

Prayer

We worship You; Holy and precious Lord!
We see You in the light of day and the beauty of life
We are amazed at the love and passion You place within our hearts
We know You have blessed us with many gifts and graces
We accept with great joy Your gift of eternal salvation
We praise You, great and glorious Lord!
AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Life at Home

Each of us obtains various items to make up our home, the essential things of life, and those that reflect our work and interests. Ask the Lord to bless your home and all in it.

On-going prayers

- Pray for people who struggle with incapacity
- Give thanks for the benefits of the technology we use
- Pray for those suffering because of poverty

Meditation

Who will dare to contend with the One who made everything!
Who can answer the questions posed by the Lord? He asks,

Where were you whilst creation took its form;
Whilst rocks split apart, and air, sea and sky were made?
Tell me if you have understanding, explain if you know!

Who determined the parameters of the Universe;
And created flesh and blood out of soulless substances?
Tell me if you have understanding, explain if you know!

How can you know your future when the present is a mystery,
And from where does the scientist or artist gain insight?
Tell me if you have understanding, explain if you know!

When will all people find joy, love and peace on earth,
And when will sin, sorrow and sickness be overcome for good?
Tell me if you have understanding, explain if you know!

The Lord has asked, and demands we give an answer;
Or stop suggesting that by using His gifts, we are greater than He!

Bible Study - Matthew 12:31,32

³¹ Therefore I tell you, all of your sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² And whoever says a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Review

This passage is the famous text in which Jesus speaks about the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'. It is a much misunderstood text, but it makes a serious point which needs to be understood, so today's study is limited to these two verses.

At the end of a difficult confrontation with the Pharisees concerning the healing of a blind and mute demoniac, Jesus was horrified at the opposition He was receiving, and said bluntly, 'He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.' (12:30). As an aside, please note that these words were spoken in the teeth of fierce opposition, and bear no comparison to the much later incident in Jesus' life where he explains to the disciples that they should not rebuke others who were casting out demons but who were not part of their 'group' (Mark 9:38).

Jesus faced opposition because He had a clear understanding of the works of evil, the authority structure of Satan and demons, and their total opposition to the Kingdom of God (see yesterday's study). The Pharisees had already placed themselves at the front of the opposition to Jesus, and although only Jesus could at that time perceive it, they had effectively sided with Satan against the will and purposes of God. If we are to understand what Jesus said about a 'sin against the Holy Spirit', then the opposition of the Pharisees is the clear background to this teaching. It gives us no grounds to suggest that such a sin is something we might expect to encounter in the course of normal life today, and I can only begin by saying that the vast majority of those who have feared they have committed such a sin have almost certainly not. Their concern at the possibility is proof enough that they seek the Kingdom, and are not the agents of evil suggested by this saying.

Verses 31 and 32 are in fact similar but different statements of Jesus which are unique in scripture, being parallels with two different sayings in Mark 3:28,29 and Luke 12:10. They follow directly on from everything that has just been said by Jesus, and it is only when you take them out of this context that they can be misinterpreted. Each phrase is quite difficult to interpret within Mark and Luke, whereas here in Matthew they do make sense. The first saying (12:31) contrasts all sin with blasphemy against the Spirit, and the second (12:32) contrasts words against the 'Son of Man' with speaking against the Spirit. In each case the first are forgivable, but the second is not. Initially, this may seem clear, but there are many different opinions of what this all means!

I will mention one interpretation which is influential but with which I disagree because it can lead to difficulties. It begins by suggesting that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are the same and represent the divine, and concludes that together, verses 31 and 32 mean that anything you say against others can be forgiven, but any blasphemy against God is unforgivable. The trouble with this interpretation is obvious; if this is the case, then vast numbers of people have committed the unforgivable sin and stand condemned to hell with a permanent judgement they cannot reverse, and largely because of something they say have said without being clear about its implications. I just do not believe this to be the case.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit both have different characteristics within the Godhead; Jesus is God Himself come down to earth for our salvation, but the Holy Spirit is the power of God constantly at work in the world. If you accept this, then both sentences are different ways of saying the same thing. Whatever sins and blasphemies are committed (even, I suggest, through some genuine misunderstanding of God or Jesus), then the Lord is able and willing to forgive. But the 'sin against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven' is what the Pharisees bordered upon doing in their challenge of Jesus in the previous story. If we look back at this carefully, then what they did was to describe the work of the Holy Spirit as the work of Satan. It seems to me therefore that the sin against the Spirit is committed when someone maliciously interprets what is of God as of evil, knowing what they do and being content in it.

I think it is extremely unlikely that any of us will have inadvertently committed this unforgivable sin. These words of Jesus are powerful, and certainly stand as a warning that it is possible for people to oppose God's work with malicious intent and cause great harm. Those who do this stand condemned as much by their own words and actions, and Jesus' pronouncement of the unforgivable sin confirms this condemnation. Even so, God alone is the Judge of all people. He is also the Judge of the Pharisees in this story, and of whether or not anyone has ever committed this sin; apart, that is, from Satan himself.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group any examples you can think of which illustrate the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'.
2. What is the difference between 'God' and 'Jesus' and the 'Holy Spirit' as illustrated in this text?
3. How can we help those who believe they have committed the unforgivable sin to be freed from the bondage of such a thought?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The sin against the Spirit is an emotive issue for some, and my own views have been coloured by trying to help people who fear they may have committed such a sin. However, I do believe that the sin is specifically linked to Jesus' observations of what the Pharisees were doing. By the end of Matthew, Jesus all but condemns the Pharisees completely (Matt 23), and this confirms my opinion.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Fast and pray for those who are vulnerable within the church and also those who are on the edge of the church. Pray that they will not be misled into believing that God is judging them when He is not, and that they will know how the love of Christ removes sin.*
- *Discuss this topic with someone close to you, and bounce your own ideas about it off them. You may well find that they have different views, so be prepared to engage with some theological debate!*

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father; come into my life and do those miracles of grace which help me to know Your hand is guiding me and leading me. And if I am not 'right' with You, bring me to a place of repentance where I can be set free, and therefore find glorious liberty: AMEN