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**Ephesians 4:17–32 ESV**, edited for brevity

*<sup>17</sup> Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. <sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. <sup>20</sup> But that is not the way you learned Christ!—<sup>21</sup> assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to put off your old self, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

*<sup>25</sup> Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor. <sup>28</sup> Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. <sup>29</sup> Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

**Matthew 12:22–32 ESV**, edited for brevity

*<sup>22</sup> Then a man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. <sup>23</sup> And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” <sup>24</sup> But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” <sup>25</sup> Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? <sup>28</sup> But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. <sup>30</sup> Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. <sup>31</sup> Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.*

## **A tale of two cheaters.**

A year or so ago, I was teaching my 3D animation class at the University of Colorado at Boulder, when two students, who were buddies and had sat next to each other all semester, handed in projects that clearly contained work that was not their own. It was far above their skill level. It took some time, but after I repeatedly insisted that I was completely certain that they could not have done that work, they caved and admitted that they had downloaded professionally made 3D scenes and submitted them as their own work. This is gross academic dishonesty, worthy of at least an F in my class and perhaps being kicked out of the university. They asked me to please give them a second chance; they said that they had cheated only because they were intimidated by the complexity of the course, and that they panicked. They would do anything to make up the work, they said. Anything. Please, they said. I checked their records; they had good grades and had never been accused of cheating.

Let's consider our first passage for today. It's from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We've looked at this letter before; scholars by and large do not think that Paul actually wrote it. Its content and major themes vary significantly from his other letters. The letter doesn't focus on salvation through faith and freedom from the Old Covenant law, as Paul's letters usually do. And Ephesians is written

in almost unbearably long and difficult sentences, and this style goes on for page after page after page, something that Paul does nowhere else. Ephesians is also far more respectful of the Apostles than Paul usually is; normally, he seems to almost compete with them. The best guess is that the letter was written after Paul's death by a student or follower of us. Whoever wrote the letter was trying to honor Paul by putting his name on it, and as we have noted in the past, this was not considered fraud back then. It was actually relatively common. We have also noted in the past that Ephesians was apparently a circular letter, written not specifically to the church at Ephesus, but to a number of churches.

The main focus of Ephesians is to battle alternative forms of Christianity, like Gnosticism. He is trying to build up the Christian church as a whole, rather than correct or redirect specific people. And it was particularly meant for Gentiles to read, not Jews who were following the beliefs of Jesus. In Chapter 4, where our quote comes from, our would-be Paul is providing ethical advice, using a biblical literary technique known as "exhortation". This was also used by many non-Christian and non-Jewish writers of the time. The goal is to passionately work to convince the reader of certain moral beliefs. In the early part of Chapter 4, Paul urges the reader to live a life worthy of God's praise; the idea is to respond to the call of the Holy Spirit within oneself. In our quote, Paul is telling the Gentile

readers that they should not live as their people have been living - that is, living only for the rewards of this life. They should dedicate themselves to living the way Christ lived. They should not lie, but rather always be truthful. People who steal must understand that this is a moral violation and they need to change, and they should always do honest work. They are to no longer use filthy language, and their language should always build up the church. They shouldn't cause the Holy Spirit pain by living lives of sin. Finally, they must always be kindhearted toward others.

So, getting back to my students. CU is of course a very secular university, and I cannot lecture students as a reverend – although when I catch cheaters, I wish that I could. I was left in a quandary with these students. The university rules said that I could fail them, as well as report them as having committed acts of gross academic dishonesty. But when I catch someone cheating, I like to turn the moment into an opportunity for the students involved to learn and to grow. My feeling is that students often cheat when they don't believe they can do the work on their own, and I think they were indeed telling the truth when they said that the course material intimidated them. They thought they were in over their heads in the class. They felt that if they did their projects on their own, the results wouldn't be very good. Yes, there is a lazy factor; it's quicker and easier to

just have someone else do the work or to find a professional 3D artist's work to hand is as their own. But very often, fear of failure is the key driver of cheating.

I decided to sit them down and offer them an incredible deal: come back next semester, take the course again, and this time do the work on their own. I would grade them on what they did the second time around – assuming it was clear that this time, it was indeed their work. They did it. The second time around, and it took them a full semester, they did beautiful work, and they did it entirely on their own. They thanked me for giving them a second chance, and this time, they clearly took pride in their work. I gave them A's. You might think that this was extremely magnanimous of me, that I did something generous for no benefit to me - but this isn't really the case, and I'll get back to this.

Still, this all sounds nice, huh? We should always forgive. People should have a second chance. Forgiveness and regeneration are always available. But our second Bible passage makes it sound like there are actually limits to God's forgiveness. Jesus says the following: *And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.* So, if you say something bad about the Holy Spirit, that's it? No forgiveness, ever? I've done a whole lot of talking up here about forgiveness and the New Covenant. Was that all nonsense?

Was I lying? This passage from Matthew has caused a great amount of concern over the last two millennia. Let's look at it.

In this passage, Jesus has just healed a severely disable man. The head honchos at the temple say that if Jesus actually did cure this guy, he did it through the evil power of a pagan God. Jesus retorts by saying hey, you have young folks in the Temple who say they cure people, so I guess they're using the power of a pagan God, too. We've looked at this story before. But this time, let's focus on how Jesus ends this tale. Again, we see that he says: *And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.* Sounds pretty unforgiving. However, let's step back and look at the entire passage. It says: *Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.* <sup>31</sup> *Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.* <sup>32</sup> *And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.*

Consider this. Jesus is making a sharp distinction here between himself and the Holy Spirit. We tend to think of the Holy Spirit as this secondary, abstract entity that is certainly of less significance than Jesus himself. But that's not how

Jesus saw it. What Jesus is saying here is that you can even curse Jesus himself and be forgiven. But the Holy Spirit is the very reason that we can be forgiven in the first place. It is the Holy Spirit acting through us that allows us to regenerate. Forgiveness isn't a total freebee, in the sense that we could be forgiven, but then not be changed. We are certainly forgiven – yet, at the same time, whatever is within us that makes us do bad things, that personality trait should be at least partially healed in the process. If, on the other hand, instead of being healed, we are cursing or rejecting the Holy Spirit itself – which is a difficult thing to do and calls for a particularly depraved mind – then we are closing ourselves off to the regenerative powers of the Holy Spirit. This is the sort of person who thinks that they are above right and wrong, that they somehow are God-like, that they can do what they want with no consequences. A person like this has made themselves invulnerable to the workings of the Holy Spirit. Keep in mind that Jesus is directing these words at the Pharisees, who supposedly kept to the rules of God so stringently that they were holier, that they were on a higher morale plane than regular people. Jesus is telling them that if they are so blinded in their arrogance that they think he is acting through the hand of Satan or a false God, then they have cut themselves off from their ability to heal their souls when they do wrong. Just as the Pharisees were unwilling to question themselves, if we ever

get to a point where we cannot question ourselves – where we cannot see that we are always in need of forgiveness and regeneration – then we are totally and irrevocably lost. That’s what we must guard against, ever thinking that we do not need the Holy Spirit – because rejecting the Holy Spirit is spiritual suicide.

I wasn’t just trying to forgive those students when I forgave them. No, I was trying to let myself feel the Holy Spirit within me. In fact, it is God’s job to forgive them, not mine. In truth, I could have failed them and been totally justified in the eyes of God. I could have followed the rules of humans – of the university – and stood in perfectly good light with God. But I was in a sense being selfish. I wanted to make sure that I was listening to the presence of the Holy Spirit within me, and I believed that the Holy Spirit was telling me that at that particular moment in time, I personally needed to seek a certain kind of healing – the kind of healing that comes from being gracious to others. It’s often one of the hardest lessons for us to learn, that we can’t always demand our rights, make full use of our authority, be as hard on someone as the rules allow. Sometimes, we have to back away and be extra kind. We do this for ourselves, so that we never become separated from the Holy Spirit.

To step back for a moment, the Holy Spirit is only indirectly referred to in the Old Testament. This is because only with our New Covenant, are we blessed



with lives of forgiveness and regeneration. The vehicle for this is the Holy Spirit, who acts within us even when we are not aware of its presence. Let us never forget that grace, that magnificent gift, which is the foundation of the New Covenant and the most important concept in the New Testament, comes through Jesus, but it is dependent upon the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Grace is what gives us the ability to heal spiritually. Let me say it again: our willingness to accept grace comes through the workings of the Holy Spirit. Please pray with me.

*God, please walk with us, hand-in-hand, every day of our lives. Thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit. May we never lose track of its presence and may we never grow so arrogant as to disregard our need for the Holy Spirit. Let us be forgiven and let us be regenerated every day of our lives. Let us remain humble not just toward you, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, but toward all people. Help us to always see other people – and the good and bad things that they do – as opportunities to live out the blessings of the New Covenant and to grow ever closer to you. May we treat all people with dignity, forgiveness, and respect – and never forget that they, too, have the Holy Spirit with them. Let us remember that by being kind to others, we might awaken their acceptance of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we are then more fully regenerated. Amen.*