

Hard Sayings of the New Testament #1 Sin Against the Holy Spirit

Introduction 1:

With today's lesson we begin the summer quarter of the weekly Bible study lessons. In the series for the summer of 2026 the first 7 lessons will be under the basic umbrella of "Hard Sayings," this year from the New Testament. For the other 6 lesson in the series, we will be discussing 6 different topics from Paul's first letter to Timothy.

Today's lesson begins our seven-lesson series on hard sayings in the New Testament. Some sayings are "hard" because they're difficult to understand for one reason or another. Others are "hard" because even though they are easy enough to understand, they provide serious challenges to us in living according to what they appear to be teaching. Today's lesson presents a text that's hard for the first reason: it's difficult to understand its message. Our lesson is taken from Luke 12, the only one of these seven lessons to be taken from Luke. For that reason, I want us to see how Luke 12 fits into Luke's narrative of the life of Jesus.

From 9:51 to 19:36, Luke places a long series of the teachings of Jesus into the narrative framework of Jesus' journey from Caesarea Philippi (where, in Matthew and Mark,¹ Jesus announces to his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to die) to Jerusalem. At times, Luke has Jesus walking along while teaching. At other times, they stop at certain locations. In Luke 11 and at least part of 12, Jesus has stopped in response to some criticism, and a crowd gathers around him. It is not clear at what point in the chapter Jesus continues on his journey.

Luke 12 is organized by modern publishers of the Bible into sections treating different topics of Jesus' teachings. Verses 1-12, our printed lesson for today, cover four short statements Jesus made which seem to be loosely related to how disciples need to face criticism or persecution from Jewish leaders or other authorities. The immediate literary context is that of Jesus' "woes" against Jewish leaders in chapter 11, verses 14-54.

I. Hypocrisy **Luke 12:1-3**

Verse 1 is another of those transition verses we mentioned a few weeks ago. Jesus is teaching his disciples. If he were just alone with them, we might read verses 2 & 3 in a different light than the context that Luke 11 suggests. Apparently, Jesus' confrontation with authorities has drawn a large crowd.

The word, 'hypocrisy,' comes from classic theater and the costuming that actors wear on their face—a mask—so that the audience does not see the actor in person, but only the role the actor is playing. Hypocrisy then takes on two related meanings: first, that of role playing, which may be innocent, when one recognizes it as theater; second, purposefully posing as something

¹ Luke does not record where this incident takes place. Scholars recognize that Luke is working with Mark, and that it's possible Luke's readers know the incident.

you aren't, which is not innocent at all. The literary context appears to be an accusation against some Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. From our perspective, we know that there is hypocrisy of this second type in the church, but among Jesus' twelve disciples in his day, it would be hard to think that Jesus has them in mind, except perhaps Judas. The real goal of the Jewish leaders, however, appears only to be that of accumulating more public honor for themselves--proof that their faith has absorbed and clings to the values of the Greco-Roman society within which they live.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. It should be no surprise that the church has always faced the temptation to adopt the values of the carnal society around it. That will always be seen as hypocrisy. How can we prevent that from happening, and how can we turn it around when it happens?
2. In our society, judges, lawyers, congressmen, etc., hire investigators and clerks to find the "dirt" that either public officials or litigants are hiding. What do you think Jesus is talking about when he says that what is hidden will be brought to light?

II. Who to fear. Luke 12: 4-7

Jesus appears to be warning his disciples of a future that they cannot yet imagine. As we approach this short paragraph, we need to consider another historical context than that of Jesus and his disciples. That is, the context of Luke's readers in the 8th and 9th decades of the 1st century. Luke knows what Paul went through in those last years of his life both in Caesarea by the Sea and in Rome under Roman governors and Nero. Before that, Stephen the deacon and James the brother of John were both killed separately for their faith. That was the middle third of the first century. Luke is writing in the last third, aware of what the churches are going through in other places in the world as he writes, and he most likely can foresee the situation getting worse over the next few decades. Much of that is in the forefront of his mind and in the minds of his readers as he records this teaching of Jesus. However, what we need to be aware of is that more persecution of Christians is occurring in our world today than ever before. It could be that the current division and politicization of much of the Church in the US might produce serious persecution in our own country as well some-day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Who is it that has authority to send anyone to hell?

III. The consequences of our words. Luke 12:8-10

In this text we find the verse that the editors of our lesson have selected as the key verse to look at: the hard saying. In these three verses there are four very important words that lead to specific and serious consequences. Three of them have to do with what people say and the other with what God does. They are, 'acknowledge,' 'disown,' 'blaspheme,' and 'forgive.' The

first two words, acknowledge and disown, seem to follow from the situation that may have been presented in verse 4, that of believers being in a situation which could result in persecution or even death. The challenge will be to acknowledge or disown allegiance to Jesus.

It would appear that verses 8 & 9 can easily be linked to verses 4-7, but what that has to do with verse 10 is one of the problems making verse 10 a “hard saying.” Verses 8 & 9, for example, seem to speak to the faithfulness or lack thereof on the part of believers. The word, acknowledge, comes from a courtroom situation in which a witness is asked to declare a certain position on an issue, to agree or disagree with a statement before the court. But how does v. 10 fit into that scenario, or is there a change in scenario taking place in response to the broader audience of Jesus’ teaching here (see v. 1)? Considering Jesus’ audience at this point, if it indeed includes the Pharisees and experts in the Law, the word “blaspheme” would most likely be the most important one from their perspective. That word resulted in the severest of consequences. Like the words, ‘acknowledge’ and ‘disown,’ ‘blaspheme’ refers to something someone says, wherever it is used in scripture, and defines as such in dictionaries.

Historically, the concept of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has been a highly debated issue. Furthermore, the lack of any more context behind Jesus’ statement here in Luke offers very little help toward our understanding of what Luke might be doing by putting that saying here. Finally, the question arises as to whether Luke is saying the same thing as other NT writers, or if he’s saying something different from them.

There are basically three ways of interpreting the text here.

1) **The first** is based on the meaning of ‘blaspheme’ as something one says. In this reading of Luke, it is in agreement with what Mark does with it in Mark 3:29-30, where the statement is tied to Jewish leaders’ claiming that Jesus does his work through demons. In this case blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would be declaring ministry under the Holy Spirit’s power as something other than holy.

QUESTION: Does God act like that—refuse forgiveness—to keep his name and character holy?

2) **The second** works from the concept of something for which God refuses forgiveness. What would cause God to not forgive someone, and how is that related to the Holy Spirit? This question creates the reading that forgiveness would not be available because of continuous rejection of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the truth of the gospel and offering grace to the sinner as truth of that gospel. A version of this view was used inappropriately by evangelists in the 19th and 20th centuries to manipulate people to come to an altar of prayer during revival services.

QUESTION: In this case, can such refusal be forgiven or not? If not, by whose call?

3) A **third view** is based on the difference between members of Jesus’ audience in Luke 12. As one scholar puts it, non-believers are the ones who reject Jesus, but forgiveness is available to them if they turn to him eventually. However, it is believers who blaspheme the indwelling Holy Spirit by falling away from faith into apostacy (cf. Heb. 6:4-6).

QUESTION: How can that action be seen as something done against the Holy Spirit?

The difficulty as I see it is not only that God takes this blasphemy very seriously, but also that all three aspects of the context need to be considered in any attempt to understand the saying: 'blaspheme,' by definition is something one says; we need to consider what would cause God to refuse to forgive; and, is Jesus saying something unique to different members of his audience?

In all cases of blasphemy in the Bible, the accusation is based on something that has been said, specifically something said about God. Throughout the Bible, God responds seriously to blasphemy, even if the Jewish authorities were much freer with how they defined than God does. In this context, acknowledging or disowning Jesus would be something that is said at some point in a public setting. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would need to be either something said *about* the Holy Spirit condemning his work, or something said directly *to* the Holy Spirit condemning him personally or his work.

It is true that Luke writes his gospel before he writes Acts, but his whole understanding of the life of a disciple is that of being filled with and following the leadership of the Holy Spirit. All of Jesus' ministry is conducted under and through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in Him. The same is true with all the work of the apostles and deacons after him.

IV. A Summary. **Luke 12:11-12**

Luke closes this section of what we now call chapter 12 with these two verses that bring the other three points into perspective. Jesus' disciples are to concentrate on their call and their ministry and not try to figure out in advance what they're supposed to say in court if and when they ever get arrested. The Holy Spirit was to do that for them at such time. If you're doing the work that the Holy Spirit is leading you to do, who better to defend you than the one who put you into that position. Luke uses courtroom language here as he did in v. 8. But he also presents the Holy Spirit as both presence and power at the precise moment in time when He is most needed.

Conclusion:

The following conclusion is given by Dr. Tom Phillips in the IBL commentary for today.

Luke 12:1-12 is a rich and layered text, offering instruction for a church under pressure and a disciple seeking to live authentically. It challenges hypocrisy with a call to integrity, reorients fear toward God who loves, and affirms that public witness is sustained not by clever words but by the Spirit of God. . . . It reminds us that the God who judges is also the God who counts sparrows, and the Spirit who convicts is also the one who teaches. In a world that tempts believers to self-protection and silence, Jesus calls us to courageous confession, confident that we are never alone, for the Spirit speaks within us and the Son stands before us in heaven, ready to say, "This one is mine."