

Can a Person Accidentally Commit the Unpardonable Sin?

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In Matthew chapter twelve Jesus gave one of his most unusual and most misunderstood teachings, concerning what is commonly referred to as the "unpardonable sin," or more specifically, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. While many Christians hardly ever give this teaching a second thought, there are some Christians who labor under the fear that they may have committed this sin that Jesus Himself says can never be forgiven "either in this age, or in the age to come" (Matthew 12:32). Some fear that though they cannot point to a specific time when they know for sure that they committed the unpardonable sin, they nonetheless fear that they may have accidentally done so without intending to at the time.

It is this last point that I want to address in this essay. Can a person accidentally commit the unpardonable sin (i.e., accidentally blaspheme the Spirit)? I believe that the answer to this question is clearly and unquestionably no, and I believe that this can be shown to be so from Scripture.

Before we look at what the Bible has to say about this question, though, it might be helpful to first say a bit more about what is the unpardonable sin. There has been a great deal of debate over this point, and at the risk of disappointing the reader, I do not wish to enter that debate here. Let me simply note the following points:

1. As has often been observed, the unpardonable sin is not homosexuality, adultery, divorce, or any other of the typical sins of the flesh listed in passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. As vs. 11 of that same chapter indicates, all such sins are forgivable if a person turns to Christ in repentance.

2. The unpardonable sin mentioned in Matthew 12 is specifically said by Jesus to be *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*. The essence of "blasphemy" is to speak evil of someone, and the context of this passage indicates that it is a spoken sin (vss. 32, 36-37) directed specifically against the Holy Spirit of God (note: not against Jesus, vss. 31-32).

3. The only certain example of an unpardonable blasphemy against the Spirit that we have in Scripture is that provided in Matthew 12, namely, the sin of the Pharisees that provoked Jesus to present this teaching. In this incident the Pharisees verbally accused Jesus of working miracles by the power of Satan (rather than the power of God through the Holy Spirit).

4. While numerous commentators have attempted to equate blasphemy of the Spirit to rejection of the Spirit's persuasive efforts to draw one to salvation, at present I remain unconvinced that there are sufficient biblical grounds to restrict the meaning of the phrase in this way. In his most direct statement on the topic, Jesus describes the unpardonable sin as "speak [ing] a word against the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 12:32). Though this spoken act certainly entails a rejection of the Spirit, it is hard to see why (#3 above notwithstanding) the meaning of the phrase "blasphemy of the Spirit" should be exhausted by this sense (i.e., by rejection of the Spirit).

Of course, if blasphemy of the Spirit is, as many argue, best equated to rejection of the Spirit's wooing influence toward salvation, then the question that titles this essay is immediately answered: No, it would not on that understanding be possible to accidentally reject such wooing influences of the Spirit. If, on the other hand, the blasphemy of the Spirit is to be understood more in terms of a climactic spoken act against the Spirit, then the possibility remains (at least in theory) that such a spoken act might be committed accidentally. By "accidentally" I have in mind situations where a person makes a slip of the tongue, or speaks an ambiguous statement that he later realizes could be taken otherwise than he intended, or in some other way (perhaps out of ignorance) utters words that, though on the surface might appear to be an accusation of evil against the Holy Spirit, were in fact not genuinely intended as such by the speaker. It is this possibility of accidental blasphemy against the Spirit that I wish to explore in this essay.

Consider now the relevant passage:

Matthew 12:

31 "Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.

32 "And whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come.

33 "Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. 35 "The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil.

36 "And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. 37 "For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned."

There are two initial reasons to conclude that a person cannot accidentally blaspheme the Spirit. First, the Pharisees' own blasphemy of the Spirit (which, of course, provides the immediate context for Jesus' above teaching; see Matthew 12:22-30) was clearly and definitely intentional. The Pharisees displayed an antagonistic attitude toward Jesus that suggests they were fully conscious of what they were doing and intended to make an evil accusation against the Spirit who was working through Jesus. This accusation was motivated by their intentional rejection of Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.

Second, notice the connection between vs. 32 (concerning the blasphemy of the Spirit) and vss. 33-35 ("the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart"). Jesus' words in both instances are directed toward the Pharisees who have just blasphemed the Spirit. The significance of vss. 33-35 is not hard to see: Jesus is saying here that the Pharisees blasphemed the Holy Spirit because this was the evil intention that sprang from their hearts. What came from their mouths *originated more deeply within their hearts* (vs. 34). This distinction between the "mouth" and the "heart" is important. Jesus is saying that blasphemy of the Spirit is not merely a word on the lips. This is not to say that blasphemy of the Spirit is not a spoken sin, for it is (as the context makes clear--see my earlier observations), but it is not only a spoken sin. The blasphemy spoken from the lips comes from a deeper source and originates in the heart. Therefore, one cannot accidentally blaspheme the Spirit by way of a slip of the tongue or some other accidental means. The blasphemy to which Jesus is referring can only be committed with full intention from the heart.

Two objections might at this point be raised against the conclusion that there can be no accidental blasphemy against the Spirit. First, Jesus himself in vs. 36 uses the word "careless" to describe the Pharisees' blasphemy. Does this not then indicate that blasphemy of the Spirit can be accidental? Second, Jesus seems to indicate in vs. 34 that every word that comes out of one's mouth is a reflection of what is in the heart. If so, then would not even accidental words (including accidental blasphemy) be a reflection of what is in one's heart? So, again, does it not follow that one might accidentally blaspheme the Spirit?

Let me respond to each of these objections in turn. First, it is true that Jesus' mention of "careless" words (as the NASB and NIV translate it) in vs. 36 is clearly meant to encompass the blasphemy of the Spirit. There is a strong emphasis throughout Matthew 12:32-37 on the significance of one's "words," and it would be arbitrary at best to say that the "word" of blasphemy against the Spirit referred to in vs. 32 cannot be encompassed within the category of "careless words" referred to in vs. 36.

However, when we look more closely at the Greek word used in vs. 36 we find out that "careless" turns out not to be a very good translation in this context. The Greek root word used here is *argos*, which in its most basic, literal sense means "inactive," "idle" (see the KJV), or "unproductive." For example, the laborers mentioned in Jesus' parable about the vineyard

(Matthew 20:1-16) are described using this same word to indicate that they were "idle" or "unemployed," not accomplishing anything worthwhile before the master of the vineyard hired them (vss. 3, 6). Another interesting example is 2 Peter 1:8, where the godly qualities of righteousness make a person "neither useless [*argos*] nor unfruitful" (see also Luke 13:7, where the related root word *katargeo* is used to describe the waste of good ground caused by unfruitful trees).

In the passage we are considering above (Matthew 12), the word *argos* is also linked to unfruitfulness (vss. 33-35). The Pharisees are said to be examples of "bad trees" producing "bad fruit," and in this sense they can be called unfruitful (in that they produce no good, useable fruit). What all of this shows is that the Greek word *argos* as used in these passages does not mean "careless" or "accidental," but instead "unproductive" in the sense of producing no good fruit, or producing only evil fruit (the fruit here being words of the mouth) that are a perversion of the gift of language God intended us to use for righteous purposes. When we consider the context of the passage (as I did above), we see that the kind of unproductive, evil words that Jesus had in mind are clearly intentional in nature. That is, once the term *argos* in vs. 36 is seen to indicate unproductivity (instead of carelessness), there remains no reason within the passage to think that Jesus meant to countenance the possibility of accidental blasphemy of the Spirit. Indeed, the larger context of the passage and Jesus' own discussion of fruitful and unfruitful trees in vss. 33-35 indicate just the opposite.

But what about Jesus' statement in vs. 34 that "the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart"? Does Jesus mean that absolutely every word (including every accidental word) that comes out of our mouths is a reflection of what is in our hearts? Taken in isolation, vs. 34 might certainly seem to say so. Jesus makes a similar statement in Matthew 15 as well:

Matthew 15:18-19

"But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders."

If Jesus means that literally every word that comes out of the mouth originates from the heart, and if we know (as we do--see my discussion above) that the kinds of words Jesus is talking about here include blasphemy of the Spirit, then even accidental words might count as blasphemy against the Spirit.

However, when we look at the bigger picture of what the Bible teaches about the relation between the mouth and the heart, we find that this could not possibly be what Jesus meant. There is even a clue to this in the Matthew 15 passage itself: Notice that Jesus gave a list of examples (vs. 19) of what He meant by "the things that proceed out of the mouth," and without exception those things are all intentional.

This is not by accident. In fact, it is the more general biblical pattern--whenever the Bible speaks of the "heart," it always refers to intentional thoughts and feelings springing from the innermost being. The heart was considered the very "center and source of the whole inner life, . . . its thinking, feeling, and volition" (William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Second Edition, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979, see entry on *kardia*). The heart was seen as a deep wellspring of what the person truly is inside, and is never, as far as I can tell, connected in Scripture with slips of the tongue or other accidentally spoken words. Consider just a few passages, where the heart is clearly associated with willful intention and understanding:

Hebrews 4:12

"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

2 Corinthians 4:6

"For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

Matthew 13:15

"For the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes. Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them."

Luke 24:25

"And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!"

What do these passages (and dozens of others like them) tell us? They tell us that only what is intentional and thought-out from the understanding or emotions can be said to truly come from the heart, because this is the very definition (biblically) of what the heart is.

To develop this point further, recall how Jesus distinguished the heart from the mouth in Matthew 12:34. It turns out that the Bible often distinguishes these two things. For example:

Psalms 19:14

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight . . .
Of course, not every thought of the heart ultimately passes through the lips:

Matthew 24:48

But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time,'

More importantly for the present purposes, the opposite is also true: Not everything that passes through the lips truly originates from the heart:

Matthew 15:8

This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.

We see in this passage that just because a word comes out of one's mouth does not mean that God is convinced of its intent. Similarly, in the following passage Paul says it is necessary for salvation to have not only a proper confession (of the mouth), but a genuine belief (of the heart) as well. Merely saying the Jesus is Lord (with your mouth) does not itself prove that this is rooted in a heart-belief.

Romans 12:8, 9

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 are preaching, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.

What we learn from this brief survey of passages on the heart vs. the mouth is that Jesus could not possibly have meant in Matthew 12:34 that every word issuing from the mouth originates from the heart (in the biblical meaning of "heart"). Indeed, Jesus' comments in this verse do not address unintentional or accidental words at all; rather, Jesus was focusing exclusively on the intentional sphere in which the Pharisees were at that time maneuvering against him. Jesus' intent here was to offer a basis for assuring his listeners that the Pharisees' words were in fact not accidental, that they were indeed a "brood of vipers" who, because the values of their hearts were fundamentally "evil" and opposed to Christ, would--not surprisingly--speak evil of Jesus and (more to the point in this passage) speak evil of God's Holy Spirit.

I conclude, then, that blasphemy of the Holy Spirit can only be committed intentionally, just as the Pharisees themselves committed this sin intentionally. If the words in question do not come "from the heart" in the full biblical sense of that phrase, then the words cannot be blasphemy of the Spirit. It is impossible to unintentionally blaspheme the Holy Spirit.