

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE SPIRIT WILL NOT BE FORGIVEN

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### Matthew 12:31-32

One of the glories of the Christian faith is the emphasis that the Bible puts on the wideness of God's forgiveness. It is open for every man to receive. But the mercy of God has a limit. There is a kind of sin that cannot be forgiven. It is called by Jesus, 'The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.' For this, there is no forgiveness. Let's read the Lord's teaching on this subject.

*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.*

### Two kinds of blasphemy

This passage makes a sharp distinction between two types of blasphemy: there is the blasphemy against the Son of man and the blasphemy against the Spirit of God. The first sin is committed against the Son of man. Who is the Son of man? It is of course Jesus. Any blasphemy and sin against Jesus will be forgiven men. But the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. To blaspheme is to say bad things about a person. It is to slander, to blast the reputation of a person. When we put v. 31 and v. 32 side by side, we can see that the 'blasphemy against the Spirit' is defined as the action of 'speaking against the Holy Spirit.'

So all sins are forgivable, except one. The sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven. Before we begin to describe this terrible sin, we need first to explain why blasphemy against Jesus is forgivable whereas blasphemy against the Spirit is not. How is it that you can speak against the Son of man (and in fact, commit any sin) and still be forgiven but you cannot expect the same forgiveness when you sin against the Holy Spirit? On what basis can we make such a distinction? Don't you find that puzzling? Because when you speak against Jesus, are you not speaking against God? And if you are speaking against God, are you not speaking against the Holy Spirit as well? Then how do you explain that there is a difference between speaking against Jesus and speaking against the Holy Spirit? How is it that to blaspheme against Jesus does not incur as much guilt as to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit?

### A sin committed in ignorance

John the Baptist said to the people in John 1:26, 'There is someone standing among you whom you do not know.' Jesus is standing among the people, in flesh and blood, like any other human being, and people did not know who He is. Some people, through ignorance of Jesus, might speak evil of

Him. And a sin that is committed in ignorance of the true identity of Jesus is pardonable. Every sin against Jesus, including that of crucifying Him on the cross, can be forgiven. Remember the words of Jesus right after He was placed on the cross. *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do* (Luke 23:34). God can forgive them because they did not know what they were doing. They acted in ignorance. This point is very important to observe.

This means, in contrast, that the sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be committed ignorantly. When you commit that kind of sin, you are no longer in ignorance. So the difference here is between failure to recognize Jesus and deliberate rejection of Jesus once He is recognized. We will return to the sin against the Spirit in a moment.

So I can sin against Jesus ignorantly because I do not know who He is. The name of Jesus means nothing to me. I can despise the Christians. I can reject the church. I can say bad things against Christianity. And yet, forgiveness is still possible. That is exactly the experience of Paul. The apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:13 that he was very guilty of speaking against the Lord Jesus at some point in his life. He says, *Though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted Him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief*. Paul confesses to three sins: he blasphemed, he persecuted, and he insulted Jesus. Although he was guilty of all those sins, he was forgiven. Why? Because he acted ‘ignorantly in unbelief.’ Ignorance and unbelief were no excuses for what Paul did, but they were among the reasons why God could have mercy on him.

You see, one thing that Paul did not do was to blaspheme against the Spirit. His heart has always been open to God. He did not know that Jesus was the Christ. He really thought that he had to do what he did, and that in doing it, he did God good service. He had a zeal for God (Philippians 3:6) but not according to knowledge. It was a misguided zeal. In that sense, he acted ignorantly. Paul followed one important principle in his life, even before he became a Christian. And the principle was to always live in good conscience before God. He says in Acts 23:1, *Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day*. And he makes the same declaration in Acts 24:16. *I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men*.

## A spiritual receiver

This matter of the conscience is extremely important. We need to realize that the conscience is the means by which God can speak to human beings. What is the conscience? Simply stated, it is the inner sense of right and wrong. This is not something that comes from our education or our society. The conscience is an innate human faculty. Every human is born with a consciousness of right or wrong. That is why a person who does not know Christ can be very uncomfortable when he has done something bad. His conscience is his last link with God, even though he lives an ungodly life. In Romans 2:15, Paul connects the inner witness of conscience to God’s moral law written in every human heart. *For when Gentiles who do not have the law do instinctively the things of the law ... they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness*. This verse tells us that the non-Christian can do by nature the things of the law when he listens to his conscience.

The apostle Paul, even as a non-Christian, was one of those who let his conscience remain sensitive to God. This is the reason why God was able to speak to him so powerfully on the Damascus road. From the biblical point of view, it is clear that conversion has to involve the conscience of the person. If Paul had been insensitive to his conscience, he would not have been able to hear God’s voice. In the same way, God speaks to us today through our conscience.

This being said, we must be careful not to equate the conscience with the voice of God or the law of God. It is not always reliable. The conscience bears witness to the standards of the authorities that we recognize, but as with any witness, its testimony may be inaccurate. It may inadequately represent the standards from which it speaks, whether these standards are based on the Bible or not. Remember Paul’s misguided zeal. So the conscience is not the voice of God, but the voice of God can

be heard through our conscience. It functions like a spiritual radio, being able to receive the signals that God sends to us.

### **When the conscience is silenced**

When we violate our conscience, we feel uncomfortable. The discomfort comes from a deep sense of remorse, regret and guilt. But we don't have to listen to our conscience. It is possible to deliberately silence the voice of our conscience. We all have heard of criminals who seem to lack any moral sense. They continue to claim their innocence even after they are put into jail. These are extreme examples of people who have desensitized their conscience. It simply shows that when your conscience is suppressed, you can continue to sin and it is not going to bother you.

The Christian can dull his conscience too. Now, the Bible tells us that a clear conscience is very important for a person's faith and that it cannot be silenced without serious spiritual consequences. In this respect, Paul draws a close connection between faith and the conscience. In 1 Timothy 1:5, he says, *But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good **conscience** and a sincere **faith***. Love must be our ultimate goal in life. And this love comes from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith. Unless you have a pure heart, you cannot have a good conscience. And if you don't have a good conscience, how are you going to have a sincere faith? You cannot have a sincere faith when your conscience is regularly condemning you.

What then is the danger of not having a good conscience? Let's continue to read this passage. In vv. 18-19, Paul says this. *This command I entrust to you, Timothy, ... that by them (by following the prophecies) you may fight the good fight, keeping **faith** and a good **conscience** (notice again the link between faith and conscience), which some have rejected and **suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith***. Some men made shipwrecked of their faith by not keeping a good conscience. Here we have an image that compares the course of faith to navigation. These people have shipwrecked their faith in the same way a ship strikes a reef and sinks. It is completely destroyed.

This is a frightening warning. 'Some have rejected their conscience.' The Greek word for 'rejected (*apostasimoi*)' is a strong one. It means 'to push away with force.' It is a willful act. When a person continues to push his conscience away, something terrible will eventually happen: his faith will be ruined. It will be broken to pieces and destroyed. Faith will be lost. You make shipwreck of your faith. In other words, when you destroy your conscience, you have destroyed your faith. Notice that you cannot wreck a ship if you don't have a ship to wreck. In the same way, you cannot make shipwreck of your faith if you did not have any faith in the first place.

### **A deliberate act**

Let's go back to the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Some people have taught that this sin can only be committed by Christians. The non-Christians, who don't know the Holy Spirit, cannot commit this sin. Well, I disagree with this view. The sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be limited to Christians only. Even if a person does not know the Holy Spirit, he can still commit this sin.

Here is why. Notice that the warning is addressed primarily to the Pharisees. In v. 24, it is the Pharisees who said, *This man (Jesus) casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons*. It was in reaction to this false accusation that Jesus talked about the unforgivable sin. If there is a group of people who were guilty of that sin, it is the Pharisees. Obviously we cannot consider the Pharisees in general as believers. Yes, they were very religious people. They knew about the Spirit of God but they were not saved. Here the Lord Jesus accuses them of being evil, calling them a 'generation of vipers' in v. 34. And it is to these Pharisees that the Lord Jesus gave the warning that they were on the verge of committing a sin for which no pardon is possible.

How could the Pharisees be guilty of that sin? In order to answer that question, we need to look at the gospel of Mark which has a similar saying concerning the unforgivable sin. Jesus says in Mark 3:29, *Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.* You will remember that in Matthew, we have the statement, *It shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come.* This phrase has exactly the same meaning as the one in Mark. He is guilty of an eternal sin. An eternal sin then is a sin that has no forgiveness, either in this present age or in the future for eternity.

Mark tells us why the Pharisees and the scribes were in danger of eternal damnation. V. 30: *Because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."* By saying that Jesus has an unclean spirit, they have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. Notice that there is no direct reference to the Holy Spirit by name. How then did they blaspheme against the Spirit? They attacked the Holy Spirit by implication. They attributed the work of Christ to the devil, calling the Holy Spirit an unclean spirit by implication.

Now, why is it that if you do this, you are guilty of an eternal sin? The answer is simple. Do you think that the Pharisees and the scribes were speaking out of ignorance? No. They rejected the truth in full awareness of what Jesus was doing. They thoughtfully and willfully rejected the work of the Spirit even though there can be no other explanation of Jesus' exorcism than that. They knew that Christ' miracle was done by the power of God but they maliciously and deliberately imputed it to Satan.

### **Those whose consciences are seared**

By 'deliberate', we mean that it expresses an attitude of the heart by which they have already made a choice on which they stand. The charge against Jesus of being in league with the devil reveals that they had deliberately made their choice to take Satan's side. That is why Jesus goes on to speak about good and evil from v. 33 to v. 37. This is what He says.

*Matthew 12.33. 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.*

Notice the contrast between good and evil in this passage. A tree good or a tree bad. A fruit good or a fruit bad. A good man or an evil man. A good treasure or an evil treasure. The point here is that there is a choice to make between good or evil. You are either on the side of good or on the side of evil. In v. 34, it says, *For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.* The words express what is in your heart. They indicate whether in your heart there is an abundance of good or there is an abundance of evil. The Pharisees sinned because they said something which expressed the attitude of the heart. What was the attitude of their heart? They loved evil rather than good. Notice this strange expression in v. 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.* 'Evil treasure.' How can evil be a treasure? The evil man treasures evil. That is why he stores it up. You only treasure what you love. You don't treasure what you don't love. As strange as it may be, people do choose evil. As we read in John 3, men love darkness rather than light. And gradually, as you accept more and more evil in your life, storing up evil rather than good, your heart becomes harder and harder. After a period of time, you no longer hear your conscience anymore. That is when a person is in danger of ruining his faith.

The mighty works done by the Spirit demonstrated the arrival of the kingdom of God (Matthew 12:28). The Pharisees who dared to attribute these works to Satan were not ignorant. Instead, they ignored their conscience and made up their minds not to believe. In doing so, they blasphemed against the Holy Spirit.

Who then can commit the unpardonable sin? It is the person whose conscience is seared. That is the word that Paul uses in 1 Timothy 4:1-2. *Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared.* This word ‘seared’ means that something is ‘branded’, ‘burned’, or ‘destroyed’. And a conscience that is destroyed leaves no more room for the Holy Spirit to speak to that person. It has become insensitive to the convictions of God’s Spirit. If a person does not hear his conscience anymore, he will never ask for forgiveness. And if he never asks for forgiveness, his sins can never be forgiven. Therefore we can say that the unforgivable sin is the searing of the conscience.

### **Beyond remedy**

The word ‘conscience’ does not appear in the OT. The idea of the unforgivable sin, however, is certainly there. Let us look at two passages in the OT which make reference to it. The first one is in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16.

*2Chronicles 36:15. And the Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, **until there was no remedy.***

Notice those last words, ‘until there was no remedy,’ until there was no pardon for them. The nation of Judah was evil. But God was patient. In His mercy, God sent them numerous warnings through the prophets. However, no one listened. The people despised the word of the Lord and mocked His prophets. God’s anger against Judah reached ‘a point of no return.’ Judah’s evil became unpardonable. That is when the king of Babylon came and completely destroyed Judah. Those who escaped from the sword were sent into exile to Babylon.

‘Until there was no remedy.’ The gravity of these words is also expressed in Proverbs 29:1 where we read this.

*Proverbs 29:1. A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken **beyond remedy.***

Notice that this person has been reproofed many times, and like the nation of Judah, he would not listen. He rejected all admonitions. He had a stiff neck, a hardened heart, a seared conscience. All these terms are synonymous. In the end, such a person will be broken beyond remedy. The word ‘broken’ is used elsewhere in Hebrew in reference to a potter’s vessel that is broken into pieces. These pieces can never be put together again. It is beyond remedy. His sins can no longer be pardoned.

The mercy of God is great. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He prefers mercy to judgment. But when a person keeps hardening his heart against God’s will, ignoring the voice of his conscience, this individual will reach a point of no return, a condition of spiritual abandonment from which he cannot be recovered. At that point, he cannot be convicted of sin anymore. And because he lacks a sense of sin, he cannot repent and seek forgiveness. Ultimately only God can know when a person’s denying of his conscience has reached this stage of irreversible rejection.

In this lesson, we stressed the need to have a good conscience toward God. Let us always be teachable, having a conscience that is open to God. We want to keep our conscience pure. We say to Him, 'Lord, if I have said anything wrong, if I have done anything wrong, You know my heart, I beg of You, teach me what it is. If I committed a sin in my ignorance, in my foolishness, in my weakness, show me my fault. Speak to my conscience. And when I am convicted of sin, I will crawl back to You on my hands and knees. I will repent and I will ask for Your forgiveness.' When you have this attitude before God, you will never commit the unforgivable sin.