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*SPEAKING AGAINST THE SON OF MAN AND
BLASPHEMING THE SPIRIT*

MARK III. 20-35; MATT. XII. 22-32.

THE difficulties, both historical and exegetical, which gather round this passage in the Gospel are only too well known. It is difficult to be sure of what precisely Jesus said ; and after we have convinced ourselves that one form of words takes us nearer to Him than another, it is difficult to be sure of what precisely those words mean.

The narrative of Mark is on the surface the simplest, and it seems to hang well together. Jesus is in a house, but attended by a crowd so large and so importunate that He has no opportunity even to take food. The impression made by the narrative is that others, not He, saw the situation in this light. He was absorbed in his work ; He lived in it with the refreshing abandonment of self in which He exclaimed on another occasion, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of" (John iv. 32). Those, however, who did not share this rapture could not be expected to understand it, and it is not astonishing to read that His friends apprehended he was losing self-control. They felt that if He could not take care of Himself it fell to them to take care of Him, and they set out to do it with kindly violence. "He is crazy," they said ; "He has lost His senses." This was not the only comment made on the rapt intense mood in which Jesus pursued His work. There were scribes from Jerusalem present who made a more sinister comment. They said, "He has Beelzebub ; it is by the prince of the demons that He casts out the demons." It is plain from the second part of this cruel saying that the work in which Jesus had so lost Himself was in part at least the work of expelling evil spirits. Probably the tradition of Christian art, to which the countenance of Jesus, whether pensive

or majestic or compassionate, is always in repose, tends to mislead our minds here. If we can judge by the indications in the Gospels, the Spirit that was in Him reacted with intense vehemence against the delusions and degradations of the possessed; the Evangelists give emphasis to the peremptory and commanding words with which He delivered them. If there had not been a visible strain and excitement in such miracles it would never have occurred to His friends to say he was beside Himself, or to His enemies to say He was possessed. It is the accusing comment of the scribes that Jesus goes on to answer in Mark iii. 23 ff., and it is at the close of His confutation of these adversaries that the solemn utterance stands which has occasioned so much discussion. "Verily I say unto you, all their sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and their blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme; but whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin: because they said, He hath an unclean spirit." This is the form of Jesus' saying to which Wellhausen, for example, gives the preference. The point to notice in it is the absence of any reference to the Son of Man. On this view, the difficulty of the interpreter is not to distinguish between speaking against the Son of Man and speaking against the Spirit; but between sin and blasphemy generally, and blasphemy against the Spirit in particular. No doubt this simplifies the situation considerably, but there are two considerations which excite misgiving. First, if this is the true form of Jesus' saying, how did the other, in which the contrast between the Son of Man and the Spirit is the point on which everything turns, ever come into being? And second, how are we to explain the occurrence here in Mark of an expression unexampled elsewhere—"the sons of men"? It may be said that in a solemn utterance like this the language of Jesus rises involuntarily to a poetic level;

but is it not more probable, when we look to the parallel in Matthew, that we have a trace here of a misread original which said something about *the Son of Man*? Mark seems to have intended his readers to take the verses which immediately follow (Mark iii. 31-35) as the sequel to iii. 20 f. The friends who had gone out to lay hold on Him had arrived while this discussion was going on. They were, as we now learn, His mother and His brothers; and it is in the same mood of intense and elevated feeling which pervades the whole passage that Jesus repels their intrusion. Though the point of the sword pierced his mother's heart with the word, He could not but say it: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Whoso doeth the will of God, the same is my brother and sister and mother."

In Matthew, we have no definite scenery as in Mark, but the Evangelist starts with such a case of exorcism as Mark only implies. Jesus heals a man possessed with a devil, blind and dumb. The crowds are profoundly impressed. Can this, they say, be the Son of David, the great deliverer whom God has promised to send His people?

Then the Pharisees—who can be practically identified with the scribes—make the same dark insinuation as in Mark, and are answered by the same arguments and illustrations. But at the close there is a difference. A verse is inserted to which Mark has no parallel. "He that is not with me is against me, and he that gathereth not with me scattereth" (Matt. xii. 30). This sounds like a warning against moral neutrality, yet who can suppose at this stage in the history that the scribes and Pharisees were neutrals in relation to Jesus? It requires some ingenuity to construe *v.* 31, in which the saying about blasphemy begins, as though it were closely connected with this. "Therefore—that is, in order that you may avoid the terrible peril involved in neutrality—I say unto you, Every sin and

blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men ; but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven." Discounting the connexion, however, this is in import exactly what we have in Mark, and the first Evangelist, we know, had the work of the second in his hands. But Matthew does not stop here. He adds in *v.* 32 : " And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man it shall be forgiven him ; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in that which is to come." When we compare Luke xii. 10, and remember parallel cases, it is evident that here we have a genuine doublet : Matthew has had the saying of Jesus transmitted to him in two forms—one, that which it has in Mark ; the other, that which is also preserved in Luke ; and in his own Gospel he has inserted both, one in *v.* 31, the other in *v.* 32. Which was used by Jesus on this occasion ?

It has been mentioned above that Wellhausen prefers the Marcan form = Matthew xii. 31. As he interprets it, this yields a true and impressive meaning. Blasphemy is the reviling of God, and even blasphemy can find forgiveness—in the case of Job, for example, when God hides Himself and proceeds in incomprehensible ways. But blasphemy against the Spirit cannot be forgiven, for the Spirit—by which we must not understand anything merely moral—is the finger of God (Luke xi. 20, Matt. xii. 28) extended from behind the veil ; it is His personalized power living and moving upon earth and announcing itself unmistakably to men, whether through impersonal effects or through men of the spirit and of power. The expulsion of demons is a work of the Spirit ; he who pronounces it a work of Satan reviles the Spirit and is guilty of eternal sin (Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Marci*, 28). True though this is, it may fairly be questioned whether the distinction on which it turns between blaspheming God when He hides Himself and blaspheming God when

He reveals Himself through His Spirit would have occurred to a hearer of Jesus ; and besides the considerations alluded to above, there are others which may induce us to think that the report in which the Son of Man is contrasted with the Spirit is probably truer to our Lord's words on the occasion. We do not, with J. Weiss, need to argue, from his peculiar phrase " the sons of men," that Mark himself knew the saying in this form, but shrank from " the large-hearted word " which left forgiveness open even to him who spoke against the Son of Man ; some undiscoverable accident of transmission or translation, for which he had no responsibility, may have given it to him in the form in which we find it in his Gospel. But there is something in the idea of Schmiedel, who makes it one of the five foundation pillars of a historical account of Jesus, that it could never have been invented by a Christian to whom Jesus was an object of worship. Such a worshipper would never have imagined an indulgence for reviling his Lord, and the presumption therefore is that this singular saying goes back to Jesus Himself. What, then, does it mean ?

Up to the present hour, interpreters seem to be radically divided. J. Weiss, in his commentary on the Gospels in *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, finds the key, following Wellhausen, in a distinction drawn between Jesus as a private person, and the power of God working in and through Him. He was intensely conscious, we must suppose, that this power was not His own, but God's ; it was something in the fullest sense of the word Divine ; it filled Him with awe as well as joy to contemplate the mighty works of redemption which it wrought ; He adored the love and omnipotence of the Father in it ; to blaspheme it was inconceivable, irreparable guilt. Men might say what they pleased about Jesus as a private person—little He recked of that ; but no warning was too solemn to be

addressed to those who reviled the power with which God wrought in Him to redeem men from the devil. There is an impressive truth in this, but there are two points at which it fails to satisfy the situation. If Jesus wished to speak of Himself as a private person, surely the Son of Man was of all designations the least appropriate for the purpose. It is a title which, as Holtzmann says, is relative to the Kingdom of God, exactly as the Son is relative to the Father. It describes Jesus not as a private person but specifically and definitely in His unique vocation. And further, when this is realized, we see that to speak a word against the Son of Man is not to be regarded as a trifle, about which He does not care, and we need not; the sense is rather that, serious as it is, such a sin may nevertheless find forgiveness, while there is a more deadly sin for which forgiveness is impossible.

Zahn, in his learned commentary on Matthew, follows another line, and contrives to make an apology for the Pharisees. He points out that there was much in Jesus which it was really difficult for men like them to understand; their critical misgivings, usually expressed in interrogative form, were very intelligible (Matt. ix. 3, 11; xii. 2, 10); they had not given any violent utterance to their growing bitterness; when they took counsel against Him it was in private (xii. 14), and the odious suggestion of Beelzebub, though it was aimed at Him, is not in Matthew (xii. 24) addressed to Him. Besides, according to Zahn, it was not really so bad as it sounds in our ears. Even such great and honoured persons as Abraham and Solomon were reputed to have held intercourse with evil spirits and to have practised magic arts; and all the Pharisees do here is to insinuate that a man like Jesus, who as an open violator of the law could not have the help of God, must do His mighty works, the beneficent and laudable character of which they do not

question, by the help of similar doubtful allies. The Pharisees are not committed against Jesus by what they say ; they are in a position of neutrality (xii. 30), and it is in view of its dangers that Jesus speaks (*διὰ τοῦτο*, xii. 31). The writer confesses that he finds it difficult to take this quite seriously. It affords no explanation of the contrast between the Son of Man and the Spirit. It does no justice to the attitude of the Pharisees to Jesus, which, in spite of *v.* 30, was as far as possible from being one of moral neutrality. It does no justice to the malignant reference to the prince of the demons. Least of all does it do justice to the extraordinary emphasis and solemnity of the words of Jesus.

Every writer, of course, writes to be understood without external aid ; but is it too bold to suggest that in reproducing the tremendous saying of Jesus and its setting each of the Evangelists has omitted something, and that we can only reach the mind of the Lord by combining them—though combination was never within their view ? The result would be somewhat as follows. Two kinds of sin are presented to us in Matthew, who is now assumed to give the true form of Jesus' words. Both are sins of the tongue, and both perhaps might be described as blasphemy. But though Matthew mentions both, he does not illustrate both. If we had to explain from his Gospel alone what is meant by speaking a word against the Son of Man, we should be left to conjecture, and, as the specimens of interpretation given above show, to very precarious conjecture. Mark, on the other hand, though he does not present us with the contrast of the Son of Man and the Spirit, does present us with the illustrations, in speech, which enable us to understand and apply it. The petulant exclamation of the friends of Jesus, as they see how He is lost in the sublime excitement of His work, "He is beside Himself"—here we have the type of a word spoken against the Son of Man ; the malig-

nant utterance of the scribes when they see Him relieve the possessed—"He has Beelzebub ; in the prince of the demons He casts out demons"—here we have the type of a word spoken against the Spirit. How would this reading of all our evidence work out ?

It seems to the writer to yield an appropriate and intelligible application. Jesus, even where the pardonable sin is concerned, is not regarded as a private person ; He is never a private person in the pages of the Gospels ; He is the Son of Man absorbed in His vocation. In such a life as His there must have been much that was baffling to those who were around Him. If there were a son or a brother under our roof to whom the one thing real was the Kingdom of God, who broke every earthly tie to give himself completely to it, who spent whole nights on the hillside in prayer to God over it, who was so absorbed in it that he could not find time for his necessary food, should we not be tempted to think that he required restraint ? Of course the friends of Jesus ought to have had greater sympathy with Him, greater appreciation of His work. They ought not to have made it possible for Him to say with the bitter accent of experience, "A man's foes are they of his own household." This was their sin. It was a real and a great sin, but not hopeless or unpardonable. Their hearts were not committed against Him, they were not deliberately and malignantly opposed to His work. Their petulant exclamation, gravely wrong as it was when we consider its object, was nevertheless impatient rather than deeply vicious. It was something they could be sorry for afterwards ; they would repent, and it would be forgiven.

It is difficult for one who hears or reads much of the endless discussion of Jesus going on around us to avoid the impression that speaking a word against the Son of Man is in this sense a common sin. Perhaps there never was a

time when the Gospels were so much read as at present. It is as though Jesus were surrounded by multitudes as dense and as interested as those which thronged Him in Galilee. They feel quite at liberty, too, to express their opinions about Him, and often—which is the point in the Gospel narrative—they do it with no sense of what He is and what they themselves are. They make their comments unembarrassed by any perception of the fact that Jesus is not a private person like themselves, but the Lord ; and that in the last resort it is not we who judge Him, but He who judges us. What is called the purely historical study of the Gospels—as if there could be any such thing where the personality of Jesus is involved—is apt to betray into this wrong attitude even those who know better ; and when it proves too strong for them, men speak of Jesus in a tone which is painful to Christian feeling, inadequate to the realities with which their words deal, injurious, in short, to the Son of Man. This is not a sin of no consequence because it is pardonable ; it is pardonable on the same condition as other sins, that it be repented, confessed and renounced. To cultivate reverent forms of speech where there is no reverence felt would be a doubtful gain ; we know how odious religious etiquette can be, and how insincere. But it is a Christian duty to cherish a reverent sense of the greatness of Jesus, and so to look at and listen to Him, so to love, trust and obey Him, that the sense of what He is may always rest on our hearts, and keep us from all that is irreverent in thought or petulant and disrespectful in speech.

When we turn to the word spoken against the Spirit, we have to recall the circumstances. Jesus had healed a demoniac, and the multitude were deeply impressed. What is more, He Himself was deeply impressed. He was conscious that the power which He exercised in restoring these dread-

fully afflicted creatures was power which the Father had given Him. It was the supreme token that God was visiting the world to deliver it from the evil one (Matt. xii. 28). It does not matter whether a first century form of thought, that of possession ; or a twentieth century one, which would speak of some kind of insanity, is used to present the facts to the mind : the facts themselves are indubitable. A power was present in Jesus and wrought through Him, bringing health to disordered minds, control to shattered nerves, purity to unnatural imaginations, God and his peace and joy to lost and terror-stricken souls. If we may say so with reverence, it filled Jesus Himself with devout joy. It filled the multitudes with undefinable hope : " Can this be the Son of David ? " But the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, " He has Beelzebub."

To understand this, we must remember it was not the first but the final word of the scribes about Jesus. The earlier part of Mark's Gospel gives a series of occasions on which they came into collision with Him and His circle. They were perpetually finding fault. " Why do Thy disciples fast not ? Why do they on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful ? Why doth this man speak thus ? He blasphemeth." The more they saw of Jesus the less they liked Him. Their aversion deepened into antipathy, and their antipathy into a settled malignant hatred. Mark has already told of a plot to destroy Him (iii. 6). With His wonderful works of mercy under their eyes, with a power at work in Him which its effects proved indisputably to be the gracious and redeeming power of God, they hardened their hearts and said " Beelzebub." It was not the exclamation of men who were irritated at the moment, and forgot themselves, so to speak ; it was the deliberate and settled malice of men who would say anything and do anything rather than yield to the appeal of the good Spirit of God in Jesus. This is

the blasphemy against the Spirit which Jesus pronounces unpardonable. He calls it eternal sin. It is sin which, look at it as long as you will, is never altered or transmuted by repentance ; and therefore it has no forgiveness, neither in this world nor in that which is to come.

If this is the true reading of the facts, it is clear that this fatal sin is not one which can be committed inadvertently, and that sensitive consciences which have been tormented with the fear that in some hasty but irretrievable word or deed they had put themselves forever beyond the reach of grace, have misconceived the situation. It may rather occur to some that the sin of which Jesus speaks with such solemnity is one which we can hardly conceive as being committed at all. But if we consider its nature, as distinct from the particular form in which it was committed by the scribes, this may well seem doubtful. The scribes were confronted by the appeal of God's goodness in Jesus, and rather than yield to it they contrived a hideous explanation which should render it impotent. Is this so very uncommon ? Is it not common enough for men who are annoyed or reproved by the good deeds of others to ascribe such deeds to unworthy motives, so as to relieve the pressure with which they would otherwise bear on their own consciences ? This is in essence the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is the sin of those who find out bad motives for good actions, so that goodness may be discredited, and its appeal perish, and they themselves live on undisturbed by its power. To take the simplest kind of illustration : when a selfish or mean man is confronted with the generosity of another, there is a natural reaction of conscience. It is a reaction of admiration. Conscience tells him instinctively that such generosity is good ; it is inspired of God : it is God's appeal to him to be generous. But he does not want to be generous, and he is not scrupulous about protecting himself against the

Divine appeal. He hints at ostentation in his neighbour, or the love of praise ; he suggests ambition, or the desire to have an ascendancy which is to be the reward of the apparently generous act ; and the generosity itself is perverted or denied. This, let us repeat, is in essence the sin against the Holy Spirit. When this temper is indulged, and has had its perfect work—when it has become malignant and virulent, as in the case of the scribes—who can tell where hope lies for human nature ? There is nothing in the Gospels, or in the whole appearance of Jesus, to encourage easy optimism on this subject ; on the contrary, the possibilities of badness which this temper disclosed in human beings evidently filled Him with awe. Can we be sure the people are few who in the bottom of their hearts regard the life which Jesus lived and through which God appeals to them as no better than downright madness—a kind of life against which they are finally resolved to defend themselves without scruple as to their weapons ? It is a sin that has a course, and is not consummated in an instant ; but that men are doing every day what is morally a piece with what the scribes did whose impiety moved Jesus so profoundly no one with eyes to see dare question. The securities against it are two. The first is, as in every sin, to withstand the beginnings—not to be suspicious of goodness in others ; not to be slow to believe in it, or quick to put an evil construction upon it ; to speak no slander, no nor listen to it. The other is to rejoice in the work of Jesus. It is the chief of all our happiness and security in the world that we do not become insensible to His presence and power among men, that we open our nature freely and joyfully to the impression of it, and to the measure of our resources become fellow-workers with Him. If we know what is being done in His Spirit and power—if we rejoice in it, promote it, give God thanks for it—the sin against the Spirit is one that need not make us afraid.

JAMES DENNEY.