

Dear members and friends of St. John,

From St. Mark, chapter 3, we read Jesus' own words: *"Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"* (Mk 3:28, 29).

You may have noticed that we live in an age that increasingly **denies the existence of hell**. I frequently hear people make statements that imply that "all good people go to heaven." Variations of this include, "all baptized people go to heaven," or "all Godly people..."

So what do Jesus' words mean? First, **God has promised to forgive** any and all sins that the faithful Christian commits in error. Notice that **faith in Christ is the necessary condition of man that enables God's complete forgiveness**. Without faith in Christ, man is adrift in a sea of sin and death. So "blaspheming against the Holy Spirit" is man refusing the free gift of life that comes from God's work of faith in him. God allows us to 'walk away' from salvation by choosing to live in sin. It may be helpful to read about this from Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod:

There is one sin that cannot be forgiven, either in this world or in the next, either by God or by man. It is the sin against the Holy Spirit. Repentance and conversion are impossible for one who has committed this sin. Although this person still lives on earth, the time of grace has expired, and every door of grace is closed to him. God no longer calls him, enlightens him, chastises him, or has mercy on him. God has given him up to his wrong mind, and he is already cursed for eternity and lost. Those who commit this sin are seldom frightened about it.⁽¹⁾

Walther's statement that people who commit this sin are seldom frightened about it, should give us all pause. Walther's talking about a person who was brought into the Kingdom of God through the Word (usually found in Baptism, but occasionally by hearing the Gospel), and then **chooses** to reject the life of discipleship. **Discipleship, in short, is allowing God to rule and reign in our hearts and minds**. Discipleship is **not** a life **free of sin**. Instead, it shows itself in our continuing struggle to keep sin at bay – through the power of God at work in us. The disciple of Christ strives to live a life pleasing to God. God actively works in us, then, to show us our sin, and to help us turn from it. God actively works in us to help us grow in wisdom and knowledge of Him, through meditation on His holy word. God actively works in us through Holy Communion, to strengthen our faith. God actively works to allow us to be a light to others who live in darkness, to share the love of Christ in our daily vocations. That's discipleship.

Too many Christians read the words of Jesus about the 'only unforgiveable sin', and they're frightened that they have or may soon commit this sin. Let's continue to read from Walther on this:

Many who are far from sinning in this way torment themselves thinking that they have done so. It is therefore vital that every Christian know precisely what sin against the Holy Spirit is. Some suppose it is persistent impenitence until death. Others think it is each denial of the truth and each wanton sin committed after conversion. Still others believe it has to do with swearing an oath either falsely or to the devil. Christians who have fallen or who are repeatedly attacked by the devil sometimes experience all kinds of terrible thoughts. They cannot rid themselves of these thoughts despite their sighs, prayers, and battles against them. These thoughts accompany and persecute them everywhere, even to the altar of the Lord. Such Christians usually think they have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. Indeed, many Christians who experienced the sweetest movements of the Holy Spirit immediately after their conversion later find that these impulses have ceased and then think they have fallen into that unforgivable sin.

So, who is it that commits this sin that cannot be forgiven? - The former believer who wants no part of God's forgiveness. The 'fall from grace' happens to those who reject God's call to repentance, not once, but permanently. God, ever-faithful, will remind us of our sin. Once reminded, we are led by the Spirit to fight that sin our lives. But some will give up and choose a life of sin, over a life of repentance and forgiveness of sins. The struggle with sin is abandoned by this person. In a very real sense, the person chooses 'the world' over 'Jesus Christ'. There is no longer a love for the Church, or for Christ, in this fallen soul. In John 15, Jesus reminds us that staying away from His word and the Lord's Supper is damaging to our spiritual life. When we ignore God, we fail to receive the spiritual nutrients that He has for us, and we grow weak.

Finally, know that **hell is a very real place**, and we live in a world that increasingly refuses to believe this. Also know that **God is working 'overtime' to keep you out of hell**. So what is the best way to avoid the only unforgiveable sin? Remain connected to the Vine, Jesus Christ. And take heart, all who are struggling with sin. God is faithfully working in your life – to keep you in the one true faith – until you are with Him in heaven. Thanks be God.

Pastor Travis

(1) Walther, C.F.W., *God Grant It*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, c. 2007.