

What Did Jesus Mean? - Part 3.

The sin against the Holy Spirit.

In this present series of talks I am examining some of the problem passages in the Gospels where things which Jesus said and taught give rise to difficulty and, because they have not been properly understood, have even caused distress. There are in fact a considerable number of these 'problem' passages, and as much a problem as any of them, and one that has caused considerable concern to people, is the teaching of the Lord, in Matthew's Gospel Chapter 12, concerning the sin against the Holy Spirit. "Therefore I say unto you", we read there, "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come." (verses 31 and 32).

Understandably, and as I've indicated, the teaching here has given rise to a great deal of difficulty. And this for two reasons. In the first place, the Lord speaks of a sin which won't be forgiven. His words seem to suggest that in a certain situation forgiveness will be withheld. And for those of us who look upon God as being ever-merciful and ever forgiving this both surprises and distresses us. But that's not the only problem. A distinction is drawn between saying a word against the Son of man and speaking against the Holy Spirit. One is forgivable and the other is not. But what is the difference? On the surface there hardly seems to be any. And yet, presumably, there must be. And we want to know what it is. It would be well, I feel, if we looked at this more general question concerning forgiveness, first of all. These words of the Lord which are our special concern seem to suggest that it is possible for us to do something for which we will not be forgiven. And here is our concern. Does the Lord withhold forgiveness? Is it possible for us to commit such a sin that He can't bring Himself, so to speak, to forgive us?

Consistent as it is with what we otherwise understand and believe about Him it is to be known, and I quote, that "the Lord forgives the sins of everyone who from his heart desires it" (*Arcana Caelestia* 5938). Though this statement in Matthew causes us at first to question it He is indeed a God of infinite love and mercy who is at all times seeking to draw all people everywhere unto Him. He holds nothing against us and at no time turns His back on us.

He is ever reaching out to us and is unceasingly endeavouring to lead us into that life of order and unselfishness where we shall know the greatest happiness and sense of well-being. His forgiveness, it needs to be said, is never withheld. It can in fact be truly said that even at the very moment of an evil being committed He is on hand with His forgiveness, ready to reach out, if from our hearts we desire it.

We need never fear the Lord that He will not forgive us. And this is so however far we fall and however shabby and disorderly our desires and actions may be. "Like as a father pities his children" we read "so the Lord pities them that fear Him." (Psalm 103:13). And not only those who fear Him, but those who do not fear Him also. He pities us all. As is so both in this world and in the spiritual world, He never removes Himself from people. They remove themselves from Him. If, therefore, (and please note this point) something is unforgiven it is not because He won't forgive it. Rather it is because He can't forgive it. Can't because of something in man which prevents that forgiveness being received. It is the state which man gets himself into which is the only barrier where forgiveness is concerned. There is no question but that sin may be unforgiven. But the fault for this lies, not with the Lord, but with ourselves. "Whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit it shall not be forgiven him...." not, as we have just seen, because the Lord won't forgive, but because He can't. It is because we won't turn to Him and seek His forgiveness.

Jesus is speaking then of a state in man where it is impossible for Him to get through to him and lead him. His words refer to a situation where a person is in every way unresponsive, even uncaring. He wants to forgive, but He can't. He wants to lead, but He is unable. He knocks on the door, but there is no answer. It is we who are at fault, not the Lord.

Let us, then, look more closely at what is involved. The sin against the Holy Spirit. That there be no confusion about the matter it must be understood that the Holy Spirit is not some separate entity or third Person in the Godhead. To the contrary, and if I may put the teaching about it in a nutshell, the Holy Spirit is the operation and influence of "the one and undivided God" in the lives of people. As Swedenborg wrote of it, it is "the Divine virtue and operation"; the Lord at work with us on behalf of our salvation. The Holy Spirit is experienced in our lives as the **enlightenment** which comes when we see and understand truth for what it is really saying to us. It comes to us in the form of **strength** which we can draw on in times of temptation.

It is present with a person when he acknowledges, accepts, and lives by the implications which he has seen in the Lord's teaching. It is love and wisdom from the Lord, especially when that love and wisdom is received into our lives.

What, then, does it mean to sin against the Holy Spirit?

To sin against the Holy Spirit means to falsify, to deny, and to reject truth which was previously acknowledged, believed in and lived by. It is, by way of illustrating the point, to coldly rationalise and confirm an evil when we clearly know better. It is to think and do things which fly in the face of convictions and ideals which were previously sincerely held. It is to destroy the power which the Lord's teaching should otherwise have in our lives. A person sins against the Holy Spirit who, having earlier and sincerely believed in honesty and justice in accordance with the eighth Commandment, for instance, later shamelessly falsifies and denies it because it suits his purpose to do so. And this is what cuts us off from the Lord. This is why the sin is said to be unforgivable. It is unforgivable not because the Lord would have it so but because in falsifying His truth we destroy the one thing He has to work with us. If the Lord can't appeal to a person through the truth He teaches, because that truth has been rendered ineffective by that person, then He is unable to lead him out of the state he is in. And this is what is pointed to. "Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven unto men." It sounds as if God withholds forgiveness, but we know now that this is not the case. The fact is that His truth and teaching is like a life-line which is rendered useless when we twist and falsify it.

One final question, however, still needs to be answered. In what way, you will be asking yourself, does the sin against the Holy Spirit differ from the other sin which is mentioned, speaking a word against the Son of man? On the surface, as we noted earlier, they seem very similar. But this can't be so.

With regard to the sin against the Holy Spirit I have been speaking about Divine Truth which is acknowledged, received, accepted and lived by. But a contrast is involved here. By the term 'Son of man' Divine Truth is meant also, but in this case it is truth outside of a person, whose implications have not been truly seen or understood, let alone accepted. To say a word against the Son of man is to be in error about, to misunderstand, even to falsify, truth whose worth and value and importance has not been seen or appreciated.

And this, easily done, is relatively harmless, and can be forgiven. But it's a different matter altogether where truth has been received, its implications perceived and accepted, and then to falsify and turn away from it. And this is what the Lord is teaching us.

Swedenborg's own words on the subject summarise what is involved. "To say a word against the Son of man, he wrote, "is (to deny or falsify) truth Divine not yet implanted or inscribed on the life of man, but to speak against the Holy Spirit is (to deny or falsify) Divine Truth which has been so implanted and inscribed." (*Arcana Caelestia* 9818). "Whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come."

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