utterance of verse 24 was no inadvertant remark made thoughtlessly on the spur of the moment," can be seen in Matthew 12:38.² After Jesus warned them about the

¹John Peter Lange, "The Gospel According to Matthew," Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, trans. Philip Schaff, vol. 8 of 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 223.

²Alva J. McClain, The Greatness of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 315.

gravity of their accusation, they boldly asked for a sign, showing that they had understood His Messianic message all along. But they had already made up their mind to reject it.

The Imminence of the Kingdom

That the sin that "shall not be forgiven" was a verbal attack against the Messiah's source of power, becomes increasingly clear as Jesus logically disproved their claim. Realizing that Spirit empowerment was an attribute of the Messiah, Jesus centered His arguments upon His source of strength. Nowhere in the passage is His messianic intent made more clear than in verse 28.

The Greek construction in verse 28 is vivid and to the point. There is no doubt left as to the purpose of Christ's miracles. First, the conditional clause found in that verse is a first class condition indicated by the $\epsilon\iota$ $\delta\epsilon$ particles at the beginning of the protasis and a present indicative verb form. Being a first class condition, it is therefore true. The importance of this condition being first class is clearly explained by McClain,

The Greek construction of the conditional clause in this sentence does not leave the question in any doubt as the English translation might seem to suggest. It is as if He had said, But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, and I do! Thus the historical issue was sharply drawn.¹

¹ Ibid., pp. 313-14.

It is clear that by the type of condition Jesus used, He was declaring that He did perform sign miracles by the power of the Spirit.

Secondly, a further look at the protasis indicates that Jesus was more concerned about what was said against the Holy Spirit, than what they might say against Himself. It is significant that Jesus refers to the Spirit of God ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ without an article. This places the "chief emphasis" upon the phrase 'by the Spirit of God' and the "secondary emphasis" upon ἐγώ.¹ In so doing Jesus kept in front of them the gravity of their accusation. In attributing His works to Satan, they were defaming the Holy Spirit of the living God, who empowered the Messiah standing before them.

A third consideration is upon the apodosis of the condition in verse 28. It begins with the particle ἄρα which is used to introduce a "conclusive statement."² It is also an emphatic particle that draws the reader's attention to the fact that the concluding statement is of utmost importance.³ A. T. Robertson includes the observation that ἄρα here describes the "unexpected and strange,"

¹Williams, "Matthew," p. 489.

²H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1943), p. 242.

³Ibid.

and in this remark he cannot be closer to the truth.¹ If Jesus cast out devils by the Spirit of God, and He did, then it must also follow that the coming of the Kingdom was at hand as is stated in the apodosis. Notice that "the emphasis is upon 'the kingdom of God is come unto you.'"² Jesus was saying that because He was empowered by the Holy Spirit, He was the Messiah; and because He was the Messiah, the Kingdom was at hand. H. A. W. Meyer clarifies Jesus' logic when he writes, "The reasoning is founded on the axiom, that such deeds, wrought as they are by the power of God's Spirit, go to prove that He who performs them is no other than He who brings in the Kingdom--the Messiah."³ The weighty evidence clearly was laid back upon the Pharisees. They stood before God's Messiah, guilty of an assault against the Holy Spirit, whose works through Christ they attributed to Satan. The slanderous accusation of the Pharisees was a "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and definitely conforms to the specified nature of blasphemy arrived at in the second chapter.

¹Archibald Thomas Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 1190.

²Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, "Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew," Commentary on the New Testament, trans. Peter Christie, ed. Frederick Crombie and William Stewart, vol. I of II vols. (Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 241.

³Ibid.,

The Gravity of Blasphemy Against
the Holy Spirit

The stern warning against the accusation of the Pharisees in Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-30 is the focal point of the discussion. The sin the Pharisees had committed was blasphemy, but it was unique in nature. This fact is made clear in that unlike other sins and blasphemies, their particular act "shall not be forgiven." Jesus stated that "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men" (Matt 12:31). This would indicate that all classes or kinds of sins and blasphemies would be forgiven, as it is more clearly stated in Mark 3:28, "All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies with which they shall blaspheme."¹

Matthew indicates that included in the list of forgivable blasphemies was even the slanderous remarks that might be made against Jesus Himself. He plainly stated, "And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him" (12:32). What is seemingly overlooked by many commentators is that Jesus was far more concerned with slandering the Holy Spirit than He was their rejection of Himself. This tends to weaken other views that see unbelief or rejection of salvation as primary definitions of this sin.

¹Ezra P. Gould, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Mark," The International Critical Commentary, ed. Charles Augustus Briggs, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Alfred Plummer (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1913), p. 65.

The sin that would not be forgiven was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is most problematic for some because the Pharisees' wicked accusation does not even mention the Holy Spirit by name. However, in order to clarify the specific nature of the sin, Mark provides his readers with a final statement that completely explains this particular sin. The Pharisees had committed an unforgivable sin "because they said, He hath an unclean spirit" (Mark 3:30).

If blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was saying that Christ had an unclean spirit, and the Holy Spirit had not even been mentioned by name, then the Holy Spirit must have been blasphemed when the Pharisees attributed Christ's works to Beelzebub. By saying, "He hath an unclean spirit," they were attacking the Messiah's source of power which was the Holy Spirit, making Jesus in league with the devil.

Specific times are given in the latter part of verse 32 in which this sin against God's Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven, "in this age, or in the age to come." Because this time element is important to the discussion of the following chapter, the writer will deal more fully with it there.

CHAPTER V

NECESSARY CONDITIONS PECULIAR TO
THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

In a close study of the context that surrounds the unpardonable sin, one can observe several key conditions that were present. When the question is asked, "Is it possible for someone to commit the unpardonable sin today?" one must consider the environment in which the sin was committed. If conditions are found to be the same, one must answer the above question in the affirmative. On the other hand, if conditions are dissimilar and are not applicable today, the answer will be negative. In order to answer the question, "Can the unpardonable sin be committed today?" a brief study of the environment of the sin is in order.

Sign Miracles

One must not forget that the occasion for the blasphemous sin of the Pharisees was the healing of the blind and dumb demoniac. The miracles that Jesus performed were the exact signs of the Messiah that Old Testament prophets had predicted. These signs were miraculous, astonishing, irrefutable and were signs for the Jews.

There are no such miracles today, despite the claims of gentile faith healers and charismatics. If the unpardonable sin was to be repeated today, there would have to be supernatural sign miracles directed toward the Jews that preceded it, and they would have to be performed by the Messiah. Without a Messiah they would cease to be Messianic sign miracles.

A Spirit-Empowered Messiah

Sign miracles were performed by Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the requirements of the Messiah was that God's Spirit would be upon Him. The Holy Spirit empowers Christians but not in the same way as the Messiah.

There is no visible, tangible Messiah in human form alive on the earth today and the Scriptures teach that He will not make Himself known again until the beginning of the Kingdom Age. Furthermore, since there is no visible Spirit-empowered Messiah present, no one can accuse Him of performing miracles by the power of Satan. Only those who spiritualize the literal millennial Kingdom could claim the Messiah is present today. However, they would have a difficult time proving His conspicuity.

A consistent dispensationalist must agree that the unpardonable sin cannot be committed today, since he would admit that the Messiah will not visibly come again until after the period of great tribulation in the future.

Verbal Slander

The blasphemy against the Spirit was a slanderous attack against the Holy Spirit who empowered Christ. Since there is no Messiah present today who is performing miracles, no one can make accusations against His power source.

A further consideration is that this sin against the Holy Spirit must be "a sin of the mouth . . . spoken by the lips,"¹ and committed with the intent of desecrating God the Holy Spirit. It is a very specific spoken sin against the Holy Spirit and cannot be applied to general sins such as unbelief or rejecting Christ.

A Personal Offer of the Kingdom at Hand

Scripture teaches two specific times, one past and one present, when the Messiah will declare the coming of His Kingdom. This happened at Jesus' first advent and will happen again at the second. The offer of the Kingdom would have to be accompanied by sign miracles and proclaimed by a visible Spirit powered Messiah. It is interesting to note that conditions that were present at the committal of the unpardonable sin could most likely be the same after the Second Coming. Could there be any relationship between the two advents and the two times mentioned by Christ, when blasphemy against the Spirit shall never be forgiven?

¹Barnard Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost," Bibliotheca Sacra, 93 (January, 1936):227.

The Meaning of αἰών

Jesus specified that the blasphemy against the Spirit would not be forgiven "in this age" ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι, or "in the age to come," οὔτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι (Matt 12:32). The word αἰών has a unique character in that it can refer to the world system in general or it may refer to "time or duration of the world."¹ Among both the Greeks and the Jews, there was a belief in numerous αἰῶνες or time periods. Hermann Sasse remarks,

If αἰών means the time or duration of the world, and the plural is firmly established, there is an obvious suggestion that the αἰών is not unique, but that there is a series of αἰῶνες in which all things flow in eternal recurrence.²

It is therefore not improbable that Jesus was making reference to two particular periods of time.

Jesus specified two distinct ages, the time period in which His earthly ministry took place, and an "age to come." That He mentioned two separate ages was in keeping with Jewish eschatological thought. The Hebrews believed that in addition to the time period in which they lived, a future age would also come to pass. Called אֵינְהָ עוֹלָם or "the age to come," it was "sometimes restricted to, or practically identified with, the reign of the Messiah upon

¹ Hermann Sasse, "αἰών, αἰώνιος," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 of 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 204.

² Ibid.

the earth, but usually it included much more--eternity as well as time."¹ If the "age to come" is indeed a reference to the Kingdom Age, Jesus was in agreement with Jewish theology. He was making a reference to the days in which the Messiah would again be visible upon the earth. If the sin would not be forgiven "in this age," indicating the time-period in which the Messiah first came to earth, then it would also not be forgiven when the Messiah is again present "in the age to come." Such a sin during the Millennium would bring swift judgment and a second chance would not be possible.

It is the conclusion of the writer that the two ages mentioned by the Lord are the only two times in which the unpardonable sin could be committed. In both instances there is a literal, visible Messiah, performing sign miracles by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, it might be possible to commit the sin during the Kingdom Age as well.

That the Church Age is excluded from the committal of this sin can be understood by the parenthetical nature of the Church itself. Christ looked past the Church Age to the Millennium in His remark, because the promises of the Messiah are most applicable to the Jews.

It must be concluded that because the essential conditions for committing this sin are not present during

¹Williams, "Matthew," p. 491.

the Age of Grace, it is impossible for one to commit that sin today. Only during the Millennium will one again be able to commit the unpardonable sin, due to the presence of a visible, Spirit-empowered Messiah.

CHAPTER VI

A BRIEF CONSIDERATION OF SEVERAL PREVALENT VIEWS OF THE UNPARDONABLE SIN TODAY

It is not the intent of the writer in this chapter to list all the known views on the unpardonable sin and interact with them all. Such an undertaking would be almost impossible because of the number of positions and the varying degrees within those positions. It is rather important to deal with some of the more prevailing views of the day.

Ascribing the Works of the Holy Spirit to Satan

Those who believe that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was attributing the works of the Holy Spirit to Satan are entirely correct. This fact has already been established in the earlier chapters of this particular discussion. However, the problem lies in a modern day application of this sin.

Commentators who have correctly discerned the nature of the unpardonable sin from its context in the Gospels have also often tried to prove its existence today. For example, Ralph Earle in The Wesleyan Bible Commentary believes a person can commit the sin without forgiveness today when he

"deliberately, obstinately, and willfully attributes to wrong sources the manifest working of the Holy Spirit."¹ The question that must be addressed is, "What does 'the manifest working of the Holy Spirit' consist of?" There is a great difference between the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus and His work today. During the earthly ministry of Christ, the Lord testified of Himself by means of the Holy Spirit's power. Today, the Holy Spirit testifies of Christ through the Scriptures. Earle makes an unwarranted parallel between Jesus' day and today, because he has excluded the Messianic factor. The work of the Holy Spirit in relation to Christ was empowerment to perform sign miracles, and there are no sign miracles today. There could not be sign miracles nor would they be necessary without a Messiah present. Whatever the "manifest working of the Holy Spirit" consists of, it certainly does not include sign miracles and can therefore not be applied to the sin committed in Jesus' time.²

Louis Berkhof holds a slightly different view than Earle, but still believes that the sin is attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. He believes that the unpardonable sin today "consists of conscious, malicious, and willful rejection and slandering, against evidence and

¹Ralph Earle, "Matthew: The King and His Kingdom," The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, ed. Charles W. Carter, vol. 4 of 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 59.

²Ibid.

conviction, of the testimony of the Holy Spirit rejecting the grace of God in Christ, attributing it out of hatred and enmity to the prince of darkness."¹ The problem with such a view is again founded in an oversight of the Messianic nature of the ministry of Christ. There was no "testimony of the Holy Spirit" as it relates to the sin that "shall never be forgiven," for Jesus bore His own testimony as the Messiah.² He had emptied Himself of the independent exercise of His divine attributes and was enabled by the Spirit to perform signs. The Spirit therefore was only the source of Jesus' power to perform miracles. Miracles were not the Spirit's testimony through Christ; they were Christ's personal testimony through the power of the Spirit. Berkhof then has confused the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' day with His work today. He fails to differentiate the Messianic ministry of the Holy Spirit during Jesus' ministry and the salvific ministry of the Spirit among men. This may be due in part to his covenant theology.

Rejection of the Salvific Enterprise of the Holy Spirit

Rejecting the drawing of the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most common view among evangelicals today. In actuality,

¹ Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), p. 253.

² Ibid.

it is not much different than Berkhof's view, but it tends to see the miracles of Christ specifically as the Spirit's work of drawing men to salvation. H. A. W. Meyer suggests that the unpardonable sin is "the sin which a man commits when he rejects the undoubted revelation of the Holy Spirit, and that not merely with a contemptuous moral indifference, but with the evil will struggling to shut out the light of that revelation."¹ Another describes it as "the conscious and wicked rejection of the saving power and grace of God towards men."²

Like the preceding view, the adherents of this position seriously confuse the Spirit's ministry of empowerment in Jesus' day with His ministry of testimony today. They would refer to the miracles of Christ as "the Spirit's testimony through the works of Christ."³

It was not until the night before Jesus' crucifixion that the specific ministry of the Holy Spirit today was announced. Jesus declared that the Spirit "shall bear witness of me" (John 15:26-27), indicating a special ministry of the Spirit that was yet future. This is not to say that the Spirit did not bear any witness to Christ in the Old Testament, but it refers specifically to His primary

¹Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew, p. 242.

²Beyer, "βλασφημέω, βλασφημία, βλάφημος," p. 624.

³McClain, The Greatness of the Kingdom, p. 316.

ministry during the Church Age, in which "the Holy Spirit Himself takes the written Word, or takes the testimony of our fellow man, and interprets it directly to our hearts."¹ During Old Testament times, besides His part in the salvation of Old Testament believers, the primary function of the Holy Spirit was enablement to perform certain tasks. In a study of the passages dealing with the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, Leon Wood found convincing evidence that, similar to His ministry toward Christ, empowerment for service was the primary function of the Holy Spirit before the beginning of the Church Age:

None of these, nor any of the other passages that might be mentioned, refer to any aspect of spiritual renewal of the person concerned. They show the necessity of God's Spirit being upon people to influence them properly, yet none of them speak of imparting new life in salvation, and surely not of removing such life. No Old Testament text speaks of this activity. Whenever the Spirit is said to come on or leave a person in Old Testament time, then, the reason is found in some area of that person's activity.²

It is noteworthy that this was also true in the ministry of Christ, in which the Messiah was empowered by the Spirit to perform His ministry among men.

If there is a difference between the ministry of the Holy Spirit then and now, it must follow that the unpardonable sin does not apply to rejecting the salvific ministry of the Spirit. Since the works of Jesus were

¹R. A. Torrey, The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1910), p. 95.

²Leon J. Wood, The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 52.

primarily His own Messianic testimony of a coming Kingdom and not just an attempt to get men to believe in Him, they cannot be compared to the ministry of the Spirit during the Church Age.

The Rejection of Christ in Unbelief

It is important to briefly consider one final view that is still prevalent today. It is believed that if an individual is given an opportunity to receive Christ and he fails to take advantage of it, the offer of salvation might somehow be retracted, and the chance to receive Christ will never again be offered. If this happens, he has committed the unpardonable sin and can never be forgiven for rejecting Christ.

Again there is a misunderstanding of the Messianic intent of Christ in His early ministry. There is also the tendency to make blasphemy something more than was intended in the original context of the sin. According to the above view slanderous, reviling accusations have suddenly been generalized into mere unbelief and consequential rejection. As was earlier clarified, blasphemy is a "sin of the mouth"¹ and cannot be applied to any other sin than that which is spoken.

It must also be shown that unbelief is a pardonable sin in several instances in the New Testament. Barnard Franklin relates:

¹Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost," 223.

It cannot be shown that mere unbelief is the unpardonable sin. The rejection and murder of Christ evidence a "climax of unbelief" on the part of the priests and Pharisees, yet Christ prayed for their forgiveness, and in Acts the gospel of forgiveness was preached to them and we read of a great company of priests who were "obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).¹

One should also note that James the brother of Christ was the presbyter in the church at Jerusalem, a well-known Christian, and yet at one time he had rejected his brother in unbelief (John 7:5).

There continues to be much misunderstanding of the nature of the unpardonable sin. Views come and go. But it remains definite from contextual and grammatical analysis, that this unique sin requires specific Messianic conditions that are not present today. Therefore, until the inauguration of the Millennium, it is impossible for any person to commit the unpardonable sin.

¹ Ibid.

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