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**Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit in the Synoptics:  
An Arbitrary Limit to God’s forgiveness?**

Dr. Laura Maleya-Mautsa, Extraordinary Senior Lecturer North  
West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa  
Adjunct Faculty, Africa Leadership and Management Academy  
Harare, Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See [lauramautsa@gmail.com](mailto:lauramautsa@gmail.com) and [www.NWU.ac.za](http://www.NWU.ac.za).

### **Abstract**

This article examines the Synoptic gospels to explore whether the forgiveness of God is randomly applied in the case of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is done by surveying the background of the Gospels to establish possible influences on the way the first hearers/readers may have understood God's forgiveness and the unpardonable sin. An examination of the key words, 'blasphemy' and forgiveness reveal the gravity of the sin against the Holy Spirit, leading to eternal damnation. Scriptures demonstrate clearly accounts where blasphemy is forgiven. While God's forgiveness seems limitlessly extended to all people, not all people receive it. In the case of blasphemy sometimes God will forgive, sometimes he won't? Is the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit a limit set by God, or is it a limit set by man?

### **Introduction**

Modern society has evolved socially to the place where blasphemy does not hold as much attention or carry as much threat as it did in the ancient Judeo-Christian world. Much less, is the fear of God and his punishment of those guilty of blasphemy. Enlightenment, secular authorities have come to regard blasphemy less severely as they have not generally considered criminal punishment appropriate for an offense against God, and its offensiveness to other people has come to appear less seriously. Increasing respect for freedom of other religions and of speech has also lessened the inclination to make blasphemy the subject for legal action (Early, 1979 p. 56). However, this development does not prohibit the examination of the matter of forgiveness and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. All synoptic Gospels record the twin sayings of Jesus that whoever blasphemes or speaks against the Son of man (Mark has "sons of men") will be forgiven. But the person who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven (Mar 3:28-30; Mat 12: 31, 32; Luk 12:10).

The view that it is God's prerogative to forgive is clear (Psa 103:3; Exo 34:6-7; Psa 130:4; Isa 43:25, 44:22; Dan 9:9). This attribute of God as one who forgives sin is pivotal in the redemption history throughout the Bible. The mission of Jesus into the world hinges on this attribute and is seen in John the Baptist's declaration of Christ, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Joh 1:29). The person of God the Father, God the Son and

God the Holy Spirit also referred to as the Trinity presumes the Godhead three in one. How then, is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable whereas blasphemy against the Son is considered forgivable (Mar 3:28-30; Mat 12:31, 32)? In the case of blasphemy sometimes God will forgive, sometimes he won't? Another issue to consider is whether blasphemy against the Holy Spirit a limit set by man to God's forgiveness?

This study explores the synoptic gospels to establish whether God's forgiveness is arbitrary in the case of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

### **A. Problem Statement**

The title of this paper makes direct reference to the key question discussed in this paper: Is God's forgiveness arbitrarily limited when it comes to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit In the synoptic Gospels?

In answering the key question, the following related questions are discussed:

1. What is the context of the synoptic gospels
2. What is God's forgiveness and how is it applied?
3. What are limits to God's forgiveness?
4. Is God's forgiveness arbitrary?
5. What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?
6. Is God's non-forgiveness towards blasphemy against the Holy Spirit an arbitrary limit?
  - a. Blasphemy against Holy Spirit, against the Son of Man
  - b. Is blasphemy a once off event or a continual lifestyle?

### **B. The Synoptic context: A Background**

Even though all synoptic Gospels are a record of the narratives of the life and ministry of Jesus, a closer examination of their contexts reveals differences that could impact on how the forgiveness of God is understood.

#### **1. Background of the Gospel of Mark**

Church tradition cites John Mark as the author of the Gospel of Mark (Mar 1:36; 5:37; 11:20-26; 13:3), who in his work wished to bring Peter the apostle forward as his authority (Hendricksen, 1975:8). Mark is called disciple, follower, and interpreter of Peter. The endearing address by Peter "Marcus, my son" (1 Pe 5:13) attests

to a close relationship. In addition, there is no clear declaration that Mark himself was a disciple of Jesus or an eyewitness of what he records.

Mark is a Gospel of deeds. The narrative in the Gospel of Mark is commonly terse and concise and at times, has a multitude of details crowded in, and is described as compact vivid and orderly (Hendricksen, 1975, p. 18). That the Gospel according to Mark was for Gentiles can be seen from the translation of the Aramaic expressions in Mark 3:17 (Boanerges), Mark 5:41 (Talitha cumi), Mark 7:11 (Corban), Mar 10:46 (Bartimaeus), Mark 14:36 (Abba), Mar 15:22 (Golgotha); It is also seen in the explanation of Jewish customs in Mark 14:12 and Mark 15:42 (Hendricksen, 1975:13). In addition, the fact that the Law is not mentioned and the Old Testament is only once quoted in Mark's own narrative is another indicator that the first readers of the Gospel may not have had the background knowledge of the God of the Jews. The notion of the forgiveness of God in Mark 3:28-29, may not have been easily understood by this Gentile, largely Roman hearers as forgiveness was not a pagan virtue (Morro, 1982:343). This possible background may have influenced how the first hearers/recipients understood the unpardonable sin (Mar 3:28-29). The suggestion that the Gospel according to Mark was possibly written for Romans is seen in the explanation of a Greek term by a Latin in Mark 12:42, the prevalence of works of power, the emphasis on authority (Mark 2:10), patience and heroic endurance (Mar 10:17, ff) and the recognition of Caesar was not Jewish but Roman. The Roman Imperial Rule and Judicial system over Israel would have a significant impact on how forgiveness was understood, much more God's forgiveness. It was anticipated that making the Christian confession made one vulnerable to both Jewish and Roman 'justice' (Nolland, 1993:681). The first hearer/reader of the Gospel of Mark with this background may have had some differences from the first recipients of the Gospel according to Matthew.

## **2. Background of the Gospel of Matthew**

The Gospel of Matthew is dated AD 85 with Syria as its suggested place of origin (Combrink, 1983:70). This study aligns itself with the church tradition that designates Matthew the apostle and former tax collector as the author of the gospel (Combrink,

1983:69; Hartin, 1998:389). Taking Matthew the apostle as the author of the gospel of Matthew, the socio-historic context shows that the Matthean community was in a mixed environment, mostly Jewish and Gentile. The use of Aramaic words and phrases (Mat 27:46) suggests that the author is of Semitic background. The Matthean community most probably had to resolve its situation and its approach to mainstream Judaism (Combrink, 1983:70). It follows then that the first readers/hearers of the Gospel, and in particular the Matthew 12:31-32 exhortation would have understood the meanings of blasphemy and the forgiveness of God from a Judaist point of view.

The extensive quotation of the Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment in the gospel strongly indicate that the author may have been a Jewish Christian (Combrink, 1983:68). Matthew's view on God's forgiveness and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would be heavily influenced by Jewish thoughts, belief and practice. Although the forgiveness of God was sought and understood, human forgiveness differed from divine forgiveness. In every case of human forgiveness, the one asking forgiveness is in a position of subservience, and is petitioning for that to which he has no just right (Gen 50:17; Exo 10:17; 1 Sa 15:25 and 25:28). The Imprecatory Psalms attest the fact that forgiveness of enemies was not always esteemed as a virtue by Israel. They could appeal to the law which enjoined upon them to seek neither the peace nor the prosperity of their avowed enemies (Deu 23:6).

### **3. Background of the Gospel of Luke**

The gospel of Luke on the other hand was written with a Greek readership in mind (Willmington, 1999:142). This is evident from the attention the author gives to the Greek language. Luke's gospel is the first of a two-volume work addressed to a friend, Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Act 1:1). Luke wrote for people outside Palestine who were at some distance from the ministry of Jesus – Gentile Christians (Kealy 1979:77; Fitzmyer 1981:57). Luke's community is evidently an urban Christian community in one of the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire.

The author of Luke and Acts is narrowed down by Church tradition to Luke the physician (Kealy 1979:63; Fitzmyer 1981:35; Hendriksen 1978:3). He is described as the 'beloved doctor' and a co-worker with Paul in prison (Col 4:10-14). Luke was a Syrian from

Antioch, by profession a doctor, the disciple of the apostles, and later a follower of Paul until his martyrdom (Fitzmyer 1981:9). As far as the authorship of the Gospel of Luke goes, the only clue of date lies in probable date of Acts. Since Acts ends with Paul still in prison before his first release in AD 62, we assume Luke was written before that date 58-60 CE (Willmington 1999:142). Of the three Gospels, Luke's record of God's forgiveness and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Luk 12:10) is the briefest. It is possible that since Luke was writing to primarily non Jewish recipient, the historical information in the prophecies or the culture of the Jews would have been unfamiliar to them. Forgiveness was not a pagan virtue. The large-souled man might disregard offenses in cases where he considered them beneath his notice, but to forgive was weak-spirited (Morro, 1982:343). One of the key approaches in understanding the purpose of the Gospel according to Luke is, the expression of the Holy Spirit as power, and experienced as the compassionate power to heal the sick, to drive out demons, and to transform people so that they are oriented to God (Isaak, 2006). This focus gives significance to the irreversible verdict to the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit (Luk 12:31, 32).

#### **4. Summary**

The background of the synoptic gospels contexts of the forgiveness of God and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit are couched in the ministry of Jesus particularly the controversy with the teachers of the Law. The background reveals the common record of the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the synoptic gospels. It is also reveals the different backgrounds of the first readers/hearers which could both impact on the authors' intentions and the hearers' reception of God's forgiveness. With the recipients of the gospels of Mark largely Roman and Luke largely Greek, the concept of forgiveness was not necessarily a highly held virtue. In contrast, the recipients in the Gospel of Matthew who were possibly influenced by Judaism had different understandings of divine and human forgiveness. These findings need to be considered in the examination of forgiveness and in particular God's forgiveness to determine whether this forgiveness is arbitrary or not.

### C. What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness as a concept is utilized both in the Old and New Testament writings in the Bible. A perusal of the Old and New Testament reveals several aspects of the meaning of forgiveness.

In the Old Testament the graciousness of God in showing divine forgiveness defined in the Hebrew words *Kāphar* (Deu 21:8; Psa 78:38; Jer 18:23) and *šālah* (Num 30:5, 8; 30:12; 1 Ki 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 50). Whereas *nāsā'* is used in both divine (Exo 32:32; Num 14:19; Jos 24:19; Psa 25:18; 32:1; 32:5; 99:8; Isa 2:9), it is also attributed to human forgiveness (Gen 50:17; Exo 10:17; 1 Sa 25:28). Prayers for forgiveness are frequent (Exo 32:11; 1 Ki 8:46; Neh 9:2; Psa 51:130). A frequent motive for forgiveness is the “appeal to Yahweh’s honour” (Bourke 1979:1377). If Yahweh punishes his people too severely or too long, and still more if he refuses to forgive them altogether, the Gentiles will say that it is because he is too weak to fulfill his promises to them (Exo 32:12). However, one sees forgiveness exemplified in different accounts for example, Joseph forgiving his brothers after years of separation (Gen 50:20-21), David when King Saul sought to kill him (1 Sa 24:7), in his handling of his army chiefs (2 Sa 18:5) and when Shimei is pardoned after he had cursed the King (2 Sa 19:23) all go to show that extending forgiveness was also seen as a virtue.

At Qumran slander of one’s fellow was forgivable after penance, but slander against the community brought permanent expulsion from it (1QS 7: 15-17)

The Greek words for forgiveness/forgive are: ἀπολύειν *apoluein*, χαρίζεσθαι *charizesthai*, ἄφεσις *aphesis*, πάρεσις *paresis* (Morro, 1982:343).

In the New Testament the Greek word *apoluein* denotes the release from sin (Luke 6:37), it is used in the sense of the analogy of sin to debt. It implies the avoidance of making judgment that would necessitate either the punishment or forgiveness of an offense if one is found guilty. It has the meaning of “forgiveness” in 2 Maccabees 12:45. The concept of God’s forgiveness is seen as being distinct from man’s forgiveness. It takes the form of remission of sin as well as the blotting out of man’s sin. Remission (Mat 26:28; Mar 1:4; Luk 1:77; 24:47; Act 2:38; 10:43; Heb 9:22; 10:18) and blotting out of sin (Psa 51:1, 9; Isa 43:25; Jer 18:23; Act 3:19) are synonyms of

forgiveness, and to understand it fully such words as save, justify, reconcile and atonement should also be considered (Morro, 1982:340).

Another understanding of the word forgiveness is seen in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Paul uses the Greek word *paresis* meaning the “putting aside,” “disregarding,” “pretermission” of sin (Rom 3:25). This meaning suggests that even though the sin has been forgiven or dealt with, there was a certain incompleteness expressed in the fact that whenever sin was committed, a sacrifice had to be made to atone for the sin.

The Greek word *Charizesthai*, which highlights God’s grace is another definition of forgiveness. *Charizesthai* is only found in the writings of Luke and Paul, with the meaning “to forgive sins” (2 Co 2:7; 12:13; Eph 3:2; Col 2:13; 3:13).

The word for forgiveness that is used in the the synoptic texts (Mat 12:31,32; Mar 3:28, Luk 10:12) is ἄφεσις or its declensions. The meaning of forgiveness here is, “putting away” completely and unreservedly (Morro, 1982 p. 340). In the event of an offense, there is judgment, “and just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Heb 9:27-28). In order to avert the judgment on sin, Christ was set forth as propitiation and God's disregard of sin *paresis* became a real forgiveness ἄφεσις; as seen in Act 14:16; 17:30. The meaning of ἄφεσις, forgiveness is to pardon, or to remove the guilt resulting from wrongdoing (Louw, et al., 1988:503)<sup>2</sup>. The semantic definition of the word is found in the fortieth Domain which is designated ‘Reconciliation, Forgiveness’ (Louw, et al., 1988a p. 502). The preceding domain is designated as ‘Hostility, Strife’ (39) and the subsequent domains are ‘Behaviour and Related States’ (41) and ‘Perform, Do’ (42). These domains have to do with dynamics in personal relationships and activity. The position of ἄφεσις, in domain 40 is the first of 13 definitions in sub domain B (40.8-40.13). The meaning of ἄφεσις has to do with the removing of

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<sup>2</sup> (Louw and Nida 1988b)The event of wrong doing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned. To forgive, therefore, means essentially to remove the guilt resulting from wrongdoing. Some languages make a clear distinction between guilt and sin, and terms for forgiveness are therefore related to guilt and not to the wrongdoing. Therefore, "to forgive sins" is literally 'to forgive guilt' The terms for 'forgiveness are often literally "to wipe out,' 'to blot out.' or 'to do away with,' it is obviously not possible to blot out or to wipe out an even, but it is possible to remove or obliterate the guilt. .

guilt resulting from wrong doing (Louw, et al., 1988a:503). It is well illustrated in the phrase ‘forgive us the wrongs that we have done’ (Mat 6:12). Jesus’ words, “my blood ... which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mat 26:28), highlights the way that the forgiveness of sin is realized. In the pouring death and resurrection of Christ provides the basis for the act of forgiveness that can be a point of reference for those who are His disciples. This view also introduces the basis for the exhortation to ‘forgive and you will be forgiven (by God) (Luk 6:37). The focus of the meaning of ἄφεσις is upon the guilt of the wrongdoer and not upon the wrongdoing itself. The event of wrong doing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned. To forgive therefore is to remove the guilt resulting from the wrong doing (Louw, et al., 1988a:503).

It is extremely important to note that focus in the meanings of *apheimi* *aphesis* and *aphesis* is upon the guilt of the wrong doer and not upon the wrong doing itself. The event of wrong doing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned.

Forgiveness always presupposes sincere repentance on the part of the sinner, a radical change of heart, a turning away from sin, and an acknowledgement of the wrongness of his ways which, is usually made of in public (Hos 14:3, 1Ki 8:47-8). Forgiveness is the wiping out of an offense from memory it can be affected only by the one affronted. Once the sin is eradicated, the offense no longer conditions the relationship between the two (Bourke 1979, 1377).

Jesus Christ taught that forgiveness is a duty that should have no set limits to its extent (Luk 17:4) and it must be granted without reserve. One can argue that this example focuses on wrongs committed against each other as opposed to wrongs committed against God. The implication is that there is no wrong so gross nor so often repeated that it is beyond forgiveness (Mar 3:28). Jesus’ answer to Peter that one should forgive not merely seven times in a day, but seventy times seven (Mat 18:21-22), not only shows that He thought of no limit to one's forgiveness, but that the principle could not be reduced to a definite formula (Morro, 1982:343). Yet in the same breath postulates that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable (Mar 3:29).

#### **D. What Is Blasphemy?**

The saying about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has been the subject of much debate in New Testament scholarship. In classical Greek βλασφημία, primarily meant the “defamation” or “evil-speaking” in general, which, also implied, “impious and irreverent speech against God” (Rees, 1979:521-522). Elsewhere βλασφημία means to speak against someone in such a way as to harm or injure his or her reputation (occurring in relation to persons as well as to divine beings) to revile, to defame, to blaspheme (Louw, et al., 1988b:434). One way in which, blasphemy was used in speaking of ‘defaming God was by claiming some kind of equality with God. Any such statement was regarded by the Jews of biblical times as being harmful and injurious to the nature of God (Louw & Nida 1988b:434).

In the Old Testament, cursing God is prohibited (Exo 22:27; Lev 24:15-16). The punishment for the culprit was that his family would not be touched, as in the Assyrian Law (Westbrook, 1989:549). The punishment meted to a person who blasphemed God was death (Lev 24:11, 16). Examples of blasphemy include Naboth who blasphemed God and the king (1 Ki 21:10, 13); Senna-cherib who defied Yahweh (2 Ki 19:6, 22; Isa 37:6, 23). Idolatry as blasphemy against Yahweh is also seen in Isaiah 65:7. In ancient Judaism words and deeds that hurt God’s honour and injure his holiness were considered blasphemy. Each blasphemy against God was considered a crime worthy of death (Lev 24:10-23). The law of punishment in the Mishnah upheld the death penalty as applying only if the blasphemer had cursed God by clearly pronouncing his name (m. Sanh. 7:5). This limited definition was not valid in the time of Jesus (Hofius, 1994:219-20). However, there are a significant number of instances related to blasphemy recorded in the New Testament.

In the New Testament βλασφημία appears 56 times. The teachers of the Law accused Jesus of blasphemy and alleged that he was usurping the authority of God (Mat 9:3; Mar 2:7; Luk 5:21), claiming to be the Messiah, the son of God (Mat 26:65; Mar 14:64), or that he was making Himself God (Joh 10:33, 36). For these reasons they sought to kill him and they used this charge to have him crucified (Luke 23:2).

In the Early Church blasphemy against Jesus Christ is seen in Saul's efforts to make the Christians he persecuted blaspheme against their Lord (Act 26:11). This in itself made Paul a blasphemer (1 Ti 1:13). In addition, blasphemy could also mean evil-speaking generally, seen when the Jews contradicted Paul and blasphemed (Act 13:45; 18:6). The essence of blasphemy is couched in the sinful nature of a person (Mat 15:19; Mar 7:22; Col 3:8). A lifestyle of continual rejection of God's Law as seen in the case of Hymeneus and Alexander they are said to have blasphemed Christ by professing faith and living unworthily of it (1 Ti 1:20). Apart from that, blasphemy is also cited as speaking against a heathen goddess: the town clerk of Ephesus repels the charge that Paul and his companions were blasphemers of Diana (Act 19:37).

Blasphemy against God is expressed in different ways in both the Old (2 Ki 19:6, 22; Isa 37:6, 23) and New Testaments such as uttering impious words (Rev 13:1, Rev 13:5, Rev 13:6; Rev\_16:9, Rev 16:11, Rev 16:21; Rev 17:3); and "conduct unworthy of God" or "that denies Christ's power or his existence", so that blasphemy is always sin directed at God or any form of deity by Jews (Rom 2:24) and Christians (1 Ti 6:1, 20; Tit 2:5). This awareness of the gravity of the sin of blasphemy raises the question as to whether there are limits to God's forgiveness, particularly in the case of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as it is recorded in the Synoptic gospels (Mat 12: 31-32; Mar 3:29; Luk 12:10).

**E. Is the Limit of Forgiveness on Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit in the Synoptic Arbitrary? Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29 and Luke 12:10**

Matthew 12:31-32 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	Mark 3:28-29 28 I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. 29 But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin:	Luke 12:10 10 And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.
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either in this age or in the age to come.		
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In Matthew and Mark the blasphemy controversy is prompted by the allegation of the Pharisees that Jesus casts out devils by Beelzebub. The general idea is that to attribute an evil source acts that are clearly those of the Holy Spirit, to call good evil, is blasphemy against the Spirit, and sin that will not be pardoned (Rees 1979:522).

Mk 3: 28. I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.

Matthew 12:31, 32a. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven,

Luke 12:10a. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven,

In these words spoken by Jesus in his self designation as the Son of man, the extension of forgiveness to those who offend and ask forgiveness is clear. Almost from the onset of his earthly ministry Jesus claims and exercises power of forgiveness, vindicating his claim by healing the sick (Mat 9:2; 2:5). Forgiveness of sins is, in fact, an integral and primary element in the work of redemption. Jesus' forgiveness presupposes not merely the dispositions of sincere and humble repentance, but also faith in Jesus himself and in his power to impart God's forgiveness (Bourke, 1979 p. 1377). Someone never exposed to Christ's divine power and presence might reject Him in ignorance and be forgiven, if the unbelief gives way to genuine repentance (MacArthur, 2006). Even a Pharisee such as Saul of Tarsus could be forgiven for speaking "against the Son of man" or persecuting His followers, because his unbelief stemmed from ignorance (1 Ti 1:13). One might argue that the extension of forgiveness by Jesus is to all. The "whosoever" highlights the absence of any discrimination with regards to the offender. Jesus is possibly appealing to the Pharisees understanding that opposition and offending Jesus as man, was a plausible human dynamic. "A distinction is made between Christ's other acts and those which manifestly reveal the Holy Spirit in Him, and between slander directed against Him personally as He appears in His ordinary acts, and that which is aimed at those acts in which the Spirit is manifest"

(Morro, 1982:343). For those sins against the Son of man, the extension of forgiveness is possible.

The ‘shall speak a word,’ figuratively implies whatever is said, whether in few words or many. The complete picture therefore is that of anyone who says or does anything to the Son of man will be forgiven.

Matthew 32b. but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come.

Mk 3:29. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin:

Luke 12:10b. but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

The sin against the Son of man is forgivable, but now the focus is specifically on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Immediately a question is raised as to why the change in the conditions for forgiveness? The offense of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not just an utterance, but those who know His claims are true and reject Him anyway sin “against the Holy Spirit,” because it is the Spirit who testifies of Christ and makes his truth known to us (Joh 15:26; 16:14-15). No forgiveness is possible for these Pharisees who witness His miracles first hand, know the truth of His claims and still blaspheme the Holy Spirit (Heb 6:4-6; 10:29), because they have already rejected the fullest possible revelation (MacArthur, 2006:1146).

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is understood as rejection of the manifest activity of God. It indicates a deliberate refusal to acknowledge God’s power, a totally perverted orientation, that calls evil good and good evil (Rom 3:8; 1 Co 10:30; Isa 5:20). This is what the Pharisees were doing when they attributed Jesus’ healings to satanic power (France, 1985:210). But the punishment for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not only on earth but extends to the age to come. France (1985:211) refutes the argument by the Early Christian interpretation that saw blasphemy against the Son of Man as that of the unbeliever, but blasphemy against the Spirit as that of the Christian – hence the idea that sin after baptism is unforgivable. As France points out, this position is not evident in the text. However, France’s (1985:211) conclusion that ultimately only God can know when an individual’s opposition to his work has reached this stage of

irreversible rejection may be true, but it does not help answer the question about the forgiveness of God being arbitrary.

Kapolyo (2006:1136), illustrates the point of irreversibility by explaining that physical and mental abilities can be lost through lack of muscle use and a foreign language learned at school can be forgotten through lack of practice. Hence, if a person constantly refuses to accept the help of the Holy Spirit then that person may lose the capacity to repent and any chance of being forgiven.

The all-inclusiveness of the ‘whosoever’ means that there is again no discrimination in the judgment passed on those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. The surprise though is in the reversal of intention, where in the previous verse “all their sins shall be forgiven” in this verse the irreversible judgment is asserted. Guilt of eternal sin would mean that it is sin that leads to death. Until one examines closely the offense, this judgment seems harsh. First to attribute the powers of evil what is manifestly the work of God in healing is indeed blasphemy against God in his act of salvation; second the saying may refer to “the Spirit” as meaning Jesus’ earthly ministry, and not referring to any future activity (Mann, 1986 p. 256). In Mark 3:29 and Luke 12:10, βλασφημία, *blasphemia* is used with the simple meaning to disparage, slander, or defame (Hofius, 1994:219-220). The gravity of the sin of eternal sin may not have been new to the first hearers of Jesus. Mishna ‘Abot 3 lists five kinds of people who will be deprived of a share in the world to come:

1. those who treat “holy things: as secular,
2. those who defile the appointed times,
3. those who humiliate neighbours in public,
4. those who remove the sign of the covenant of Abraham, and
5. those who expose aspects of the Torah not in accordance with the Law.

The offenses listed above focus on community relationships and religious practices. However, in the case of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the sin is unforgivable because those who charge Jesus with demonic possession see goodness as evil, and therefore are closed to the action of God’s Spirit. This makes sense for Mark’s readers only in terms of the preceding narrative, where Jesus, endowed with the Spirit, preaches the good news of God (Mar 1:12-

15). The unforgivable sin in biblical thought is similar to hardness of heart (Mar 3:5).

**F. Is God’s Character fickle? ... Or Is It Man’s Rejection of God to the Last?**

The origin of the forgiveness of God is first in His character which sets him apart from human character, even though humans are called to forgive, in their interactions (Luk 17:3; Mat 18:21,22). In classifying God’s attributes, a distinction is made between his communicable attributes (those that God shares and or communicates with humans) and His incommunicable attributes (those not shared or communicated with humans). Closer examination however reveals that there is no attribute of God that is completely communicable, and there is no attribute of God that is completely incommunicable (Grudem, 1994:156). Provision for the forgiveness of sin is made possible for mankind because God gave His Son Jesus to die on the cross. In His divine provision this was decided and done “before the foundation of the earth”

Those who sinned against the Son of man, and are upon repentance forgiven, is clear (Mat 27:44; Luk 23:42, 43). The question is, “How is it to be understood that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable?” As to other sins, no matter how grievous or gruesome, there is pardon for them. There is forgiveness for Manasseh’s idolatry (2 King 21:1-7, 16; 2 Chronicles 33:9-13); David’s’ sin of adultery, dishonesty, and murder (2 Sam 12:13; Psm 51; Psm 32); the woman of Luke 7; the prodigal son’s riotous living (Luke 15:13, 21-24); Simon Peter’s denial accompanied by profanity (Matt 26:74-75; Luke 22: 31-32; John 18:15-18, 25-27); and for Paul’s pre-conversion merciless persecution of Christians (Acts 9:1; 22:4; 26:9-11; 1 Co 15:9; Eph 3:8; Php 3:6). But for the man who “speaks against the Holy Spirit” there is no pardon.

Why not? Bitter opponents of Jesus ascribe to Satan what the Holy Spirit through Christ was achieving. They do this willfully with no genuine sorrow for sin, and as for penitence they substituted with hardening of heart; for confession, plotting to kill Jesus (Hendricksen, 1975:139). Constant and consummate opposition to the influence of the Holy Spirit, because of a deliberate preference of darkness to light, render repentance and therefore forgiveness morally impossible

(Morro, 1982:343). A similar idea is taught in Hebrews 6:4-6, and in 1 John 5:16: “A sin unto death.” But the literal meaning of Christ's words implies an inability or unwillingness to forgive on the Divine side rather than inability and unwillingness to repent in man.

For anyone who is truly penitent, no matter how shameful his transgressions may have been, there is no reason to despair (Psa 103:12; Isa 1:18; 44:22; 55:6-7; Mic 7:18-20; 1Joh 1:9). On the other hand, there is no excuse for being indifferent, as if the subject of the unpardonable sin is of no concern to the average church member. The blasphemy against the Spirit is the result of gradual progress in sin. Grieving the Spirit (Eph 4:30), if unrepentant, leads to resisting the Spirit (Act 7:15), which if persisted in, develops into quenching the Spirit (1 Th 5:19). The true solution is Psa 95:7b-8a, “Today O they you would listen to his voice. Harden not your hearts Heb 3:7-8a.

This warning regarding the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit does not mean that he is someone to be avoided at all cost (Hendriksen, 1978:656). On the contrary, not only does the Father tenderly care for his own vs 4-7, and the Son assure them that he will acknowledge them as his very own v8, but also the Holy Spirit will help them in their hour of need (Hendriksen, 1978:657).

### **G. The Forgiveness of God**

Offense against God is defined so broadly that mortals cannot avoid God's condemnation (Shogren 1992:835). This observation is confirmed in the words “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Mat 5:20). In their semantic Lexicon the definition of ‘forgiveness’ is located in the fortieth Domain and is designated ‘Reconciliation, Forgiveness’ (Louw, et al., 1988a:502). The preceding domain is designated as ‘Hostility, Strife’ (39) and the subsequent domains are ‘Behaviour and Related States’ (41) and ‘Perform, Do’ (42). These domains have to do with dynamics in personal relationships and activity. The position of ἄφεσις, in domain 40 is the first of 13 definitions in sub domain B (40.8–40.13). The meaning of ἄφεσις has to do with the removing of guilt resulting from wrong doing (Louw, et al., 1988a:503). It is well illustrated in the phrase ‘forgive us the wrongs that we have done’ (Mat 6:12). Jesus’ words, ‘my blood, which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mat 26:28), highlights the way that the forgiveness of sin is

realized. In the pouring death and resurrection of Christ provides the basis for the act of forgiveness that can be a point of reference for those who are His disciples. This view also introduces the basis for the exhortation to ‘forgive and you will be forgiven (by God) (Luk 6:37). The focus of the meaning of ἄφεσις is upon the guilt of the wrongdoer and not upon the wrongdoing itself. The event of wrong doing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned. To forgive therefore is to remove the guilt resulting from the wrong doing (Louw, et al., 1988a:503).

Divine forgiveness is dependent on the loving and merciful nature of God. While it is offered to all, pardon is not given to all (Shogren 1992:832). One of the synonyms for the forgiveness of sin in Lukan writing is salvation (Luk 24:47; Act 2:38; 5:31). This is forgiveness offered in the context of initial repentance and conversion to Christ. This forgiveness carries the meaning of cleansing and issues from the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ based on Old Testament prophecy (Kselman 1992:836). The decision for God to make provision for the sin of Man was made from the foundation of the earth (1 Peter 1:20), and is confirmed in Old Testament prophecy before the coming of Jesus (1 Peter 1:10-12):

*<sup>v10</sup>Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, <sup>v11</sup>inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. <sup>v12</sup>It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.*

This knowledge of the inception of the intention to forgive on God’s part coupled with the knowledge of his attributes as loving, faithful, merciful, and immutable to name a few, serves to show that God is neither fickle nor indecisive. On the contrary, the limit of forgiveness for the sin of blasphemy is not arbitrary but clear in both its conditions and its limits.

Limits to forgiveness from a human side include: stubborn unrepentance (Mar 4:12), unbelief (Act 2:7-8, 40), the denial of wrongdoing (1 John 1:8), and refusal to forgive others (Mat 6:14-15).

Repentance is a fundamental condition of forgiveness. Morros (344), discusses forgiveness as one part of a mutual relationship, where; the other part is the repentance of the offender. God does not

forgive without repentance, nor is it required of man. Where there is forgiveness, there is restoration to the former state of the relationship which was broken by sin. Such a restoration requires the cooperation of both parties involving both a granting and an acceptance of the forgiveness as indeed, godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret (2 Co 7:10).

#### **H. How Should We Then Live?**

The discussion on whether the limit to God's forgiveness is arbitrary is not intended to paralyze those who are set on living righteously. The cited passages in the Synoptic gospels contain a caution against the improper use of charges about the sin against the Holy Spirit, which can cause great anguish to people. In Mark this sin is not final impenitence or refusal to accept doctrine, but a deliberate choice to interpret the presence of divine action as evil (Donahue & Harrington 2002:135-136). To those who do not have a lifestyle of perpetual rejection of God in word and deed, there should be no fear of committing eternal sin that leads to damnation. On the contrary, these Christians who have experienced God's initial forgiveness can live in freedom that enables them to do God's bidding.

Secondly, disciples of Jesus can live with the acknowledgement of God's power in the Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. This assurance can give confidence to the disciple to worship and honour God, trust him for the forgiveness of sin as well as expect miraculous manifestation in accordance to God's will.

Lastly, the essence of the sin against the Holy Spirit can be condensed into just one word – impenitence (Hendriksen 1978:658). The Christian or disciple of Jesus is well warned not to be impertinent but live in brokenness and humility as God dwells with those who are broken and contrite in heart (Isa 57:15). The Christian is encouraged to live in humility and penitence: If anyone is truly sorry for his sins, he cannot at the same time be guilty of "the sin against the Holy Spirit" for true sorrow is the work and fruit of the Holy Spirit (Hendriksen 1978:658).

#### **Conclusion**

God's forgiveness originates in His immutable nature. He is described as one who loves and is merciful; God does not vacillate in his dealings with man (Num 23: 19). The reliability of God is found

in his composite nature and attributes. The nature of God's redemption history demonstrates purposeful, intentional intervention on God's part in the affairs of mankind. Although God's forgiveness is limitless, yet there are conditions and limits to his forgiveness. The prominent limit to God's forgiveness in this study is the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is regarded by some as a continued and obstinate rejection of the gospel. This offense is considered an unpardonable sin, simply because as long as a sinner remains in unbelief he voluntarily excludes himself from pardon. While God extends pardon to all, only those who acknowledge his divine power for good receive pardon, while those who reject this pardon are guilty of eternal sin.

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