

Matthew 12:31-37 – “Can I Be Forgiven?”

Matthew 12 has really been a dividing chapter. It's a dividing chapter by how we've been seeing a line drawn in the sand between Jesus and the religious leaders – the group that's been opposing Jesus the most strongly.

Jesus has clarified that He is Lord of the Sabbath, He's Lord over all, and He's the strong man who is greater than any other force.

- You see the religious leaders have been seeing all the great works that Jesus has been doing but instead of attributing it to God, they attributed it to the devil – that Jesus was operating in the power of Satan!
- They didn't say this when their own sons cast out demons, but when Jesus does it, they say He is working in alliance with the devil. What foolish thinking!

So this chapter is really setting the stage for the growing rejection of Jesus which will eventually lead us to the very reason Jesus came, and that was to go to the cross so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God.

So we ended last time with that verse, *He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad* (**Matthew 12:30**).

This is the dividing line that is happening between the true followers of Jesus and those who were pretenders.

- Again, we've seen these religious leaders attack Jesus for His treatment of the Sabbath (12:1-14); He's attacked on His Sovereignty and accused of working with Satan to cast out demons (12:22-30); He'll be attacked later in the chapter by religious leaders who demanded a sign because of their unbelief of who Jesus was (12:38-42); and Jesus will be attacked by His own people (family and friends) who began to think He was out of His mind and sought to restrain Him (12:46-50; Mark 3:21).
- For those who ever thought ministry would be fun, this chapter paints a different story. It's rewarding no doubt, but if they treated Jesus this way, how much more will His servants be questioned and challenged by those who are adversely opposed to the truth.

Now verse 31 is perhaps one of the most misunderstood scriptures in the Bible and it has caused many a believer to suffer through some needless sleepless nights. This is why it's so important to look at this in the context of this chapter.

1. Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit – 12:31-32

12:31 - *Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.*

First of all, let's just be clear of what this verse *does* say – **every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven**... There is no offense that you can commit that immediately disqualifies you from salvation. There is no sin that can slip out that can never be forgiven even if you repented of it. All sin can be forgiven when we come to Jesus and seek His forgiveness in an attitude of repentance.

- This is evident when you look through Scripture:

Exodus 34:6–7, *"And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, ⁷ keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."*

Psalms 103:8–12, *"The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. ⁹ He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. ¹⁰ He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; ¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us."*

Colossians 2:13–14, *"And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴ having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."*

- So clearly, we see that our sins are cleared away when we come to Christ.

So what is this ***blasphemy against the Spirit*** then?

Now that word blasphemy means to slander; to speak evil of and show irreverence to that which is holy.

- "The profaning, desecration and taking in vain of the name of God, or the reviling of any of His works or deeds." ¹

¹ Manser, M. H. (2009). *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies*. Martin Manser.

And remember who Jesus is speaking to in this context. He's addressing the Pharisees who were slandering the work Jesus did.

Jesus had a man brought to him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute. This is the trifecta of healings. This man is completely healed by Jesus, he's made well, and the crowds are amazed and begin to wonder if this is the Promised Messiah (12:22-23).

But the Pharisees, full of pride, say that Jesus did this work by Satan. He's working in alliance with the devil. They attributed the very clear work of God to Satan – that was blasphemous.

The Pharisees were on very thin ice. They have seen repeatedly the work Jesus was doing, which showed clearly that He was no ordinary man. Yet they failed to let their hearts be open to receive Him. They wanted to hold on to their authority and not surrender it to another.

And this is really the issue that is going on which I believe really clarifies what the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is. It is a hardened heart which refuses to receive the testimony of Jesus and the witness of the Holy Spirit.

- The Holy Spirit has been sent into the world to testify of Christ and to bring people to the knowledge of their need for Jesus:

John 15:26, *“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.”*

John 16:7–11, *“Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. ⁸ And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹ of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹ of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”*

You see the Pharisees have been seeing all that Jesus has done, miracle after miracle, healing after healing. They've even had their own cast out demons in others before, and they attributed that to the work of God (***‘by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges’*** Matthew 12:27.) If they saw it as a work of God when their sons cast out demons, why wouldn't they give this same credit to Jesus?

The work of the Holy Spirit was evident, yet they hardened their hearts and refused to believe. This was blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

This is why Jesus at the beginning of His ministry shares the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. It was the pathway for this restoration and salvation:

- **Matthew 5:3–6**, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.”*
- Sadly, most of these Pharisees didn’t know what it meant to be poor in spirit if it hit them in the head.
- These Beatitudes begin with an emptying of self so that you can receive and be filled with what God has for you. That which leads to blessing and joy!

So, the Holy Spirit has come to lead us to Jesus, but if you refuse to respond and you harden your heart, you will not be forgiven.

This is essentially the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It’s not a singular one time act that is committed. It is the settled disposition of your heart that is closed to the truth of who Jesus is and walks in repeated rejection of Him. This is why it’s unforgiveable. Because you never come to the place of repentance – you have no desire to.

This unforgivable sin then is more so a sin of the heart rather than the lips.

- It’s not that we’re going to stand before God one day as believers in Christ, and He will have opportunity to say, *“Sorry, can’t let you into heaven. Back on May 7, 2004, you let that blasphemous word slip out. I’m unable to grant forgiveness, My hands are tied!”*

Again, let me repeat, every sin is forgivable. Paul himself said in **1 Timothy 1:13**, *“although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.”*

That’s something to take note of. Paul did these things not understanding who Jesus was. This is why we read next:

12:32 - *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.*

A person can say something against Jesus but do so in ignorance. They can even deny His deity but then later repent and be forgiven. ***But whoever speaks***

against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him... It's as though God has His threefold witness: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *"By the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established"* (Deuteronomy 19:15). Those who speak against the Holy Spirit are denying the final witness of who Jesus is. They may question God, they may not believe Jesus is who He says He is, but there's still room to repent and be forgiven. But if they deny the witness of the Holy Spirit, they are sealing their heart in a state of rejection. The more you reject Jesus, the harder your heart becomes, until it reaches a point where you have settled down in that disposition and have no desire for forgiveness.

- "In the end, no one can be saved if they pridefully and permanently reject the Spirit of God. This is the Spirit who draws us to salvation, who alone leads us to repentance and applies God's forgiveness. We dare not reject His testimony to the Son. Even as we consider the danger of blaspheming the Son and the Spirit, we must be careful not to completely disconnect the two from one another, for ultimately to reject the Spirit is finally to reject the Son." ²

Jesus says you will not be forgiven **in this age or in the age to come.**

Some have wondered if this particular blasphemy could only have been committed during Jesus' public ministry when people saw His healings and miracles and attributed them to Satan.

Either way you look at this, the bottom line is that anyone who does not heed the prompting of the Holy Spirit and rejects Jesus, there is no provision for salvation in this age or any age to come. Salvation is through faith in Jesus alone.

- Some have a very unbiblical view that in the end, God just forgives everybody, because He's a forgiving God. But there are those who will be met by a God who holds sin to account, particularly this one.

Now before we move on, if you are worried that you may have committed the unforgivable sin, you haven't. Because you would not be worried about it if you did. This unforgivable sin is to die in your sin. It's the continued rejection of the Holy Spirit's testimony of Jesus, to where you never come to the point of salvation. But as long as you have breath in your lungs, you have an opportunity to repent and believe in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. It's never too late this side of eternity.

² Platt, D. (2013). *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (D. L. Akin, D. Platt, & T. Merida, Eds.; p. 164). Holman Reference.

Jesus further calls out the Pharisees for their hypocritical actions:

2. The Bounty Of The Heart – 12:33-37

12:33 - *Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit.*

The Pharisees should have concluded that Jesus must be good because of all the good He was doing. An evil person doesn't typically do good work. So, the Pharisees, who saw all the great work Jesus did, should have determined that He was indeed good. A tree is known by its fruit. Good fruit, good tree.

- Again, when the Pharisees, or those they were connected with, did a good work like exorcising a demon from someone, they knew that was a work of God. They never questioned if that perhaps was a work of the devil. So why do that with Jesus?
- Either say His work is good, which would mean He is good or else make the work bad and then you could say He was bad (but they knew this wasn't true). This is what made their sin so heinous. They rejected Jesus when everything they saw about Him was so good. This was blasphemous.

The reality is that a tree is known by its fruit. Walk through any orchard and you may not have any idea what kind of tree is there until you see what kind of fruit it produces. If I see apples hanging on a tree, I can say with about 74% certainty, that's an apple tree!

Jesus was showing what kind of person He was by the fruit He bore. But in the same sense, these religious leaders were revealing what kind of people they were by the fruit they bore. And it wasn't good.

How about you? We can think of ourselves as good and wonderful people, but the proof is in the pudding. What kind of fruit are you bearing? We'll talk a little more about that in a minute.

12:34-35 - *Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.*

Jesus lays it on heavy now for these Pharisees. Calling them a **brood of vipers** was basically saying, *You're children of the devil*. A brood was the offspring, and

referencing vipers brought to mind Satan the serpent. This is the same term used by John the Baptist when greeting the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3:7).

These were evil people. They couldn't hide it. Because they were evil, they were unable to speak anything good. This was all a reflection of what was in their hearts. You can fake it for a while, but if you're storing up things in your heart that are not pure and good, it's inevitable going to be revealed through your speech.

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

- I love the show Survivor. What's interesting is that everyone who competes in Survivor knows they need to be on their best behavior, otherwise they're going to be voted out. But as the game goes on, people just can't help themselves. What they have going on in their heart, typically comes out. They can try and keep it down, or suppress it, but it eventually bursts out in some tirade or verbal assault when things don't go their way. Their heart simply reveals what is really going on inside.

So, the question needs to be asked, what are you treasuring in your heart today? Because this is what will eventually come out and expose what kind of tree you are. Are you a bad tree with no fruit, or are you a good tree bearing good fruit? What you put in your heart will determine these things.

- How can we be sure we're treasuring the right things in our heart? Be in the Word of God. Are you storing His Word in your heart? Are you meditating on it and cherishing it? Be in close connection with God. Don't just go through the motions of being a Christian. Really be in relationship with God. Spend time with Him in prayer, spend time worshipping Him together with the saints. Serve Him. Be abiding in Him. These are not things I say to put a system of works on you to earn God's favour, these are things that are going to help you enjoy the favour of God. Being fruitful is a much more enjoyable way to live.
- And you can be sure that fruitful words and fruitful actions that honour God and glorify God will come out of a heart that is being cultivated with the things of God. That is an intentional thing that we do.
- **Psalm 92:13-14**, *"Those who are planted in the house of the LORD Shall flourish in the courts of our God. ¹⁴ They shall still bear fruit in old age; They shall be fresh and flourishing."*
- **John 15:5**, *"He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit..."*

12:36-37 - *But I say to you that for every idle [barren] word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. ³⁷ For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*”

Now this verse has been used to say that all of us (believers and unbelievers) are going to give an account for every word spoken when we stand before God. That can be pretty scary. I mean we're going to need eternity just to get through my rap sheet.

But let's clarify something here. Yes, God will judge people by their words because their words are an expression of what's in their hearts. The Pharisees saying that Jesus is working in cooperation with Satan revealed the evil in their hearts. And by their words they will be condemned.

But what about us as believers? **Romans 8:1**, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."*

My words or my works don't justify me today, I'm justified by calling on Jesus and trusting in His righteousness.

Romans 10:8–10, *"But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."*

I'm so glad that everything I have done or said is covered under the blood of Jesus. I've confessed Him with my mouth because I have believed in Him in my heart, and by doing so I am forgiven and cleansed. Not only of what I have done but for what I will do and say. By my words I'm justified (1 Cor 6:11; Gal 2:16). But like so many today, they have turned their backs on the Holy Spirit's prompting to turn to and accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. They have said they don't need Jesus and they don't want Jesus. By their words they are condemned.

That condemnation does not have to be over you. Jesus died in your place to take that judgment upon Himself so you could be spared. But that is only received by confessing and repenting of your sin and putting your faith in Jesus. Receive Him and His justification for you today.