

Today we have a very complex set of readings which could raise a lot of questions but I'm guessing that the one most of you are asking is: what is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? If that is the one unforgivable sin, we should probably know what it is. The catechism defines it as a mature spiritual hardness of heart that directs sinners away from God's mercy and ends in final impenitence; it is a stubborn refusal to seek God's mercy and forgiveness. One who blasphemes against the Spirit cannot receive forgiveness because he or she refuses to repent and seek forgiveness.

How did the church come up with that definition based on what Jesus said in the gospel? Look at the situation. Before today's gospel, Jesus had been healing people and casting out demons. Many people didn't know what he was doing; some people even thought he was insane. Here come these scribes from Jerusalem; Matthew and Luke tell us that the Pharisees were involved in this as well. These were the religious leaders of ancient Israel. They were well educated and quite powerful and respected among their people. They said that Jesus' miracles were the works of the devil. When someone with this type of authority speaks, we are inclined to listen to them. The impact of the scribes and Pharisees saying, "Jesus is in league with the devil" could have—and actually did—drive people away from Jesus. Who in their right mind is going to turn to Jesus for help? Who is going to come to him for the forgiveness of sins? Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; there is no other path to salvation except through him. The Holy Spirit was given to us to help us know Jesus so he can help us know His Father and experience his mercy. However, if we believe all of this is some trick of the devil, we won't listen to the Spirit and we will be denied God's mercy.

Quick question: if a person stubbornly denied God at some point earlier in his or her life—which would be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—but then has a conversion; will that person still be denied forgiveness? Think of the hard core atheist who has a conversion while lying in his hospital bed dying from cancer and asks to see a priest. That heart of stone which caused him to deny God has melted and now all things are possible. He's no longer guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit because he has finally sought out God's mercy and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit never stops calling to us, now matter how hard our hearts or how closed our minds might be. Even the hardest stone has little cracks in it and that is all the Spirit needs to sneak in and start tearing down the walls that keep us separated from God. It is only those who die without ever experiencing that conversion of heart who cannot be forgiven. And that is not up to us to determine—only God knows the final state of anyone's soul at the moment of death.

Jesus made the statement about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in connection to the complicated "strong man" parable. We need to look at this parable as well. Who is the strong man in the parable? Is it Jesus? Or is it Satan? The strong man is Satan. If we think

about that, it makes complete sense because someone even stronger has to break into the house, tie up the strong man and plunder his possessions. The strong man cannot be Jesus because no one is stronger than God.

Does this make Jesus a thief? Remember CS Lewis' quote about Christianity: "Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage." The word "plunder" can be translated as "spoil." What does a saboteur do? He or she breaks things, spoils them, like the French resistance blowing up telephone lines to disrupt Nazi communications on D-Day. Jesus is engaged in a great campaign of sabotage, not of destruction but of restoration.

The Genesis reading we heard shows us the world after the fall of Adam and Eve. God's good creation had been captured and spoiled by the devil, sin, and death. Jesus' campaign of sabotage is about putting things back into their right order. When he comes into the strong man's house and ties up the strong man, he is showing himself to be the one whom God promised would strike and crush the head of the serpent. The possessions he is going to plunder and "spoil" by unspoiling them--what are they? Us and the rest of creation that Satan has corrupted. Satan spoiled God's creation, including us. If we are corrupted and spoiled, then Jesus' "spoiling" of us means that he is coming to restore us to the dignity and goodness which God saw in us at the very beginning. Jesus isn't stealing from the strong man, he is reclaiming what is rightfully his. That is what he did for us on the cross.

Jesus has liberated us from our captivity to the strong man who is Satan. Here is the thing though. Do we realize we have been set free? Many of us are attached to things, people, pets, pleasure, food, power, money, technology, political ideologies and other things. All of these things have the potential for good, but when we become too attached to them, they can be evil. A question to ask ourselves: who or what is really in control of our lives? If any of the stuff that I just mentioned controls us, we are still enslaved to the strong man. We also tend to focus on negative thoughts and brood over past injuries; we are easily discouraged and tempted to despair. These are also tricks of the devil to make us think we are still his captives. **DO NOT LISTEN TO HIS LIES!!!**

Jesus wants to free us from all of that. It is not easy for us to realize we are free and to fully participate in the freedom and love God intends for us but if we soften our hearts of stone, he will come in and begin restoring the goodness within us.