



# What Is Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit?

Is there an unforgivable sin?

**Scripture:** Matthew 12:22-32

**Sermon Series:** *Matthew*

**Topic:** Blasphemy, Holy Spirit

## Introduction

This morning's text takes us into the topic of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

What is it? How can we avoid it?

As we have been reading Matthew's gospel together, we have discovered that Mathew is painting for us a majestic literary picture of who Jesus is. He has been holding out before us the events of Jesus' life; what he did, what he said, and how people responded to him. Jesus was the most authoritative teacher the people had ever encountered (Mt 7:28-29).

Matthew has shown us the numerous ways in which God was mightily and uniquely at work in the world through Jesus. Thus far in his gospel, Matthew has given us ten<sup>1</sup> examples of how Jesus has fulfilled specific Old Testament (OT) prophecies regarding messiah. Jesus was healing the sick, opening blind eyes and deaf ears, doing astonishing miracles, and casting out demons as if the kingdom of heaven had somehow landed on earth.

In the previous paragraph, vs.17-21, Matthew has also show us how even the confusing aspects of Jesus' ministry were also fulfillment of prophecy. For example, even when he was clearly correct Jesus refused to fight with the Pharisees when they opposed him and after healing people he would often tell them not to tell anyone of the miracle. Matthew explained this by going back to Isaiah's description (42:1-4) of God's anointed Servant as one who would not quarrel or engage in public debate, neither would he seek to popularize his fame by street-side ad campaigns. Jesus was looking more and more like messiah. Could he truly be the one?

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 1:17, 22-23; 2:6, 14-15, 17-18; 3:3; 4:12-16; 8:16-17; 11:10, 14; 12:17-21.

The crowds were beginning to ask this question, as we see in v.23 in our text this morning. However, the Pharisees were apparently unwilling to ask this question and so in a great act of mercy, Jesus speaks words to them that ought to have stunned them into this kingdom of heaven. He warned them that they stood on the brink of an unforgivable sin.

Would they listen? Would they repent?

## Miraculous Healing: Evidence of the Kingdom of God

This section begins with a miracle performed by Jesus, which *gives clear evidence that the kingdom of God had come through him*. The crowds begin to contemplate this fact, yet the response to this miracle by the Pharisees reveals that they may have a fatal heart disease.

**Matthew 12:22 (ESV)** Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.

Jesus delivered a man from the oppressive dominion of a demon who had both blinded this man and kept him from speaking. Jesus *healed him* so that *the man spoke and saw*. This man who had been silent was granted the ability to speak. This man who had been blind was now able to see the world around him. Matthew does not tell us how Jesus did this, but simply that he did this amazing and wonderful healing for this man and set him free from the power of this demon. We have seen this many times throughout this gospel. Jesus is mightier than one or many demons.<sup>2</sup>

## The Response of the Crowds

There were crowds of people around who saw the transformation of this man.

**Matthew 12:23 (ESV)** And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?"

This miracle did not happen in private, but rather in the presence of *all the people*. The Greek (πάντες οἱ ὄχλοι *pantes hoi ochloi*) literary means "*all the crowds*" (NASB). The word 'crowds' is plural, pointing out that there were a lot of people around. When the crowds of people witnessed the transformation of this formerly blind and mute man, they *were amazed*. They were absolutely *astonished*. The word (ἐξίστημι) "means 'to put out of its place' and thus 'to drive out of one's senses, to amaze.'"<sup>3</sup> They were stunned and struck by what they saw.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 8:28-34.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992). 314, footnote 56.

The people were struggling to understand what they were witnessing and so they asked a question, "*Can this be the Son of David?*" There were grasping for understanding. They were clearly seeing heavenly power at work on earth. Who could do such powerful and authoritative heavenly things such as this? The *Son of David, the messiah*, was the only one who could do such things. Something clearly beyond the earthly realm was taking place before their eyes, which made them wonder whether Jesus was the messiah.

### **An Unexpected Messiah?**

The title "Son of David" is an equivalent title with Messiah.<sup>4</sup> But this Jesus was unlike the messiah they expected.

- He was a gentle healer, not a grandstanding leader.
- He was a meek gentleman, not a military General.
- He was an authoritative teacher, but not an aspiring governor.

*Can he be the Son of David?* Can he be the one whom God promised to reign forever on the throne of Israel?<sup>5</sup> He is certainly powerful, but he does not at all political? He was shepherdly like David, but he was not kingly like David. *Can he be the Son of David?*

### **Matthew Already Answered This Question**

There is no doubt where Matthew stands in regard to this question. He has already revealed to us that he believes Jesus is the Son of David in more than way. He revealed this fact in the opening sentence of this gospel. "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*" (Mt 1:1).

## **The Response of the Pharisees**

The Pharisees will not tolerate such massive messianic musing about Jesus.

**Matthew 12:24 (ESV)** But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

*When the Pharisees heard* that the crowds were contemplating whether Jesus could be the Son of David, the Messiah, they responded by seeking to put a stop to such thinking. *It was not the miracle that prompted their response so much as it was the question* (i.e. "Can this be the Son of David?"). Jesus has heretofore performed many miracles, but this is first time that Matthew reports that crowds of people were wondering if Jesus could be messiah.

Note that the Pharisees *do not deny that Jesus was able to cast out demons*. They actually confessed with their mouth that truth that "*this man casts out demons*." They believed that

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 314.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Samuel 7:12-16.

Jesus possessed the power to perform miracles.<sup>6</sup> They are here denying that his power comes from God. In stead of seeing this mighty miracle for what it truly was, they leap to the irrational and illogical conclusion that Jesus' power to cast out demons comes not from god, but rather from *the prince of demons*. *Beelzubul* means, "master of the house"<sup>7</sup> and is another name for Satan.<sup>8</sup> Satan is the prince of demons as we will see in Jesus' response.

## The Response of Jesus (v.25-32)

The remainder of the passage contains Jesus' response to this slanderous charge by the Pharisees. His response is both a *logical refutation* of the Pharisee's sinful stubbornness and a gracious and *sobering warning*.

### A) Logical Response (v.25-29)

Notice that Jesus remains very calm. He is leveled-headed and clear-thinking. He very logically offers four reasons why the Pharisees are dangerously wrong.

#### 1. A self-defeating kingdom will be defeated (v.25-26).

**Matthew 12:25-26 (ESV)** <sup>25</sup> Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

<sup>26</sup> And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?

*Knowing their thoughts.* Jesus knows how his enemies are thinking. He understands the patterns of thinking is unfolding in their minds and he now aims to expose where their thing has gone wrong. This is always the scheming attack of Satan; by messing with the mind and convincing people that wrong thinking is right..

Note that *Jesus believes that the "prince of demons" is real and he is called Satan*. Jesus believes that Satan is a real spiritual being. He is the chief demon. Jesus does not say to the Pharisees, "Guys, guys, you've got it all wrong. There's no such thing as 'the prince of demons.' You're believing made-up stories. Satan is not real. Get out of the past and step into the first century. Get over it and move on with your lives." He does not say this. Jesus affirms that "the prince of demons" is real, his name his Satan.

Note that *Satan has a kingdom*. A kingdom is a structured region or realm. Paul calls Satan's kingdom "the domain of darkness."<sup>9</sup> There are inhabitants<sup>10</sup> to his kingdom and

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<sup>6</sup> Recall their provocation of Jesus in the synagogue to heal on the Sabbath. They believed that Jesus had the power to heal (See Matthew 12:10).

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 10:25; cf. Matthew 9:34.

<sup>8</sup> See Jesus' words in Matthew 12:26. Jesus understands the Pharisees to be speaking about Satan.

<sup>9</sup> Colossians 1:13.

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 6:12.

there is an order of operation in a kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Satan's kingdom contains all of this demonic servants who serve him and seek to do his will.<sup>12</sup> It also consists of "the whole world"<sup>13</sup> that includes people who unknowing are members of his kingdom and are enslaved by him.<sup>14</sup>

**Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste.** This is something everyone knows. This is common sense. No organization—no kingdom, no city, no house—that destroys its own work will last long. If Satan is casting out Satan, then Satan is shooting himself in the foot. If he keeps up such self-destructive work, then soon he will destroy himself. If after shooting himself in the foot, he next he shoots himself in the leg, and then the chest, soon he'll bleed to death. Pharisees, such language as you're using reveals that you're not thinking logically. What you are saying does not make sense.

## 2. You're being hypocritically inconsistent (v.27).

**Matthew 12:27 (ESV)** And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

The Pharisees spoke too soon. Jesus asks a brilliant question. "**By whom do your sons cast out demons?**" By "your sons" Jesus means the disciples or pupils of the Pharisees.<sup>15</sup> Evidently some of the disciples and pupils of the Pharisees were also able to cast out demons.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Jesus is asking from what power source their disciples were working since, both they and Jesus were effecting the same result. Presumably the Pharisees approved of their "sons" casting out demons, but they disapprove of Jesus doing the same. In their rush to condemn Jesus, they have now inadvertently condemned their own disciples. However, Jesus argues that *their own disciples would condemn them* because if they were to ask their pupils by what power they were casting out demons, they were certainly say that they were doing so by the power of God and not by the power of Satan. The charge of the Pharisees is ridiculous.

## 3. The kingdom of God is here (v.28)

**Matthew 12:28 (ESV)** But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Since it makes no sense whatsoever to claim that the spirit of Satan is at work in Jesus destroying his own kingdom, then the only logical conclusion is that Jesus is empowered by the Spirit of God. *Jesus is the Servant of whom Isaiah spoke, upon whom God would put his*

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<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 6:11.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Timothy 2:26.

<sup>13</sup> I John 5:19; cf. Luke 4:6; John 12:31; 14:29; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; 6:12.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 2:14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 316.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark 9:3-40; Acts 9:13.

*Spirit* (Mt 12:18). If the power of God was at work in some of the disciples of the Pharisees to occasionally cast out demons, and if Jesus is now casting out demons left and right, then clearly *the Spirit of God is mightily at work in Jesus*. And if the Spirit of God is at work in Jesus to such a degree that mankind has never before seen in all of Israel<sup>17</sup>, then **the kingdom of God has come upon you!** This is the only logical conclusion.

#### 4. A strong kingdom can only be overcome by another stronger kingdom (v.29).

**Matthew 12:29** (ESV) Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

Jesus likens Satan to a "**strong man**." The only way to take a strong man's stuff is to be sure that the strong man is made weak. It's not easy to break into a strong man's house and take his stuff. To steal the strong man's stuff, one must be stronger than the strong man. His **house** is the place that will be most heavily guarded. Yet, if you can break into the strong man's house and take his stuff, then you have proven to be much stronger than the strong man. Jesus is claiming to be stronger than the strong man.

Satan is the strong man and his kingdom is being **plundered, by Jesus!** Jesus is not serving Satan, rather he is defeating him! Jesus is plundering the kingdom of Satan by healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, opening the ears of the deaf, loosing the tongue of the mute, and setting free those who have been oppressed by demons. Jesus is plundering the evil kingdom of Satan by bringing in the good kingdom of God. Therefore, **Jesus is stronger than Satan**, who is the prince of demons. Thus, Jesus is a mightier prince who brings in a the mightier kingdom of God.

Oh, be careful how you respond to this greatest of all princes. These four arguments point to the calm majesty of messiah Jesus.

#### B) Sobering Response: The Warning Words of Jesus (v.30-32)

Given the unshakable logic of these arguments, along with the abundant evidence of Jesus authority and power, Jesus now offers some sobering words of warning to the Pharisees.

##### 1. If you're not with me your against me (v.30)

**Matthew 12:30** (ESV) Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

There can be no neutrality regarding Jesus. He will not allow it. One is either for him or against him. **Everyone must decide where you stand in relation to Jesus**. If you do not join him in **gathering** people in to him, then by default you are **scattering** people from him.

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 9:33.

One either joins Jesus in bringing in the kingdom of God, or one finds oneself opposing Jesus by standing with the kingdom of Satan.

Which will it be for you? This is a choice each of us human beings must make.

## 2. Blasphemy against HS is an unforgivable sin (v.31-32)

**Matthew 12:31-32 (ESV)** <sup>31</sup> Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

These may be the most sobering words in all of Scripture. Clearly there is a blasphemous sin which will *"not be forgiven, either in this age nor in the age to come"* (v.32). There is a sin against God the Holy Spirit which so offends the holiness and dignity of his perfect character that it is justifiably *unforgivable*. Mark, in his gospel, writes that there is a way of sinning against the Holy Spirit that causes one to be *"guilty of an eternal sin"* (Mk 3:29). There is a sin so sinful that once committed it can never be atoned for, not even in the whole of eternity. We must know what this sin is. But before Jesus explains this sin, he first emphasizes the incredible grace of God.

*Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven* (v.31). This sounds contradictory to what I just said, however, keep with Jesus' words. Don't stop listening and thinking. Note these amazing words. Note the incredible grace of God. *Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven!* This is incredible. There is no sin so sinful that it can't be forgiven and even blasphemy can be forgiven.

*Blasphemy is primarily a spoken sin.* The kind of blasphemy about which Jesus is teaching is a spoken sin. Jesus says, *"Blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven"* (v.31). And *"...whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven..."* (v.32). 'Blasphemy' against the Spirit in v.31 is parallel to *"speaking [a word] against"* the Holy Spirit in v.32.

Blasphemy means, "to slander—abusive words falsely spoken."<sup>18</sup> "To speak against someone in such a way as to harm or injure his or her reputation (occurring in relation to persons as well as to divine beings)—'to revile, to defame.'"<sup>19</sup>



<sup>18</sup> Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 433.

But in v.31 Jesus affirms that *"blasphemy will be forgiven."* Paul confessed that he formerly was a blasphemer and yet he was forgiven (1 Tim 1:12-17). *"Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven..."* (v.32). Not ever. Spoken sin against the Son of Man *will* be forgiven but spoken sin against the Spirit *will not* be forgiven.

Why? What is the difference between speaking against the Son and speaking against the Spirit? Is the Spirit more important than the Son? No. Both are equally important, both equally God, both are equally holy.

*Is the answer not seen in their respective roles in salvation?* The role of the Son in salvation is different from the role of the Spirit. The Son of God **achieved** salvation, while the Spirit of God **applies** salvation. While the redemptive work of the Son was external—on the cross, the redemptive work of the Spirit is internal—in our hearts. It is the Spirit of God—not the Son of God—who is poured out in our hearts<sup>20</sup> unto salvation. It is the Holy Spirit of God who convicts the heart of sin (Jn 16:8-9), gives new birth to hearts dead in sin (Jn 3:6, 8), who now glorifies the Son (Jn 16:14), and "bears witness about" Jesus (Jn 15:26). Words are important here because it is our words that reveal the condition of our hearts. In the next paragraph, Jesus says,

*"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"* (Mt 12:34).

**Blasphemous words spoken only out of a blasphemous heart.** Blasphemous words against the Holy Spirit reveal hearts that hardened against the saving work of the Holy Spirit. This is dangerous because hardened hearts can become unrepentant hearts. Unrepentant hearts will never be forgiven of sin because they choose to remain in sin rather than to turn from it.

**Forgiveness of sin is not automatic.** No one is *automatically* forgiven of their sins. Forgiveness is conditional upon repentance. When John the Baptist began his ministry, he began by preaching, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Mt 3:2). When Jesus began his ministry, he began by preaching, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is a hand"* (Mt 4:17). When Peter preached his first sermon and the people asked him what they should do, Peter responded by saying, *"Repent...every one of... for the forgiveness of your sins..."* (Acts 2:38). And the final words of Jesus recorded by Luke in his gospel is the command of Jesus *"...that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations..."* (Lk 24:47). **Forgiveness of sins requires repentance from sins.** Hearts that refuse to repent, grow harder and harder over time and soon one day, they are so hard that it is impossible to repent. Such hearts speak blasphemous words against the Holy Spirit. So *the unforgivable sin is not merely speaking certain hateful words against the Holy Spirit, but rather speaking hateful words against the Spirit that flow from hardened and unrepentant hearts.*

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<sup>20</sup> Romans 5:5; 8:9, 11, 14-16.

**The hardened Pharisaical Hearts.** The Pharisees had seen miracle after miracle and sign after sign and yet, they refused to repent of their sins. Their unrepentant hearts grew harder and harder against Jesus over time until eventually they stood at a point of decision.

1. The Pharisees heard in Jerusalem about the miracles and signs that Jesus was doing in Galilee and sent to investigate (Mk 3:22).
2. They saw Jesus heal a paralyzed man and proclaim forgiveness of the man's sins and they thought within themselves, *"This man blasphemes"* (Mt 9:1-3).
3. Then they saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and they said to his disciples, *"Why does he do this?"* (Mt 9:10-13).
4. They witnessed Jesus cast out a demon from a man who was mute and the crowds marveled saying, *"We've never seen anything like this,"* while the Pharisees said, *"He's possessed by the devil"* (Mt 9:32-34).
5. They watched Jesus in the synagogue heal a lame man on the Sabbath and they responded by plotting to murder him (Mt 12:9-14).
6. Now, they witness Jesus casting out a demon from a man that caused both blindness and muteness and they hardened their hearts yet again saying, *"This man works by the power of Satan."*

This is the second time<sup>21</sup> they've said this and it reflects a deeper hardening of their hearts against the work of the Spirit of God through Jesus and so he graciously warns them. He warns them that *they are close to crossing over a spiritual line from which they will never return if they do not now stop and repent and ask forgiveness of their sins.*

The Pharisees had clear evidence to the fact that Jesus was anointed by the Spirit of God to do all that he did, even one of their own admitted this. Nicodemus confesses as much saying, *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him"* (Jn 3:2). Yet, they were still refusing to repent and follow Jesus.

## Conclusion

What should we do with this truth?

### Define Unforgivable Sin

First, we should clearly define this unforgivable sin so we can avoid it. From this text and its context we can define blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as,

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<sup>21</sup> See Matthew 9:33-34; 10:25.

The persistent, willful rejection of the clear work of the Holy Spirit through the name of Jesus, which so hardens the heart that it both defiantly understands and slanderously declares such holy work to be evil. In the face of such sin, the Holy Spirit permanently withdraws from the person leaving them forever in their sin, thus rendering them unable to repent and receive forgiveness.

### Can a Christian commit such blasphemy?

This begs question can a Christian commit such a sin? There are many Christians who have often struggled with the feeling that they have committed this sin. To answer this question we must consider those to whom these words were spoken.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not speaking some particular sentence or particular words against Jesus or God or the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees had already said something like this before (see 9:34). And remember what Jesus leads with, *"I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people..."* Just as sin can be forgive, so blasphemy can be forgiven. Where there is *repentance* of sin there can be forgiveness of sin.

What is different about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is that there is no repentance. There is no sorrow for sin, but rather a stubborn persistence to continue in it even though it is known to be sin. The hardened heart has no room repentance. But it does have room for a malicious rejection of what a person knows to be the work of the Holy Spirit, and continuing in that rejection, willfully ignoring the obvious truth, a person chooses to slanderously declare that the good work of God is actually evil.

I do not believe a true Christian—a person in whom the Holy Spirit of God truly dwells—could ever do such a thing without repentance. We may, in times of weakness, say terrible things to God, but *"every sin and every blasphemy"* of which we truly repent will be truly forgiven. The heart that is grieved that he may have committed this sin most likely by the presence of the grief demonstrates the absence of this sin. The person who is sorry for his sin and hates his sin and turns from his sin will be forgiven. The person who knows Jesus to be the Son of God, the Messiah of the world, and yet hardheartedly continues unrepentantly in sin and both sees and says that the good work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus is evil, is the person who stands in danger of an eternal, unforgivable sin.

Confess your sins. Repent of any known sin. Turn away from all sin. Turn to Jesus. If you are not for him, then you are against him.

Therefore, joyfully magnify the name of Jesus. Rejoice in the kingly power of Jesus. Praise him as God's chosen Messiah. Worship him at the plunderer of Satan's crumbling kingdom. Delight in him as God's anointed Servant. Sing to him who gives life and forgives sin. Praise the one who transforms sinners into saints.