

An Unforgivable Sin?

A sermon on Matthew 12:22-32 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 May 2020

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Message

The forgiveness encountered in Jesus is extravagant and all-inclusive, but those who determinedly reject and demonise the Spirit's winds of change can cut off their own access to it.

Sermon

The reading we heard from Matthew's gospel tonight is not included in the ecumenical lectionary (a 3-year cycle of Bible readings), but if it sounded familiar, it was probably because a version of this story from Mark's gospel is included. When I last preached on that one, I focussed then on the riddle Jesus poses about whether the Satan can drive out Satan, a riddle he poses in reply to the charge from the religious leaders that he himself was casting out demons by drawing on the power of the devil. So this time I want to focus instead on the final verses which have provoked a lot of well-meaning people to panic at their frightening suggestion that there might be an unforgivable sin.

The two parts are related, because we can only begin to understand this saying about an unforgivable sin in its context as a response to this allegation that what Jesus is doing is satanic. Let me unpack that biblical connection first, and then I want to give the rest of my time to asking what this "unforgivable sin" might look like and mean in light of some big news issues that have been much discussed recently.

The story begins with a very brief reference to a miraculous healing. No attention is given to the details, but as I said a couple of weeks ago, the healing miracles are often used more for their symbolic meaning than for their historical details. This is a good example. We are told nothing about how the healing was done, but Matthew spells out emphatically that first the man was blind and mute, and then that Jesus gave him the power to speak and see. So symbolically, we are being told that the context for the charges against Jesus is that he is reaching out to people who have been kept in the dark and silenced, and he is opening their eyes to what is going on and giving them a voice to speak out.

It is in light of that, and the positive response to it from the crowds, that some of the religious authorities begin denouncing what he is doing as satanic, as evidence that he is in league with the devil. Can you hear the importance of that? They are not disputing that the healing took place. They are not disputing that Jesus is opening people's eyes and giving the power of speech to the silenced. They are seeing those wonderful, liberating, life-giving things, and denouncing them as evil, as satanic, as evidence that Jesus is a dangerous enemy of all that is good.

So when Jesus responds to their charges with this statement about being guilty of an unforgivable sin, it has to be understood in light of this specific accusation. Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Speak against me if you will. No big deal, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."

Now one of the reasons that this statement has provoked so much anxiety among well-meaning people over the years is the use of the word "blasphemy". Jesus labels this

unforgivable sin as “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”. And over the years, the understanding of blaspheming faded until it people thought it just meant swearing.

Let me tell you straight: Jesus is certainly not saying that if you’ve ever said “Bugger the Holy Spirit,” you’ve written yourself a non-refundable ticket straight to hell. It is not that at all. That would make absolutely no sense at all in the context of this story where Jesus makes the statement. Nobody is swearing here. Blaspheming yes, but using swear words, no.

What does it mean then? Our concept of blasphemy comes from the ten commandments; from the one that says you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. The focus of this commandment is not condemning those who scream “Jesus!” when they slam their finger in a door. The focus is on those who misuse the name of the God to claim authority for doing things that God would never authorise. Corrupt priests who tell children or vulnerable adults that God wants them to have sex with them, and that God will punish them if they tell anyone; that’s blasphemy. Political leaders who claim to be authorised by God when they bomb the cities of their enemies; that’s blasphemy. Blasphemy is using the name of God in the service of evil.

But even those blasphemies are not what Jesus is labelling as being beyond forgiveness here. Jesus is actually extending the concept of blasphemy in a slightly different, but closely related direction. Using the name of God to do evil while calling it good was one thing, but what Jesus is targeting here is the other way round: witnessing good, and accusing it of being evil.

Why does he call that “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”? Well, think about how Jesus describes the work of the Holy Spirit elsewhere. Jesus tells us (John 3:8) that the Holy Spirit is like the wind. You can’t see it, but you can see its effects as it blows where it will and gathers up whatever it will. I think this is what Jesus is meaning when he says that if you speak against him that’s no big deal, but speaking against the Holy Spirit is different. I think he is acknowledging that as a human being, other human beings could just take a personal dislike to him. No big deal. But people can’t take a personal dislike to the Holy Spirit, because they don’t encounter the Spirit as a personality. They only witness what the Spirit is doing, the winds of change, and so if they speak against the Spirit, they are condemning what the Spirit does, which is always loving, liberating, empowering, and life-giving. Speaking against that is speaking against life and love itself. That crosses a very different line.

I’ve been thinking about this in relation to some recent news events. The trigger for my wonderings was a headline on a news site that posed the question, “[How on Earth did an abhorrent crime like family violence become entangled in Australian cultural wars?](#)”

The article pointed out that nowadays, every time a woman is murdered by a violent partner and people demand that things change to make sure it doesn’t keep happening, there are commentators who denounce this as an anti-male conspiracy by a femi-nazi domestic violence “industry”. The journalist said that in the face of horrendous death and grief, these commentators try to get us all to “line up in (opposing) ideological camps instead of doing every thing we possibly can to stop this happening again.”

Can you see the parallel to what Jesus is talking about? These culture war commentators are seeing silenced and downtrodden people having their eyes opened and their voice empowered and standing up for a safer and more peaceful society, and what is their response? They

denounce it as something evil, as demonic, as a threat to all that is good in the world. They are seeing the wind of the spirit bring desperately needed change to set people free from fear and violent dangers, but they are unable to welcome it and get on board. To them, as the winners under the old order, it just looks like a threat to their own power and privilege. Exactly the way the Pharisees were seeing things.

These angry commentators are not all men either – Bettina Arndt, we're looking at you!

There has been a lot of this in the news recently. There have been similar reactions to the news of Harvey Weinstein being convicted of rape. Powerful men thought it was okay to construct a world where they could use their power and privilege to coerce women into their beds and call that consent. But when the winds of change begin to tip the balance back towards a much needed equality and mutual respect, the language of culture war is again invoked to denounce it. The work of the Spirit is demonised.

And isn't that language of culture war interesting? I've often said that I think the best way of understanding the concept of the "kingdom of God" now is as the "culture of God", so when Jesus speaks in this story of a crumbling kingdom of satan desperately opposing the incoming kingdom of God, what are we talking about? A culture war! The culture of the satan, the accuser, against the culture of God. And what would the culture of the accuser look like? Like a culture of accusations, of bitterness and resentment and seething violent backlash.

The risk, of course, in what I'm saying is buying into the culture war ourselves and perpetuating it, and even invoking God's name to justify it. It is not always only the angry commentators who are guilty of portraying their opponents as being in league with the devil. The besetting sin of the other side too is an over-generalising, absolutising outrage which can stumble into the same thing.

It's not true that everything those culture war commentators say is wrong. It's not true that asking what is going wrong for men always means blaming the victim and opposing change. If we don't work out what is going wrong for men, we will never be able to heal them and set them free from their addiction to violence and control. And certainly there are plenty of stupid, unhelpful and polarising things that get said by some of those who are campaigning against domestic violence. If you make all men feel like they are being dismissed as the enemy, you're not boosting the chances of winning their support and cooperation.

But equally, if on the other side you dismiss an entire positive social change movement because some of its adherents say stupid things, you may not just be missing what the Spirit is doing, you may be setting yourself in opposition to what the Spirit is doing, and that, says Jesus, is a very dangerous place to be. You may not just end up on the wrong side of history, but on the wrong side of the incoming culture of God.

So why does Jesus single this out from all other sins as being the unforgivable sin?

Well, before I attempt to answer that question, I need to first acknowledge that we can't be sure that he did say it. The statement is oddly constructed, with an absolute statement, followed by a random, somewhat contradictory, qualification. "I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy," —that sounds pretty absolute— "but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." And a lot of very good biblical scholars suspect that

the first statement genuinely comes from Jesus, but that it was too radical for the early church and they added the qualification in response to themselves being accused by the Pharisees of being demonic.

That sounds quite likely, but whether this statement comes from Jesus or from the early church, it is still part of the biblical tradition that has been passed down to us, so we need to reckon with it. Even if it is not actually true that there is anything that God can't or won't forgive, we need to reckon with why this "blasphemy against the Spirit" was seen as the most unlikely of all sins to be forgivable.

It seems to me that the answer is actually fairly straightforward, perhaps even just a logical necessity. The culture of God and the way of salvation are more or less the same thing. The basic message of Jesus's preaching was, "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and get on board." And if that's the call, you can't have it both ways. You can't reject and oppose the culture of God and be onboard with it at the same time. If you witness the culture of forgiveness and change, and choose to oppose it as demonic, you are rejecting that forgiveness for yourself as well. If you convince yourself that the last bottle of water is poisoned, you'll die of thirst with the water still in reach.

So these words, even if they definitely come from Jesus himself, are not something you need to be anxious about, wondering whether somehow you have committed an unforgivable sin. If you are still able to worry that you might have committed this sin, you haven't. This unforgivable sin is not something you can commit in a momentary lapse or a bad day. It is a disposition, a sustained attitude, a fully fledged cultural commitment. But if you commit yourself to opposing the winds of change, the emergence of a new culture of love and inclusion and empowerment of the previously downtrodden and silenced, take a good hard look at yourself and repent while you still can.

The wind of the Spirit is blowing, the culture of God is emerging, the life of forgiveness and freedom beckons. Drink deeply of it and live.