Sinning against the Holy Spirit

"I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come."
—Matthew 12:31,32, *New King James Version*

THOSE WHO CLAIM THAT the Holy Spirit is the third person in a trinity of gods, of which the Father and the Son are the other two—and all coequal in power and authority—would have difficulty in explaining this statement by Jesus that while sin against himself would be forgiven, sin against the Holy Spirit would not be forgiven. Certainly this disproves the absolute equality of the Holy Spirit and the Son of God. But there is no need to be concerned with an erroneous doctrine that has come down to us from the Dark Ages. When we understand what the Holy Spirit is, and the circumstances under which these words of

the Master were spoken, all is clear, harmonious, logical, and satisfying.

First, let us take the context into consideration. Beginning with verse twenty-two, we are told of one of Jesus' miracles. A man was brought to him "possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw." (Matt. 12:22) The people generally who witnessed this miracle were properly "amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David?" (vs. 23) To these Israelites, the 'son of David' was the promised Christ, and when they saw, through Jesus, the exercise of what they knew must have been Divine power, they were convinced that he was indeed the great One whom the God of Israel had promised to send. In their simplicity of mind and humbleness of heart, they were glad to acknowledge the truth when it was so conclusively demonstrated to them.

But it was not thus with the Pharisees. When they "heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of devils." (vs. 24) These Pharisees, in their hardness of heart, refused to accept the logical explanation of what they had witnessed. They had seen the power of God—the Holy Spirit of God—manifested in the casting out of a devil from this afflicted man, but were ready and willing to deny the facts, closing their minds to reality.

This was the background of Jesus' statement in our text. By it, the Master implies that the Pharisees, in denying the truth of what they had witnessed, had set themselves in opposition to the Holy Spirit of God. Indeed, as he said, they had

blasphemed against the Holy Spirit in that they had charged that its good work was in reality the work of the Devil. Such a sin, Jesus said, could not be forgiven, neither in this world, or age, nor in the age to come.

This account highlights the fact that the Holy Spirit is simply the holy power of God by which he accomplishes all his good purposes. In this instance, it was exercised through the Master in ridding this afflicted man of the 'devil' which was causing him to be blind and dumb, and restoring him to health. It was a miraculous demonstration of Divine power. The exercise of Divine power is always miraculous, in the sense that our finite minds are unable to understand it. However, to deny its accomplishments is a sin that God does not overlook.

Why is it that sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven? In a broad sense it is sin against light, against knowledge. In the case of the Pharisees, there was the chance that they could misunderstand Jesus' teachings. After all, while he spoke as "never man spake" (John 7:46), their conception of him had to be based upon his words. No fault could be found with Jesus' gracious words, but in their imperfection and prejudice they could nonetheless misunderstand the meaning of what he said. This, the Master indicated, could be forgiven. But to distort the meaning of the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit was not ignorantly done. It was a willful sin, so could not be forgiven. They had sinned against what they knew to be right.

The application of this principle is seen in God's dealings with Saul of Tarsus, who afterward became the great Apostle Paul. Saul was a bitter opponent

of the Christian cause. With what he supposed was a righteous hatred, he persecuted the early believers. But on the way to Damascus, on a mission of further persecution, he was struck down to earth by a blinding light, shining above the brightness of the sun at noonday, and heard a voice speak to him, saying "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4) The voice answered, "I am Jesus."—vs. 5

It was all in good conscience that Saul had been opposing Christ and the Christian cause, but now, given a demonstration of the power of God informing him that Jesus truly was the Christ of promise, it changed his whole outlook. Had he been like the Pharisees, he might have insisted that the Devil was trying to interfere with his work of stamping out the heresy of the Nazarene, Jesus, and continued on to Damascus to complete his mission of persecution. But Saul's heart was right. He accepted the logic of events, was convinced, and gladly entered into the service of the Messiah whom previously he had been persecuting.

The experience was a severe lesson to Saul, which, even as the great Apostle Paul, he did not forget. It served to keep him humble, and ever to realize how easy it is to be wrong. Writing about it later, he said, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."—I Tim. 1:12-14

Paul had been a 'blasphemer,' and a 'persecutor.' He had done great injury to the brethren of Christ, but he had not blasphemed against the Holy Spirit. His sin was against Christ, whom he did not know. He had sinned 'ignorantly' and in 'unbelief,' so mercy was extended to him—great mercy, indeed, for he was forgiven, and exalted to the high position of a special apostle in the church. The situation would have been different if, when that great demonstration of power, which he later characterized as a "vision," was given to him on the Damascus road, he had been "disobedient" to it. This would have been an unforgivable sin.—Acts 26:19

A very illuminating episode is related in Acts 4:29-5:11. The religious rulers of Israel were much disturbed over the successful ministry of the apostles at Pentecost and later, so "they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus." (chap. 4:18) The apostles did not obey these instructions. Instead, they reported to their brethren, and held a prayer meeting. Their prayer concluded thus: "Now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus."—vss. 29,30

Immediately there was a miracle, where we read, "When they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither

said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all."—vss. 31-33

These were the miraculous circumstances that caused the believers to sell their houses and lands and turn over the proceeds to the apostles. Little wonder, in view of the Holy Spirit's demonstration among them, that they were induced to take this drastic action. Then we are told that a "certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, And kept back part of the price," his wife agreeing to it. (chap. 5:1,2) As Peter told Ananias, he had a right to do this, for he had not been commanded by the Lord to sell his land, or to give any part of the proceeds to the apostles to be used for the common support of the church. His sin was in the fact that he claimed he had turned in all the money when he had not.

Peter asked Ananias why Satan had filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. The meaning of this is apparent when we take into consideration the circumstances. The Holy Spirit had been working mightily in, and through, the apostles. The place where they held their special prayer meeting shook with its power. The sick were healed, and other signs were brought by the Spirit's power. Filled with the Spirit, the apostles' preaching was powerful. The entire company was convinced that God was in their midst, including Ananias and Sapphira. But these later were not sincere in the matter. They were willing that their relationship to the LORD, through Jesus, should cost them something,

but not all. Yet they wanted their brethren to think they had given all.

The brethren could have been misled in this. But one of the special powers of the Holy Spirit that had been given to Peter was the ability to read the mind and heart. Through the power of God, he discerned the deception. Peter said to Ananias, "Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." (vs. 4) What a lesson this is for all the LORD's people! Let us remember that we stand or fall before the LORD, not before one another.

Sapphira, Peter said, had tempted the Holy Spirit of God; meaning that those, through whom the Spirit was operating, would be tempted not to call for the judgment upon her which the LORD required. But Peter exercised the authority given him by the Holy Spirit and they both perished. They had sinned against the Holy Spirit and it could not be forgiven them. It was not a sin of ignorance.

THOSE ONCE ENLIGHTENED

It is not necessary that the miraculous power of God—his Holy Spirit—be outwardly demonstrated in order to sin willfully against it. In Hebrews 6:4-8, another and different situation is brought to our attention in which it is possible for one to commit sin which cannot be forgiven. We quote: "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, 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.

For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned."

Here the apostle is discussing those in whose hearts and lives the Holy Spirit has operated through the written Word, and he makes it plain that in this situation also it is possible to sin against the Holy Spirit. They have been 'enlightened,' so they do not have ignorance as an excuse. They have 'tasted of the heavenly gift.' This evidently is a reference to Jesus, whom God gave to be the Redeemer and Savior of the world. They have tasted Jesus, which implies more than merely having heard of him.

They were made 'partakers of the Holy Spirit.' The work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, through the Word of Truth, has been too evident to put aside lightly. While not spectacular, as the power of the Spirit was demonstrated to the Pharisees, yet its power in the life of a believer is even more convincing. Who could come under the baptism of the Spirit, and the power of its anointing, the life-giving energy of its begetting, receive of its witness and seal, and be filled with its power for holiness, its peace, and its joy, without realizing that he has been enjoying the rich favor of God?

It is through the miracle-working power of the Spirit that the Word of God has reached us with all its enlightenment and inspiration. Those who have 'tasted the good word of God,' have been face to face with God, for the Word reveals him in his glory, outlining his wisdom, justice, love, and power. Millions

read the Bible just because they believe it is a good book, others for its historical value. Some read it simply out of curiosity. But those who have devoted themselves to do God's will, and read the Bible that they might know his will and receive encouragement to perform it, find that it is a power in their lives. It is the power of the Holy Spirit.

These also, Paul indicates, have tasted of the 'powers of the world to come.' *Strong's Bible Concordance* states that the Greek word here translated 'powers' means 'force (literal or figurative) specifically miraculous power (usually by implication, a miracle itself.)' Much miracle-working power will be operative in the age to come, and the Hebrew Christians had already witnessed some of it. In chapter two, verses three and four, we read, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing witness, [the word 'them' is in italics, which means that it is not in the original], both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will?"

From this, it is clear that the Hebrew brethren, in addition to being enlightened and given the Holy Spirit of Truth through the written Word, had witnessed some of the miracle-working power of the Spirit in the signs which were given to those early believers. Perhaps some of them had had bestowed upon them one or more of the miraculous 'gifts of the Spirit' mentioned in I Corinthians, chapter twelve. In this respect, then, they were in the same position as the Pharisees, and Ananias and Sapphira,

who had witnessed the miracles performed by the Holy Spirit. These were the powers of the world to come. As we know, in the age to come, all the sick will be restored to health, and all the dead will be awakened, the powers of regeneration then being in effect. How that will fill the earth with God's glory!

Thus the apostle informs us that those who fall away from their loyalty to God after having enjoyed all these marvelous favors from him, favors which we might say are summed up in the one word enlightenment, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance. The falling away of such would be a matter of willfulness so gross that they would have no desire to repent. By having accepted Christ and enjoyed the merit of his shed blood on their behalf, and then rejecting him, they put him 'to open shame.' The enlightenment of these comes through God's only source of enlightenment which is the Holy Spirit of Truth, so, in falling away, they sin against the Holy Spirit, and cannot be forgiven. Because they cannot be forgiven, and there being no hope of their repenting, these die the "second death," as symbolized by the fire which destroys the briers and thistles of Hebrews six, verse eight.

A similar presentation of this general thought is found in Hebrews 10:26-29. We quote: "If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of

God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" The Law given by Moses was typical. Those who died under its judgments will be awakened from death. But those who sin willfully in this age, after having been enlightened by the Holy Spirit of Truth, will go into oblivion forever.

DEGREES OF WILLFULNESS

We see no reason from the Scriptures to suppose that a single act of sin against the Holy Spirit results in eternal destruction. When Jesus said to the Pharisees that sin against the Holy Spirit could not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come, he implied that their sin in denying that his miracles were wrought by the power of God would not go unpunished. But this does not necessarily mean that the punishment would be what the Scriptures describe as the 'second death.'

In Luke 12:47,48, Jesus lays down a rule governing the punishment of those who sin that is understandable, practical, and just. We read, "That servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." In other words, the degree of enlightenment determines the extent of responsibility. Those mentioned by Paul in Hebrews 6:4-8 and 10:16-19 are indicated to be sufficiently enlightened, and their sin against light so persistent and continuous that there is no repentance, no

turning around. That is why their punishment is shown to be eternal death.

The principle set forth by Jesus is specifically said to apply to the LORD's servants. The unbelieving world, in its almost total ignorance of God, is not on probation now at all, but only the servants of God and those who profess to be his servants. This includes the Pharisees, who in Jesus' day claimed that they were the representatives of God. This made them responsible, especially when they denied the power of him whom they claimed to serve. They will be punished, and doubtless with many 'stripes,' but the Bible does not indicate that they necessarily died the second death.

THE "GREAT TRANSGRESSION"

It is apparent from the Scriptures that it is possible for those enlightened by the Holy Spirit of Truth, through the written Word, to fall away. Equally clear, however, is that such a calamity does not occur suddenly. There is a gradual encroachment of sin, beginning perhaps with but a slight degree of laxity, but finally ending in a complete denial of the Lord, the Truth, and the power of the Holy Spirit in one's life.

In Psalm 19:12,13, David traces this gradual development of sin, and in the fourteenth verse utters a touching prayer expressive of every true Christian's desire to please the LORD. He asks, "Who can understand his errors?" In the preceding verses the psalmist speaks of the power of God's Law, his testimony, and his statutes, his commandments "pure," to make his people "wise," and to "enlighten" them. "By them," David says, are *(Continued on page 35)*

(Continued from page 31) the LORD's servants warned, "and in keeping of them there is great reward."—vss. 7-11

In asking the question, 'Who can understand his errors?' it would seem that David is implying that no one can, apart from the Word of God, enlighten, or reveal them. Then his prayer, "Cleanse thou me from secret faults"—faults that I do not realize I possess. Help me turn on myself the searchlight of thy Word that the beginnings of sin may be detected, and may the cleansing power of thy Truth make me clean and pure in thy sight.

David continues his prayer, "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me." 'Presumptuous sins' are willful sins, sins against light, against the Holy Spirit. Perhaps nearly all the LORD's people, at one time or another in their Christian life, are guilty of one or more presumptuous sins. These are not 'secret faults,' although they might be the outgrowth of a wrong condition of mind and heart of which one is not aware. But notice David's prayer—'Let them not have dominion over me.' In a moment of impetuousness, one might commit a presumptuous sin, a sin that cannot be forgiven, and a sin therefore that calls for stripes. But still it does not follow that such sins must necessarily have dominion over us.

For presumptuous sins to have dominion over one means that he has given up all effort to control his life in keeping with the directives of the Word. It would mean, as David continues, that such a one was guilty of the "great transgression" (vs. 13); that transgression so great, so willful, and so continuous, that the only suitable punishment would

be the second death. Such is the growth of sin if not checked.

The only safe course for any of the LORD's people lies in the attitude expressed by David, when in further prayer to God he pleaded, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer." (Ps. 19:14) We can cooperate with the LORD in the answering of this prayer, through continued and earnest searching of his Word, that we might know the things that are acceptable to him, and pleasing in his sight. Thus we will be safe-