

The Unforgivable Sin

Perhaps no question deserves to be handled more sensitively in the Church than that of the unforgivable sin. This is because sensitive pious souls sometimes accuse themselves of this or fear that they might have inadvertently committed the sin and put themselves beyond salvation. We need, therefore, to be very clear what this sin is and what it is not.

There are five references to the unforgivable sin in the Scriptures, one in each of the synoptic gospels and two in the letter to the Hebrews. These are as follows:-

“Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation” because they said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

(Mark 3:28-30)

“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who 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, either in this age or in the age to come.” (Matthew 12:31-32)

“And anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven. (Luke 12:10)

"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame."

(Hebrews 6:4-6)

"For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:26-29)

The references in the Letter to the Hebrews are the easiest to understand. If “fall away” (6:6) is a little imprecise, the later reference in 10:29 certainly is not. Open contempt for and rejection of salvation in those who once believed, otherwise known as apostasy, is an

unforgivable sin. Note that apostasy involves the denial of something once held, not attacks on Christianity from those who have never been enlightened. It also has the character of something done, a definitive action ... not simply a transient state of mind.

Sometimes, through depression or demonic attack, pious believers experience an assault of evil and blasphemous thoughts that greatly distress them. The mere fact that they are distressed by this is solid proof that they have not committed the unforgivable sin. They need to identify the source of these troublesome thoughts as coming from Satan and realise that ALL Christians from time to time have to fight against such things. In this we have St. Paul as a witness, (2 Corinthians 12:7, Ephesians 6:10-20), and the universal testimony of the ascetic fathers and mothers who, after the example of our Lord Himself, St. Anthony the Great and all the ascetics have fought in the arena of salvation.

If an example of apostasy is required then Julian the Apostate is a fairly typical example. He represents all those who having at one time believed in Christ, now reject Him and convert to another religion or atheism. Nonetheless, forgiveness and restoration remain available for all those who recant and return to Christ. This may be clearly seen in the life and witness of the New Martyrs of the Turkish yoke, some of whom followed precisely this path by returning to Christ and being martyred, (for example, St. John the Bulgarian, St. Timothy of Esphigmenou and New Martyr Polydoros of Cyprus). It can also be seen in all those thousands of believers who became persecuting atheists under Bolshevism but who later repented and returned to the Faith. This being the case, apostasy is only an unforgivable sin if there is no sincere repentance before death. We shall note a similar situation when examining the witness of the synoptic gospels, to which we now turn.

Upon first reading the three sayings of Christ concerning the unforgivable sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit are more or less the same. St. Matthew adopts St. Luke's reference to the "Son of Man" as a contrasting reference to the possibility of forgiveness for speaking against Christ Himself. (We do not have the opportunity here to elaborate on the enigmatic figure of the "Son of Man" in the New Testament but it is generally taken to refer to Jesus.) However it is the varying context of the sayings in each gospel that give a different yet complementary interpretation to the verses.

St. Luke places the saying in a sequence that moves from a heavenly tribunal defence of those who confess Christ to an assurance of the Spirit's inspiration for those same confessors when they face earthly tribunals, that is, in times of persecution. St. Luke,

therefore, understands the unforgivable sin to refer primarily to apostasy. In this he is clearly close to the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. St. Mark and St. Matthew, however, record the saying in the context of the antagonism of the Pharisees towards the exorcisms of our Lord. They claim that it is by Satan himself that Christ delivers, not the Holy Spirit. This is the unforgivable sin in this context ... calling good evil and attributing the work of God to the devil. It represents a kind of spiritual blindness that is almost absolute and effectively intractable. Nonetheless, the focus of the blasphemy remains the Holy Spirit not Christ Himself. The work of the Holy Spirit in and with Christ is established by both the evidence (the healings – Matthew 12:22-23) and, contra the argument of the Pharisees, the irrationality of supposing that the devil could overthrow himself (Matthew 12:24-29).

It should not surprise us that each gospel writer gives a different but complementary context for the same sayings. The gospels are not strictly speaking biographies of Jesus Christ but rather accounts of how the early Christian communities and the Apostles who served them understood the applicability of our Lord's sayings and actions to their own situations. Occasionally a gospel writer (here St. Luke) will place a given saying in a different context from the original situation (here as in St Mark and St Matthew) because he has discovered a new layer of meaning that can be applied to his own Church situation. In the case of the unforgivable sin (and theologising between the gospels generally) we need to combine both the original contextual meaning and the later interpretations. Unsurprisingly, such fusions of compatible elements generate richer and more comprehensive insights. So, with this in mind we can now summarise our findings.

The unforgivable sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit concerns both apostasy and denying the work of God in Christ. Clearly both are connected but apostasy is committed by those who were already believers before overturning the Spirit's work in their lives. Fighting and misrepresenting God belongs to those who have preferred darkness to light from the very beginning. Therefore, when Christians, as opposed to non-believers, become personally anxious about the unforgivable sin only apostasy is a relevant concern. Since apostasy is both the denial and refusal of salvation, few if any commit it ... and certainly not unintentionally or as a result of mental confusions or conflicts. It is, therefore a truism, but often resisted by scrupulous and unstable souls, that anxiety about the unforgivable sin is solid proof of one's immunity from it. It is better of course to be assured about this by having a robust confidence in God and one's own integrity in that faith. Moving to this position is a healing process in which the soul transcends its own fragility, often born out of self-obsession, by placing its whole confidence in God alone.