

The Unpardonable Sin

by Rev. Tom Aicken

The Lord Jesus spoke of a certain blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which is unpardonable (Matt. 12:31,32). Mark relates this comment of our Lord to the scribes who committed a similar sin when they said of Jesus that He had an unclean spirit (Mark 3:28-30). It is of interest to note that Jesus enlarged on that when He pointed out how anyone who spoke against Him, the Son of Man, could indeed be forgiven, but that anyone who so blasphemed against the Holy Spirit would not be forgiven (Luke 12:10). More on this last verse later.

All this raises important and very practical questions: What is this unpardonable sin? If there is forgiveness with God (Psalm 130:4), if He promises to forgive those who humbly confess their sins (1 John 1:9), and if this promise of forgiveness is freely and sincerely offered to all who repent of their sins (Rom. 10:11-13), what is it about this particular sin that closes the door, that turns away grace and ushers in the judgment of the Almighty? How was it, for instance, that Esau found no place for repentance though he sought it diligently with tears (Heb. 12:17)?

To begin, let every Christian know and be fully assured that it is impossible for him to commit the unpardonable sin. He is a sinner, yes, a sinner saved by grace, and sin will continue to plague him for the rest of his natural life. Though he should be thoroughly disappointed in himself as a result of that (1 Tim. 1:15), and needs the Holy Spirit to help him in all his weaknesses (Rom. 8:26), he may at any rate be at peace in knowing that he will be kept by the power of God through faith all his days here on earth until at last he is received up into glory (1 Pet. 1:5).

If you are a Christian, my friend, one who has always wondered what the unpardonable sin is about and whether you were subject to it, you may breathe a sigh of relief. This is not to say that you may regard what sins you do commit flippantly, thinking that they are not so bad or that you are somehow better and more deserving than others. As Christians, we may too easily quench the Spirit by resisting His influences (1 Thess. 5:19) and too often grieve the Spirit by neglecting or even opposing what His Word commands (Eph. 4:30). We ought, rather, to consider the seriousness of our transgressions, flee from them, seek the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit in order to pursue holiness, and thank the Lord our God that His love to us in Christ, believer, is a love that will never let you go!

It is, as we see above, only unbelievers who are subject to committing the unpardonable sin. Yet, while all who are without Christ need to be warned against this sin, there are certain people within their number who are particularly vulnerable to it and for whom the danger of committing it is most imminent. These are they who belong to one of three distinguishable groups of people, and because these three seem so very different from one another, I propose that it is helpful to examine them separately.

First, there are those like Judas Iscariot who appear for a time to be true disciples of Christ, people who only later prove to be apostate. These are described in Heb. 6:4-6 as having been once enlightened (received the gospel with some intellectual understanding), tasted the heavenly gift (experienced some measure of influence, yet still falling short of being regenerated), became partakers of the Holy Spirit (the conscience affected by common grace, but not at all by special grace), and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come (having some perception of God's goodness and acknowledging it to be so). Having assimilated some of these benefits apart from having been made a new creation in Christ does not, however, keep anyone from falling right away when later overpowered by an enticing desire or a determined resolve to veer off course. These are people who are said to commit the unpardonable sin and find no place for repentance.

Second, there are those like so many who grow up in Christian homes with the training and discipline of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), and are given along the way every encouragement to walk in His ways and to fear Him (Deut. 8:6), yet for all that they turn right away from the Lord and His Church when they move out and start homes of their own because they choose for themselves to walk a different path. They were not necessarily rebellious in their teenage years or disrespectful to their parents; it is just that they were never converted, had no heart for the Lord, but embraced the world and its ways instead.

I am not suggesting that all such people have committed the unpardonable sin – it may well be for some that they will later turn to the Lord, and let us pray that they will – but there can be no question that many of them have indeed committed it, something that is demonstrated by an increased hardening of the heart over time until they can only speak of Christ and the Bible with the greatest disdain. How does that happen? It comes about by their careless neglect of spiritual matters.

The Lord God declared very early in our history, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen. 6:3), and, while that statement was followed by a worldwide flood, it continues to stand as a warning to every generation until the end of time. Let all younger folk in the covenant community of the Church take careful note of God’s gracious invitations before they leave home, before they strike out on their own, especially His command to seek the Lord while He may be found and to call upon Him while He is near (Is. 55:6,7).

Third, there are also those who grow up outside the Church, people who have imbibed left-wing ideology and see no value in critical thinking, people who consider it their mission in life to mock the gospel and oppose every semblance of moral behaviour. We may not always recognize when they have crossed the line and committed the unpardonable sin, but the Scriptures do speak of their suppressing the truth in unrighteousness and being therefore without excuse (Rom. 1:18-20). When God will not put up with them any longer – what does He do? – He gives them over to their own vile passions, to go their own way (vv. 24-32), and one can scarcely imagine a greater curse to befall anyone!

Whether in or out of the church, therefore, let every unbeliever beware that as long as he is continuing in unbelief, rejecting Christ and mocking the gospel, he is inching his way to a Christless eternity, he is calling for the wrath of God to be unleashed upon him, and, apart from the regenerating grace of God, that sinner (without hope and without God) will inevitably and irretrievably plunge himself into the abyss of hell. Let all the unbelieving world take notice: You do not want to commit the unpardonable sin, and the only way to ensure that you do not is to seek refuge in Christ. Come to the Saviour, unbeliever, do so today, know that He is able to save to the uttermost all who come to the Father through Him (Heb. 7:25) and that He will not cast out any of all who do come to Him (John 6:37)!

To be sure, God does not desire the death and condemnation of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23), but let it be clear that all men are responsible for what they do, and the gospel message is absolutely certain and unchanging: God the Father loves His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and has given all authority and power to Him. “He who believes in the Son (trusts in Him, commits everything to Him) has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides (His righteous indignation remains forever) on Him” (John 3:35,36).

How were people saved in Old Testament times, which is to say before Christ came and lived among us? Whether under the Old Testament (looking forward to Him who was to come), or now under the New Testament (looking back on Him who has already come), salvation has always been by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (See John 8:56; Acts 2:29-36; Heb. 11:23-28.) From Adam onwards, in other words, no one ever came to God except through faith in Jesus Christ (John 14:6), for His is the only name under heaven given among men whereby we may and must be saved (Acts 4:10-12).

Is not God longsuffering? Indeed, He is, but His longsuffering is not the same as His striving with man forever. The best example I can think of for this is found in a text I quoted at the beginning, Luke 12:10. Let us look at it now in greater depth. On the cross Jesus prayed for those who crucified Him, pleading, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). That, however, is not the best translation. What He actually prayed for was not forgiveness but a temporary stay of execution. Jesus did not want His heavenly Father in a moment of anger to lash out at them, but to be longsuffering and to give them adequate time to learn from the apostles what His death and resurrection were really about. In time they did learn, and, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, even many of the priests who had crucified Jesus came to believe in Him (Acts 6:7). Wow! Who could have guessed that such a thing would ever happen?! But this is what that prayer for a stay of execution was about; it was to preserve the elect, even the most wicked among them, and to give them the opportunity they needed to repent.

The Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Church after the Lord Jesus went back to heaven (John 16:7), and He was sent at that time to testify of Jesus (v.14). One could crucify the Lord of glory because the Spirit had yet to come, but to deny that testimony of the Holy Spirit – the only One who could bring men under conviction, the only One who could take souls dead in sin and make them alive in Christ – is to commit the ultimate sin, the unpardonable sin, from which there could be no deliverance. O unbeliever, do you see what the unpardonable sin is, why there is no forgiveness for those who are left to go their own way and find no place for repentance? "Come to the Saviour, make no delay; here in His Word He has shown us the way. Here in our midst He's standing today, tenderly saying, Come!"