

Rabbi Simeon ben Nathaniel said: Do not make your prayer a fixed task, but a plea to God for grace and mercy. —Abot 2, 18.

A stumbling block for Jews

The following excerpt from *The Gospel according to Moses* illustrates a difficulty Christians often face when discussing the Gospel with Jews. It is a direct quote from an actual conversation:

"I stand near the main doors [of the temple] talking to Henry, a newcomer to Chever Torah who struck up a friendship with me before he knew I was a Christian. But now that he knows, the dreaded question has come up again.

'You people believe there's no other way to God, right? I mean, except for Jesus.'

'Yes. That's true.' I desperately try to keep smiling.

'So anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus is going to hell?'

'Uh . . .'

'Do you realize what that means? That means my grandmother is in hell! And my favorite aunt and my uncle!'

'Well . . .'

'They loved God! How can you believe he would send them to hell?'"

Before Jews like Henry can sincerely consider the Gospel, somehow their concerns about the Christian doctrine of Exclusivism (often called "one way") must first be laid to rest. But how?

"Do not judge"

Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me," (**John 14:6**) so traditional Christian theology holds that forgiveness for sins and a peaceful and loving relationship with God is impossible apart from the work of salvation done on the cross and in the empty tomb. Does this mean we can tell Henry his family has probably gone to hell?

"Do not judge," said Jesus, "or you too will be judged." (Matthew 7:1)

- ▶ Is Jesus saying Christians should not judge the behavior of others? (Hint: read on to **Matthew 7:5**. Also see **1 Corinthians 6:1-6**)
 - ✓ Christians are called to judge the behavior of each other (and to use discernment—see also **Dt 32:29**, **2 Chr 2:12**, **Ps 119:125**, **Pro 3:21**).
- ▶ Is Jesus saying we should not judge the motives or intentions of others? (Hint: **Mt 10:16-17**)
 - ✓ Christians are called to use common sense to judge the intentions or motives of others.

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- ▶ Is Jesus saying we should not judge the spiritual condition of others? (Hint: **Ro 2:1-3** and note that like **Mt 7:2** our judgment of others leads to God's judgment of us.)
 - ✓ Paul cannot be speaking here of judging people's behavior or motives for the reasons already discussed (those things must be judged). Also, Paul says "you who pass judgment do the same things," which is not necessarily true of specific behaviors or motives (not everyone does every sin) yet it is true of sinfulness in general (everyone is a sinner). **Therefore Paul is forbidding spiritual judgment for sinfulness; he is saying that kind of judgment—the salvation or condemnation of souls—is God's job, not ours.**
 - ✓ The prohibition applies to specific individuals, not to corporate judgments.
 - We must say, "Anyone who dies without trusting Jesus will be condemned by God."
 - But we must never say, "Sally went to hell," or we risk the same fate ourselves.
 - ✓ So the proper first response to Henry's question is:
 - a) Christians can and should tell the world that all who die apart from faith in Jesus will be condemned by God, but
 - b) we must never presume to tell any individual person they are condemned, because
 - c) only God knows who has faith in Jesus.

"A whopper of a paradox"

In our study of the antinomies and paradoxes of the Bible we learned that, for those who believe every word of the Bible is true, the only faithful response to two apparently contradictory teachings within it is to embrace both teachings. This is true of the doctrine of Freewill and Predestination, for example, and the teaching that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, and many others. With that in mind, consider these two back-to-back statements by Jesus:

*But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God.
(Luke 12:9) NIV*

*And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven...
(Luke 12:10a) NIV*

Where the NIV translates "disown" above, most other versions render the word, "deny." So how can we reconcile these statements? Aren't "disown/deny" and "speak against" much the same? Yet Jesus says one will result in being disowned ourselves, while the other will be forgiven. One possible interpretation is explained below:

*"Honest rejection of Christ, however mistaken, will be forgiven and healed—
'Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven
him.' But to evade the Son of Man, to look the other way, to pretend you*

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haven't noticed...this is a different matter. You may not be certain yet whether you ought to be a Christian; but you do know you ought to be a Man, not an ostrich, hiding its head in the sand." (C. S. Lewis, "Man or Rabbit?" God in the Dock (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970) 111)

Yet Lewis leaves us with questions, because many other verses in the Bible that seem to teach that—contrary to **Luke 12:10a**—we must “speak a word” for the Son of Man to be forgiven (see **Ro 10:9** for example). Consider another quote by a giant of Christian thought:

A partisan of the most rigid orthodoxy . . . knows it all, he bows before the holy, truth is for him an ensemble of ceremonies, he talks about presenting himself before the throne of God, of how many times one must bow, he knows everything the same way as does the pupil who is able to demonstrate a mathematical proposition with the letters ABC, but not when they are changed to DEF. He is therefore in dread whenever he hears something not arranged in the same order. (Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 124)

It may also help to consider the second half of **Luke 12:10**, which expands Jesus' teaching on this subject:

...but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. (Luke 12:10b) NIV

- ▶ What is Kierkegaard's point? (Hint: Who is safer in an airplane, the pilot who fully understands the science of flight, or a passenger with only a vague idea about how the airplane stays up in the air?)
 - ✓ Knowing we know Jesus is not the same as knowing Jesus.
 - ✓ We must not confuse the form of faith in Jesus with the reality of faith in Jesus.
- ▶ Are “disown,” “speak against,” and “blaspheme” much the same concepts when applied to any Person of the Triune God? If not, why not? If so, why does God have such different responses?
 - ✓ They can be much the same concepts, but we must remember that the Son and Spirit have unique personalities and unique responsibilities so they are not applied to the same Persons. While all Persons of the Godhead are equal, one, and thus God of all there is, in some sense each Person interacts differently:
 - The Son is God interacting with physical creation.
 - The Spirit is God interacting with spiritual creation.Thus the rejection of one is different than the rejection of the other. And a word spoken against Jesus might be due to ignorance or misplaced anger, etc., but resisting the Holy Spirit is something one does in the heart, in a place at our core beyond ignorance and anger, beyond words and intellectual, philosophical or theological concepts, a place where the true condition of one's spirit and

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whether one is willing to humbly submit to God in love or not, is undeniable.

- ✓ Another way of thinking about this: speaking against the Son is about what we *have* done; blaspheming the Spirit is about what we *will* do or *might* do. God knows us on all three temporal levels (have, will and might) and thus judges us on all three levels. (John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 1999) page 168)
- ▶ What might it look like to “speak against the Son” while not blaspheming the Holy Spirit?
 - ✓ Perhaps a person who has been taught to mistrust or even hate Christianity all his life (a child raised in a Wasabi Muslim culture for example) could thus hear the details of the Gospel without allowing any real consideration of those details to pass through his mind. He would thus “disown” the Son. Yet that same person might “hear” the truth about the Second Person when the Holy Spirit whispers it directly to his heart, and accept the Son completely on that level. “Judge not” means we must not presume to say how God will respond to such a person.

How are we saved?

The following text explains the basis of reconciliation between God and many people of ancient Israel:

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13-16) NIV

The “country” and “city” referred to here are probably the new heaven, new earth and new Jerusalem prophesied in **Rev 21:1-4**, so this text means these ancient Israelites will join us in paradise (or we will join them).

- ▶ What is the basis of salvation today? (See **John 3:16-18** and **Eph 2:8-9**)
 - ✓ Faith in Jesus’ sacrificial death in our place to satisfy justice.
- ▶ What is the basis of the ancient Hebrews’ salvation—the “things promised” in **Heb 11:13** above? (Hint: see especially **Gal 3:14**. Also **Luke 24:49**, **Acts 1:4** and **2:39**)

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- ✓ Everyone in history has always been saved in exactly the same way: through faith in Jesus' sacrificial death in our place to satisfy justice, although those who placed their faith in this before the time of Jesus they did not know all the details of His sacrifice.
- ▶ Has God changed since their time? Is the human condition different today, or are people the same as they were in their time? What does this tell you about the basis of our salvation today, and theirs, then?
 - ✓ Of course God has not changed, but remains exactly the same.
 - ✓ From Adam and Eve until now, people also remain fundamentally the same.
 - ✓ This means God's requirements, and our responses, have not changed either. We have more information than they did before the time of the New Testament, but it is NOT this information that saves us. If it were, then everyone who was not a prophet before the time of Jesus would have been condemned to hell, yet of course this is not the case (see **Heb 11** and note that not everyone mentioned was a prophet).
- ▶ If an infant dies today, will God condemn the child to hell? If an infant died in Abraham or Moses' time, would God have condemned the child to hell? What does this tell you about the basis of salvation now, and then?
 - ✓ Arminians say a loving God will have mercy on the infant since it did not reach the "age of accountability."
 - ✓ Calvinists say it is possible that God will condemn some infants to hell, based upon His knowledge of what the infant would have done had they lived. (See the Sanders concept above.)
 - ✓ Either way however, the basis for mercy is God's graceful provision of justice on the cross, since both Arminians and Calvinists agree that all infants are born with fallen souls. The basis for mercy is NOT the infant's intellectual understanding of everything the cross means.

The New Covenant

Did Jesus initiate a "new covenant" on the cross, as He said at the last supper. This was a reference to the "new covenant" prophesied by Jeremiah:

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:20)

Some Christian theologians believe the new covenant represents a change in the way humanity is reconciled to God. Whereas before the cross, it was impossible to approach God based on faith in Jesus death and resurrection and God therefore made other accommodations for people of sincere faith die to their ignorance, after the cross no such accommodation is made. To examine this idea, read **Jer 31:31-34**.

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- ▶ Does Jeremiah's prophecy seem to indicate that the new covenant will exclude more Jews from reconciliation with the Lord?
 - ✓ No. See verse **34**, where it says, "They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."
- ▶ How might verse 33 of this prophecy relate with Jesus' warning in **Luke 12:10**? (See **Ps 51:17**, **Acts 5:3-5** & **15:5-8** and **Ro 2:28-29**)
 - ✓ Some point to **Mt 12:22-32** and say blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is strictly limited to the literal attribution of the Spirit's work in and through Jesus to the devil (Beelzebub). See also **Mark 3:30**. Ryrie even goes so far as to say this sin cannot be committed anymore, since Jesus is not longer on earth casting out demons. This interpretation is true as far as it goes, but it is too narrow.
 - It does not explain the paradox established by Jesus in **Luke 12:9** and 10, ("He who disowns me...will be disowned," and whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.")
 - It is not possible to blaspheme the Holy Spirit while accepting him into our hearts. Thus, it is not the blasphemy alone which condemns to hell, but rather the rejection of God that the blasphemy represents.
 - ✓ Since the "heart" is where the Spirit "resides" (**2 Cor 1:21**) blasphemy against the Spirit is refusal to allow the Spirit to enter our heart and guide our spirits (**Ps 51:17**, **Acts 5:3-4**, and **Acts 15:5-8**).
- ▶ Look for similarities between **Ro 2:28-29** and **Dt 30:6**. What does this suggest about the idea that there was a change in the way Jews are reconciled to God due to the new covenant?
 - ✓ The basis of love for God and praise from Him (i.e. acceptance by Him) has always been the same: God's grace alone, as demonstrated with a heart change only God can provide.
- ▶ Note Paul's use of the word "Spirit" in **Ro 2:29**. How does this relate to Jesus' teaching in **Luke 12:9-10** and the "promise" seen and welcomed from a distance by the people in **Heb 11:13-16**?
 - ✓ Blasphemy of the Spirit is any choice to turn Him away when He offers to "circumcise" our hearts through faith in Jesus (that is, enter into a covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation with us on the basis of the cross). This includes attribution of His work to the devil, and any other form of denying Him in the heart.
- ▶ In view of the lessons learned today, what is your understanding of Paul's meaning in **Ro 11:26-29**? Does "all Israel" apply to every ethnic Jew? Does it apply only to Jews who have placed their faith in the historical facts of the Gospel (see **Ro 11:25** & **33**)? How does the story of **Jonah** compare to this passage in Romans?

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- ✓ "All Israel" cannot apply to every ethnic Jew, because Paul has already established ethnicity as irrelevant for salvation. (**Ro 9:6**) Because of that, and because the Scriptures are replete with statements that belief is essential, it must apply to believing Jews only.
- ✓ But it also cannot apply only to those who specifically believe in the historic facts of the Gospel and are therefore "Israel" in the same sense as all others who are grafted in, because "Israel" in this context is established as Jews alone in **Ro 11:7**, and because belief in the historic Gospel is not the basis called upon for their salvation here. Rather, "all Israel will be saved" is said in tandem with, "They are loved on account of the patriarchs" and "The gifts and his call are irrevocable." (**11:28 & 29**) Thus the belief is connected with Abram, who received "the gifts and the call" because he "believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness."
- ✓ This seems to contradict much of what we see elsewhere in the NT regarding salvation solely through a specific confession of faith in the historic facts of Christ's Passion, which is why Paul chooses to bracket this teaching with the preface, "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery..." and concludes with, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"
- ✓ Compare Paul's assertion to the story of Jonah, who did not convert Nineveh to Mosaic Judaism, but simply told them the Lord would judge them in 40 days. When they responded in faith and humility with sincere repentance, and their response was accepted by God, who withheld condemnation (**Jonah 3:4-10**). This reinforces the notion that God may sometimes grant salvation on the basis of the cross to some who do not know about the cross, (**Heb 11:13-16**) in the same way Paul says the believing Jews "will be saved" because they are "loved on account of the patriarchs" and because "the gifts and his call are irrevocable."
- ✓ Christians who find themselves becoming frightened or angry at the mere contemplation of this possibility (and many do) should consider God's response to just such a reaction in **Jonah 4:4-11**.

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