

Sermon VII

by
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"Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come." (Matthew 12:31,32)

The words of my text are reckoned among "the things in Scripture hard to be understood," and have been sometimes explained in a way injurious to the credit of the gospel and the comfort of believers. It is therefore of great importance to inquire into their true meaning, and to attend to the practical uses which they suggest. And for this purpose I shall, in the first place, endeavor to describe the nature and aggravations of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost; secondly, mention the grounds and reasons of its being declared by our Lord unpardonable; thirdly, inquire how far it is possible for persons in our own times and circumstances to be guilty of this sin.

1. I am, in the first place, to describe the nature and aggravations of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.

It appears from the preceding verses that the sin of the Pharisees consisted in ascribing to the influence of an evil spirit those miracles which were wrought by our Lord under the influence of the spirit of God, in attestation of his divine authority. They did not call in question the reality of our Lord's miracles but repelled their proper force and application by ascribing them to Beelzebub, the prince of demons. This our Lord declares to be an unpardonable sin. "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men neither in this world, neither in the world to come," which words may either, according to some commentators, be understood as a proverbial expression corroborating the proposition, or perhaps may refer to that new era which was to commence after our Lord's resurrection when the apostles were to be endowed with extraordinary gifts by the influence of the same spirit and for the same purpose of attesting their divine mission. In this view the declaration of our Lord may be considered as ascribing the same guilt and danger to those who should, in like manner, resist the preaching of his apostles.

2. To understand the grounds of this awful sentence, it is necessary to point out the peculiar aggravations which attended this sin.

It consisted in a violent opposition to the most simple and powerful evidence in testimony of our Lord's divine mission. It may be taken for granted that in every age divine truth will be supported by such proofs as are sufficient to procure the belief of attentive, honest minds, and to justify the condemnation of those who reject it. But still, as the evidence of truth may from particular circumstances be more palpable and striking, the guilt of opposing it becomes in proportion more heinous and dangerous. This was precisely the case of the persons whom our Lord charges with the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. They not only heard him speak, who spake as never man spake, but beheld the

plainest and most powerful demonstrations of his divine authority. Nicodemus referred to a maxim, founded on eternal truth and reason, when he said; "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles which thou doest, except God be with him." Miracles are a species of evidence attended with exclusive, unparalleled advantages. They strike upon the senses, through which the most immediate and lively impressions are wrought upon the mind. They cannot be evaded. Historical facts are deduced from laborious and patient investigation. Arguments of an abstract nature cannot be understood without an original acuteness of understanding and profound attention. Traditional evidence must of necessity descend to posterity under circumstances of disadvantage which impair its authority. Besides, the capacity of men to apprehend moral evidence depends not only upon their natural understanding but upon their education and habits of life. But, as the senses of men are the same in every age and in every state of society, so the evidence which appeals to them maintains the same unbroken and invariable force. Neither capacity, nor learning, nor ingenuity, nor any effort of attention was necessary to bring home the impression of miracles to those who were spectators of them. The Pharisees not only heard of the miracles of our Lord from the report of others, but they beheld them with their own eyes. They saw the deaf, the dumb, the blind, the lame, suddenly restored to the use of the several senses and powers of which they had been destitute. They saw the dead raised and the devils cast out. They did not deny that these things were done.

Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost implied a deliberate and violent suppression of that conviction which had begun to operate upon the mind. In the case before us, Providence had not only vouchsafed the strongest evidence that could possibly be given to convince the persons to whom it was offered, but we see that it actually had its effect to a certain extent. They were, in part, convinced. They acknowledged that Jesus had performed a miracle. What more could be done to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah? What method did they contrive to elude conviction? Malicious ingenuity is put to the stretch. A hypothesis the most absurd and uncharitable is at last invented. They said, "This fellow casts not out devils but by Beelzebub the prince of devils." Never in a more unfavorable instance could the power of a demon or evil spirit be called in to extricate them from the dilemma to which they were reduced, and to account for that stupendous event which they now saw and acknowledged. To the agency of demons they had been wont to ascribe all extraordinary calamities, and particularly that mental derangement which is the summit of human misery. So that according to the construction put upon this and other miracles of our Lord, the power of the evil spirit was exerted against himself. He was stretching out his arm to subvert his own authority. How grossly inconsistent such an exertion of his power with the malice and subtilty which they ascribed to that wicked spirit, whom they believed to be the parent of sin and misery?

Here then were two ingredients which constituted the surpassing depravity of the persons now reprehended by our Lord. First, they calumniated and depreciated the most ample and forcible evidence which was adduced in support of our Lord's divine commission. Secondly, they struggled against and effectually repelled the tendencies of conviction which that evidence, notwithstanding the most inveterate prejudices, had actually produced in their minds. Hence the awful sentence pronounced against them in the words of the text. "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be

forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come."

But still, however enormous the guilt of the persons alluded to, is not this sentence mysteriously severe? Does it not appear inconsistent with the genius and spirit of the gospel and the professed purpose of our Lord's mission into this world--to seek and to save that which was lost? Can there be any guilt so atrocious as to be placed beyond the reach of divine mercy, dispensed and sealed by the blood of Jesus? In answer to this, I am naturally led to the second thing proposed in the method of this discourse, viz. to mention the grounds and reasons of our Lord's pronouncing the sin against the Holy Ghost unpardonable.

It is an awful truth, repeatedly inculcated by the Gospel, that notwithstanding the gracious offers it makes of divine mercy, yet there are many who stand out against it and finally fall into perdition. The reason of this is that such persons have been guilty of unpardonable sins, or sins that cannot be pardoned, according to the established laws of the divine administration. Not that any sin in an absolute sense is unpardonable or beyond the reach of divine mercy, but because the persons to whom it is imputed have not complied with the conditions on which the divine mercy of pardon is ultimately suspended. The gospel exhibits the richest display of divine mercy. Sinners and enemies are invited to be reconciled to God. But how are they to be reconciled? By faith and repentance. To whom is the pardon of sin promised? Only to such as believe and repent. This is the plain, uniform doctrine of the gospel; and indeed, if it were otherwise, so far from being a plan of mercy it would prove a violation of justice and order. Instead of exalting the divine perfections, with reverence be it spoken, it would degrade them. Instead of promoting the moral improvement and happiness of the human race, it would plunge them into deeper corruption and misery.

From these observations you may easily understand why it is said that blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall never be forgiven. It was impossible, in a moral sense, that it ever could be forgiven. Sins are more or less pardonable as they are more or less likely to admit, or to exclude, those means and conditions which are essential to obtain pardon. The sin against the Holy Ghost was declared to be unpardonable because it was impossible, in the nature of things, that the person guilty of it could ever fulfill the conditions or employ the means without which the pardon of sin cannot be granted. Thus faith and repentance, as has been said, are indispensable conditions of pardon. But what hope of faith and repentance [is there] in that man who had violently stood out against the most powerful means of conviction? After the Pharisees saw the miracles of our Lord and continued hardened and inflexible, there remained no farther method, no possibility of bending their minds and rendering them susceptible of conviction and pardon. The man who sinned against the Holy Ghost could never be forgiven. Why? Because he never wished to be forgiven. He would not accept of forgiveness when offered to him. In such a case the ruin of the sinner was entirely his own doing. It was not any impeachment of the mercy and goodness of God.

Suppose that a patient in the extremity of disease obstinately rejects the salutary prescriptions of the physician. In such a case neither the power of medicine nor the skill of the physician would be discredited though the most fatal consequences ensued. Should a rebellious subject wantonly despise the proffered mercy of the prince whom he has offended and at length fall a victim to that vengeance which he has provoked, would the miserable catastrophe be ascribed to the severity of the prince or [to] the malignant obstinacy of the offending subject? Like the desperate patient, the blasphemer of the Holy

Ghost refused the only remedy that could heal or remove his disease. Like the obstinate and irreclaimable rebel, he would not accept of the offered pardon. He rejected it, he trampled upon it. He shut his eyes against the rays of divine truth. He turned a deaf ear to the gracious accents of divine mercy. How was it possible that he could be pardoned?

3. I come now to the third thing proposed in the method of this discourse, viz. to inquire how far it is possible for persons in our own times and circumstances to be guilty of this sin.

I hesitate not to affirm, that it is impossible that any person in our own day can be guilty of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost in the same sense and to the same extent in which it was attributed to the Pharisees by our Lord in the words of the text. Many may be guilty of sins which are similar, or which approach nearly to it; and in proportion as they do so they endanger the repentance and forgiveness of the sinner. But what I assert is this--that it is impossible for any person in our own remote age to be guilty of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost in the same sense and to the same extent in which it was imputed to the Pharisees by our Lord. For observe, in order to perpetrate the very sin denounced in the text, it was necessary that men should behold with their own eyes the miracles which were wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost. Hence, this sin, in its finished enormity, was confined to the first age of the gospel, namely, to the period of our Lord's ministry and that of his apostles. As soon as miracles, or the extraordinary powers of the Holy Ghost were withdrawn, blasphemy against the Holy Ghost ceased to exist in the literal sense and aggravated degree in which it was committed by the persons alluded to in the text.

But I come now to an inquiry more immediately practical and interesting, viz. in what respects we ourselves may approach to this sin and discover dispositions similar to those which produced it with all the aggravations now described. To remove the unreasonable apprehensions and fears of well-meaning persons who are naturally prone to despondency, I observe that it is absolutely impossible that they can have been guilty, or even that they can have approached in any degree to the similitude, of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. The character of the persons I have now in view forms a direct contrast to that which is described in the words of my text. The former are modest, fearful, and suspicious of themselves. The latter were daring, presumptuous, and secure. Melancholy persons are alarmed on the first surmise of guilt, and are smitten with pungent remorse when they have committed it. The blasphemers against the Holy Ghost never felt compunction and "had their consciences seared, as it were, with a hot iron." Persons prone to despondency are severe upon themselves, depreciate their best performances, and reckon up and exaggerate their slightest errors and infirmities. Those who resemble the blasphemous Pharisees are wise in their own eyes and commit iniquity with greediness; and though the whole world condemns them, they allow not the suspicion of guilt or danger to enter into their thoughts. Persons of a dejected spirit complain of the weakness of their faith; the constant language of their hearts is, "Lord, help my unbelief." Blasphemers against the Holy Ghost deliberately resolved against conviction. They turned, with scorn, from all the warnings and invitations of Providence. And however absurd or incredible, they would rather call in the influence of a demon than acknowledge the operations of the divine hand. To say all in a few words: Unpardonable sinners never suspect themselves, never make the least motion or take the least step towards repentance. They cannot be pardoned because they never wish to be pardoned.

But it is the duty of faithful preachers to warn and alarm the guilty as well as to comfort the

fearful and despondent. And for this purpose, I observe,

1. That persons who enjoy the privileges of the gospel, and who profess it and regularly comply with all the external duties it enjoins, while they are enslaved by sinful passions and habits are in a state of danger very like that which is described in my text. The resemblance between such persons and those who sinned against the Holy Ghost consists not so much in the specific nature of the sins which they have committed as in the consequences and effects of them. Persons who sin habitually and grievously under the light and profession of the gospel are, of all others, the most likely to continue in an unrepenting and, therefore, an unpardonable state.

Put [forward] the case, that any notorious sinner--an adulterer or a murderer--has been hitherto a stranger to the gospel. There may be some ground to hope that when he is made acquainted with the threatenings which it contains and the mercy which it reveals, conscience may be awakened, terror excited, hope cherished, and repentance and reformation accomplished. But when persons who have been educated in the profession of Christianity persevere in a course of sin; when the man who cheats and oppresses, who is false and deceitful, hears from the preacher condemnation denounced against fraud and unrighteousness, hears it without the slightest emotion of fear or danger and still continues to cheat and oppress; when the revengeful man hears that unless he forgives others their trespasses neither will his Father who is in heaven forgive him, and yet remains unrelenting and cruel; [then] what hope of repentance, what farther means can be used to convince and reclaim him?

Let not such persons add profaneness to all their other sins by saying that they trust to the grace of God. What is the grace of God? The holy Scriptures, the stated ordinances of religion. It is by the grace of God that you have this day one opportunity more of hearing your guilt and danger exposed. If there be more secret and extraordinary influences of divine grace, which is not to be doubted, to whom are these to be imparted? Not surely to the man who abuses and tramples upon that grace and those means of moral improvement, but to the man who occupies the talents which he already enjoys. You see then how much, with respect to danger, your guilt is like that of the Pharisees who blasphemed the Holy Ghost. But your case, though alarming, is not desperate. God is still waiting to be gracious. He still calls you to repentance. Flee as you would do from a house in flames. This moment you may escape; the next, your doom may be fixed.

2. Every attempt to evade and extinguish the evidence of religious truth, and to counteract and efface favorable thoughts of it which have already possessed the mind, bears no ambiguous resemblance to the sin committed by the obdurate unbelieving Pharisees. Of this description are all those persons who are deliberately and actively studious to eradicate every principle of religion and virtue planted in their breasts by the pious endeavors of their parents and teachers. They discover a perverse, unnatural propensity to disparage those arguments by which the fundamental principles of religion and virtue are supported. They do not allow the same credit to facts, or lay the same stress upon evidence, advanced in behalf of sacred truths which they readily do in forming their judgment and opinions concerning those events which enter into profane history of ancient date, or the ordinary affairs of life in their own times. They listen with a partial ear to the most superficial cavils and objections leveled against revealed religion. When such persons do not rest in solitary, silent apostasy, but become champions in the cause of infidelity and do all they can to

subvert the faith of others, they approach to a nearer resemblance of the blasphemers against the Holy Ghost. The absurd construction which they put upon our Lord's miracles was intended not only to vindicate their own stubborn incredulity, but to obstruct and overturn the faith of others. All, therefore, who calumniate [slander] the character of Jesus and vilify the evidence of his sacred mission with the diabolical purpose of destroying its credit and influence, discover the same radical antipathy to truth and are advancing rapidly towards that consummate depravity which brings on the incapacity of repentance, and excludes the divine forgiveness. Of such persons the apostle speaks in terms very like the awful words of my text. "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come; if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance: seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Heb. 6:4,5).

3. Uncharitable misconstruction of the good deeds of others bears a resemblance to the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.

The gifts of the Holy Ghost were twofold. Some of them extraordinary and transient, and others of them ordinary and permanent. The extraordinary gifts of the Spirit consisted in those miraculous powers which were conferred upon our Lord and his apostles, and were confined to the first age of the gospel. The ordinary gifts of the Spirit are those graces and virtues which are essential to the character of Christians in all successive ages of the world. Thus love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance are denoted the fruits of the Spirit. Now there are some persons of such a malignant disposition that they will not give credit for virtue to those very actions which bear all the marks of the sanctifying influence of the Divine Spirit. If a man be noted for charity, they will tell you that it does not proceed from principle but from vanity. Sobriety and temperance are ascribed to mean and selfish motives, regularity and exactness in performing the exterior duties of religion to hypocrisy and affectation. Ought it not to be matter of serious alarm to such uncharitable persons to observe a resemblance in their own temper to that of the Pharisees who ascribed the beneficent miracles of our Lord to the power of Beelzebub?

This is Sermon VII of *Sermons by Thomas Somerville* (Edinburgh: 1813). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.