

BLASPHEMY AND THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

INTRODUCTION

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines blasphemy as “profane and sacrilegious talk about God or sacred things.” It consists of irreverent or insulting language toward God or His perfections. It primarily denotes defamation, detraction, reproachful or abusive language against whosoever it is spoken, whether God or man. The term blaspheme, according to R.K. Harrison in the Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics, is derived from the Greek noun *blasphemo*, “to harm one’s reputation. Fausset’s Bible Dictionary says it is literally a “railing accusation” against anyone (Jude 9), and that “Evil speaking” is probably meant by it in Col 3:8. The McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia offers this definition. “Blasphemy is an injury offered to God by denying that which is due and belonging to him, or attributing to him what is not agreeable to his nature.” Also, giving the attributes of God to a creature also constitutes blasphemy (Luke 5: 21; John 10: 36). But it is more often used in the sense of any speech directly dishonouring God, as the following Scriptures will show:

Remember this, that the enemy hath reproached, O LORD, and that the foolish people have blasphemed thy name (Ps.74:18 KJV).

Here, abusive words are used to dishonour God. He is reproached as if He were false and is unable to defend His people. The prayer of the psalmist is that God would remember that these reproachful words are against Him, and that He would regard them as such.

In Isa. 52: 5 we read:

“And now what do I have here?” declares the LORD. “For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock,” declares the LORD. “And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed.”

This text in Isaiah shows how God’s name was blasphemed by the Babylonians who delighted in reproaching His name by saying that He was unable to defend the captive Jews and keep their city from ruin.

Paul in the New Testament expressed grief when he wrote:

“...God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you (Rom 2: 24).

Blasphemy, therefore, constitutes a deliberate slandering, disrespecting, reviling, insulting and cursing of the name, being, or works of God, who should be honoured, blessed and worshipped.

R.K. Harrison says that the ancient Greeks used the term to denote the “mockery” or “insult” of a person; they also used it to refer to any depreciation of the gods’ nature and powers. Both Old and New Testaments condemn blasphemy because it is immoral, and a deliberate rejection of God.

BLASPHEMY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Problem

Pagans at times were provoked to commit blasphemy by the bad examples and moral lapses of God’s people. King David’s sin, for example, gave the enemies of the Lord a motive to blaspheme. Second Samuel 12: 14 says, ***“But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt...”*** Paul, in Romans 2: 24, makes this charge, ***“God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”*** We must never allow our shameful conduct to be the reason why people slander, dishonour and defame the name of God. Too often, people have wondered what kind of God is the God of the Christian, simply because our conduct at times is reprehensible.

Also, God's people were seen as blasphemers when they committed the sin of idolatry. God spoke to the prophet Ezekiel and said to him:

27 "Therefore, son of man, speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In this also your fathers blasphemed me by forsaking me: 28 When I brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that provoked me to anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings. 29 Then I said to them: What is this high place you go to'"(Ezek. 20:27 – 29)?

Since His name reflects His nature and character, He is to be blessed and worshipped forever more; never cursed or reviled.

The Penalty

In the Law of Moses blasphemy against God is condemned and is punishable by stoning. We read in Lev.24: 10 – 16 about the son of an Israelite woman who was stoned for blasphemy:

An Israelite mother and an Egyptian father went out among the Israelites and a fight broke out in the camp between him and an Israelite. 11 The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name with a curse; so they brought him to Moses. (His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri the Danite.) 12 They put him in custody until the will of the LORD should be made clear to them. 13 Then the LORD said to Moses: 14 "Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him. 15 Say to the Israelites: 'If anyone curses his God, he will be held responsible; 16 anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death. (See also 1 Kgs. 21: 9, 10, 13).

BLASPHEMY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Blasphemy Against God

In the New Testament blasphemy against God is seen in the irreverent words used against Him. *“And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name... The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven” (Rev. 13: 1, 5, 6).* Albert Barnes comments on verse one stating:

The word "blasphemy" here seems to be used in the sense that titles and attributes were claimed by it (the beast) which belonged only to God. The meaning here is, that each one of these heads appeared to have a frontlet, with an inscription that was blasphemous, or that ascribed some attribute to this power that properly belonged to God; and that the whole power thus assumed was in derogation of the attributes and claims of God.

The Bible says in Rev. 16: 9, 11, *“They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him. ... and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.”* And in Rev. 16: 21, *“From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.”*

Here, insulting words were directed at the names and attributes by which God is known. Names such as Lord, God, Almighty, Divine, Father, Omnipresent, etc., were mocked, dishonoured, and offended.

Blasphemy Against Jesus Christ

Blasphemy against Jesus Christ is to speak irreverently and irrationally of His doctrine, ways, name, attributes, and even His followers. Paul said he was a blasphemer because he spoke against the name of Jesus. He later discovered, however, that the name of Jesus was a Name above all names. He laments in 1 Tim 1:13 that he was a blasphemer because he was opposed to the cause and the name of Christ, and as a result reviled His name. He confesses in Acts 26: 9, ***“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.”*** He did not believe that Jesus was Lord and Saviour, and in so opposing he was guilty of blasphemy.

Paul was so obsessed with his opposition of Christ that he even tried to force those who followed Christ to blaspheme. He said, ***“On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them”*** (Acts 26: 10, 11). His objective in forcing Christians to blaspheme was to have them deny that Jesus was the Messiah and that He was indeed an impostor. After his conversion to Christianity, he commanded Christians to avoid any behaviour that would cause others to blaspheme the Lord's name and teaching (1 Tim 6:1).

Later, he looked backed with shame upon the fact that he treated his Lord and Saviour with such contempt and reproach, and was humbled at the fact that the Lord whom he persecuted still called him to the ministry.

Jesus Charged With Blasphemy

As stated earlier, one was accused of blasphemy when they gave the attributes of God to a creature. The Jews charged Jesus with this form of blasphemy. In Matt 26: 64, 65, Jesus makes this declaration, ***“...But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*** His statement brought an immediate and angry response from the high priest who tore his priestly garments and said, ***“He has spoken blasphemy!”***

Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy.

To sit at God's right hand was to claim what belongs to no man. Had He not been the Messiah, the charge of blasphemy would have been true.

In John 10: 36 He makes another astounding statement when He said, "I am the Son of God," for which He was accused of blasphemy. To a Jew, making such a statement was to claim equality with God. The basis of this charge is the use of the name God, or, the Son of God, which He applied to Himself. This same term, "Son of God," however, is applied in Scripture to magistrates (John 10: 34, 35). The Jews were wrong to charge Him with blasphemy on the application of a word to the Messiah which in their own Scriptures is applied to all magistrates.

Luke 5: 21 says, ***"The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, 'Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'"*** If Jesus were not God, He could not forgive sins, and this authority to forgive sins would have been blasphemy against God, in the proper sense of the word. But the proof of His Deity was evident when He demonstrated the Divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience. He restored the paralytic instantly to perfect wholeness, and He discerned the secret thoughts of the scribes. The manifestation of these two divine attributes revealed His deity, and hence his authority to forgive sins.

Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

Blasphemy is the most discussed and emphasised of all offences against the Holy Spirit. While all other forms of blasphemy may be forgiven, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will never be.

In the book of Matthew chapter 12, verses 22 through 32, the scribes credited Jesus' miracles to Satan. The text reads:

22 Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see.

23 All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the son of David?"

24 But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons that this fellow drives out demons."

25 Jesus knew their thoughts and said unto them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand."

26 If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?

27 And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then they will be your judges.

28 But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

29 Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.

30 He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.

31 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

The thought here is attributing to an evil source works which are clearly those of the Holy Spirit. This is blasphemy and this sin will not be pardoned. However, this form of blasphemy has more to do with the continued attitude of one's heart. It is not just a few slanderous or offensive words spoken against the character of God, or an act of life on any one occasion, but an attitude of the heart. It is a position one takes that result in the sin being unpardoned. What makes blasphemy so serious is the fact that it involves the whole person.

In the above text, Jesus healed a man demonised by a blind and dumb spirit. The Pharisees, who observed the miracle and were unable to deny the fact, maliciously and deliberately rejected the visible evidence of Christ's indisputable

power to perform miracles by the Spirit of God, and attributed it to the power of the devil. By refusing to accept the evidence of the miracle, they were guilty of the wicked and unjustified defamation that Christ was in alliance with the powers of darkness. It was not an honest mistake. They evaluated the matter making it a sin of thought, and concluded it was of the devil, making it a sin of open speech.

Therefore, blasphemy involves a decision, the maintenance of which becomes an attitude. There is a sense in which the blasphemer, at a given point, arrives at the conscious experience of deliberately sending or consigning the Holy Spirit to an unworthy place. By an act of will he determines to deny the knowledge that he possesses (Rom.1: 16 – 32). He who commits it is so given over to a reprobate mind that he has no feelings of conscience about it. If he does, it is positive proof that he has not committed the unpardonable sin. In other words, the very fear that one has committed the sin is proof that they are free from this terrible offence.

He who commits this sin must do it knowingly. It is committed when one deliberately turns his back on the light, choosing darkness instead. He refuses to be forgiven. This is real blasphemy. The person, who continues his wilful way, being unresponsive to the tender wooing and constraint of the Holy Spirit, is unpardoned. It is because the blasphemer no longer has the capacity to repent and believe. Calvary provides for every sin, no matter how vicious or vile, but the provision must be accepted and appropriated. Since the new birth and all of Calvary's benefits are conveyed by the Holy Spirit, if that Spirit is rejected, God has no other means to convey His gift of grace to us. Jesus said in John 16: 8, ***“When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment:”*** The unpardonable sin is to resolutely and finally reject that conviction of the Holy Spirit who is the only witness of Jesus Christ. Augusburger sums up the sin of blasphemy this way:

The sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the final result of a person's persistent rejection of, and disrespect for the call of the Spirit. The nature of this sin is that of being closed to the revelation of Christ, being testified by the Spirit. One blasphemes the Spirit when he refuses to recognize, rejects, cast off and disowns the Spirit's call to Christ as the one way to Salvation.

However, there is a relative blasphemy. This is when someone is guilty ignorantly. He does not recognise his mistake in offending and opposing God, and trying to alienate the minds of others from His love and reverence. Such was the case of Paul who later repented and received mercy. He said in 1Tim.1: 13 that he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious, but he obtained mercy because he did it ignorantly in unbelief. Blasphemy was not his final word. Elsewhere he confessed that he thought at the time he was doing what he was supposed to do (Acts 26: 9). Paul felt it was his duty as a Pharisee to oppose the claims of Jesus as Messiah. He thought he owed it to his country, to his religion, and to his God.

In like manner, many people have criticised works of the Holy Spirit through the church that they do not understand. For example, some hold to the view that tongues are of the devil simply because they do not believe, or understand it. This is blasphemous even though it is not unpardonable. It becomes dangerous however, if it is a wilful, persistent, rejection against knowledge.

Conclusion

It is evident from Scripture that not all blasphemy is unpardonable except against the Holy Spirit. Almost every believer at some time feared that he or she had committed this particular sin. This, however, is not the real issue but it is used as a ploy of Satan to condemn and immobilise the believer. The greater concern is whether or not we, by our conduct, are responsible for causing unbelievers to blaspheme God's holy name. We are encouraged in the Word of God to let our light shine before men, that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven (Mt. 5: 16). If by our bad examples as believers the unbeliever blasphemes the name of God, which is to be blessed and praised, we are just as guilty of blasphemy.

Paul, in his letter to Titus, repeatedly encouraged the believers in Crete not only to do good, but also devote themselves to it (Titus 3: 14) so that no one would malign God's Word (Titus 2: 5).

For this reason, I encourage all believers not to worry about committing the unpardonable sin, but rather pay attention to their conduct. Let your conversations be

pure, and your lives be holy in business, at home, abroad, and even in adversity, so that others may honour and praise God, and be led to worship Him because they see in your life the excellency of Jesus Christ.

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