

Point of No Return

Matthew 12:31

The most fateful words ever spoken by Jesus had to do with the fearful possibility of committing the unpardonable sin. He said, "Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men." Matthew 12:31.

No one can misconstrue the clear message of these verses. There is a sin unto death. A man or woman may pass over a line which separates God's mercy and His wrath and not be able to come back. These chilling words of our Lord stand in stark contrast to His usually benevolent utterances. For this reason, if for no other, they should be examined with great care.

What is this sin which Heaven regards with such abhorrence and loathing? Why will God deal so severely with those who are guilty of this sin? To the human mind a great number of depraved and cruel acts might fall into such a category but which one of them would God count so heinous and horrible that it could never be forgiven?

Occasionally, one meets an individual who wonders if he has committed this sin. His prayers seem to bounce back from the ceiling, and he feels no hope of God's favor or forgiveness. Yet he can't identify any particular act of sin that severed him from the hope of salvation. How can he tell if he has actually committed the unpardonable sin? Can a person really know?

Before answering all the troubling questions people ask about the unpardonable sin, a glorious truth needs to be

recognized. We serve a God of infinite love and compassion. It is not His will that anyone should be lost. He has made provision in His Word for every soul to be cleansed and sanctified. The incredible promise of 1 John 1:9 applies to every man, woman, or child in the world today: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

On the condition of sincere confession, God promises to forgive any sin, regardless of its nature. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Isaiah 1:18.

What a special assurance for those who have violated every law of God and man in their wild plunge into degradation. God loves them still! There is no guilt too great for Him to cleanse away. He waits with outstretched arms to receive any who take the first step toward His forgiveness and mercy.

Such a picture of God seems totally at odds with the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:31, 32. If the Father is so willing to forgive and save, why should there be such a thing as an unpardonable sin? The answer is simple. This sin is never forgiven because it is never confessed. It is never repented of. God will not force His pardon upon sinners. They must repent and confess. Even the beautiful promise of 1 John 1:9 contains that significant little word "if" - "if we confess our sins. ..." On the authority of God's Word, we can be assured that every sin will be forgiven if confessed in faith and repentance.

Various opinions have been put forth as to why this one sin is never confessed. Some believe it to be suicide; others, that it must be some dreadful immorality or cursing of the Holy Spirit.

One thing is certain - it is a *sin*! That is a good starting point, because the Bible gives a simple definition of that ugly little word "sin." "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." 1 John 3:4. Paul enlarges on that statement by declaring that sin is the breaking of the Ten-Commandment law. "I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." Romans 7:7.

Not only does the unpardonable sin have something to do with the breaking of God's great moral law, but it also is an offense against the Holy Spirit. The nature of that offense is tied closely to the primary functions of the Spirit. Jesus said, "But the Comforter which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." John 14:26.

Besides teaching us all things, Jesus indicated that the Spirit will also "guide you into all truth." John 16:13. Every searching student of the Word has probably experienced this teaching, guiding influence of the Holy Spirit. There can be no true insight into biblical truth without the enlightenment of this Spirit of God.

The third mission of the Holy Spirit is to convict of sin. Jesus said: "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." John 16:7, 8.

It is the special work of the Spirit to reprove or convict us of sin. When wrongs are committed, the conscience is pricked with a sense of guilt. Please take note that as long as we allow the Holy Spirit to teach, guide, and convict, we could never be guilty of committing the unpardonable sin. But suppose we refuse to acknowledge these three offices of the

Spirit in our own personal experience with God? That is when people approach the deadly parameters of the worst sin on record.

It is intriguing to study the actual incidence of this sin in the Bible record. At one time practically everyone in the world passed over that point of no return. "And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years." Genesis 6:3.

Here God speaks of the antediluvian world which perished in the flood.

For over a hundred years the Holy Spirit pleaded with that wicked generation through the preaching of Noah. Although the very imagination of their hearts was evil continually, a small remnant of eight responded to the Spirit and entered the ark. All the rest were swept away in the raging waters which covered every inch of the earth's surface. After years of patient striving, the Spirit withdrew to leave the stubborn resisters to their chosen fate.

Could the same thing happen again? There is an amazing parallel between the days of Noah and today. Jesus said, "As it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man." Luke 17:26. The very same gross excesses are being committed right now in all the great cities of the world. Perversions of the worst degree still mark the carnal course of every nation under the sun.

Why did the vast majority of pre-flood people refuse to enter the ark of safety? Many of them actually helped Noah in the construction of the huge boat. The Holy Spirit deeply stirred them with conviction, but they would not move out to obey the message. Finally, God said, "Let them alone. My Spirit will no longer strive with them."

Is there going to be another flood? Indeed so. But it will be a flood of fire, utterly destroying this planet and its contents. How is the world responding to the call of God to enter the ark of protection and safety? The same Spirit pleads today; a similar message of separation and revival is being sounded; and the Spirit of God is being treated exactly as in Noah's day.

Insulting the Holy Spirit

I read in the Bible three things that people are doing to the Holy Spirit. First of all, in Ephesians 4:30: "And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption." Notice that people can grieve the Holy Spirit, and the Bible says it will be done in these last days.

What else will they do to God's personal representative? In Hebrews 10:29 we are told that men will despise the Holy Spirit. "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" That word "despite" means the same as despise. Just think of it! They will despise the Holy Spirit. And then let's get one other thing before us. This is in Acts 7:51: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." So there we have three things that men will do to insult the Spirit of God: they grieve, they despise, and they resist Him just as they did back in the days of Noah.

What effect does all this rebellion against the Spirit have upon the person who does it? Almost imperceptibly the conscience is seared and the heart is hardened. In fact, this is why it is counted such a terrible sin. Sometimes people say, "I don't understand why God should consider this the worst thing that can be done." I'll tell you why: because the

Holy Spirit is the only way God can reach an individual. There is no other way for God to save a person except through the Holy Spirit. That is the way we are led to repentance. If we do not have the Holy Spirit, there is no hope for us.

It's like a man out in the sea who is drowning alone, and somebody throws one life preserver to him. If the man will lay hold of that life preserver, he can be saved, but if he refuses to take hold of the only link to the shore, he will perish without hope. In the same way, we are in this world, and the only way God can reach us is by the Holy Spirit. If we turn away from that Spirit and refuse to listen and obey, God will have to let us go and be lost. This is why David was so deeply concerned in his great prayer of contrition. While pouring out his heart to God in Psalm 51, David said, "Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me." Verse 11. He realized that if God removed the Holy Spirit, he was lost. He would be left alone with no way of being saved. And that's why Jesus said that it's the unpardonable sin. When you cut yourself off and refuse to listen to the Holy Spirit, there is no hope for you.

Three Ways to Offend the Spirit

I've marked down three ways that people can commit this sin. The first way is for a man simply to say, "I don't want to be saved; I don't want to be bothered with God and the Bible." Once in a while you'll find a person like this. I'm glad to tell you that it's not very often. Most people really want to be saved, but now and then you'll find some who just aren't interested. They are perfectly satisfied with their materialistic world of the flesh. Notice what it says in Proverbs 28:13: "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." Those who don't want to give up their sins will finally convince themselves that they are happy without Christ.

They will eventually feel no conviction, and the Holy Spirit will leave them alone.

The second group which is so vulnerable to this sin reaches the same state of rejection by a different route. They really want to be saved and will tell anyone that it is their primary future priority to get right with God. Unfortunately, this class keeps waiting for that opportune time to step out into the path of total surrender. With all good intention, they allow the golden moments to slip by them until their wills have been paralyzed by indecision. Such people still talk about following Christ all the way, but their ability to act has been destroyed by procrastination. At last they linger too long and pass the point of no return.

Without doubt the largest group of unpardonable sinners is to be found in the third group I want to talk about. Strangely enough, these folks appear to be the most unlikely ever to commit the unpardonable sin. They are church members - perhaps even pillars in the congregation. Does that shock you? Why should these Christians stand in greater danger of this sin than the other two groups? Because they do not understand that truth is progressive. Millions of Christians have settled back in their comfortable pews, complacent about being saved. They feel absolutely secure in their conformity to a church, not realizing that baptism is only the beginning of a long, growing experience.

Said the psalmist: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." Psalm 119:105. The farther we walk into the Bible, the more truth is revealed, and the more accountable we become before God. He has never unfolded all the truth to any one person at any one time. A lamp only shines far enough to expose one safe step. As we move into that step, another one is revealed. As we grow in grace and knowledge, God requires us to move with the advancing light of truth.

Conscience Seared by Disobedience

Now suppose that I see the light from the lamp of God's Word, but refuse to obey it. Let's say that the Holy Spirit has convicted me, and I understand perfectly what He requires of me, but it is unpopular and inconvenient. What happens if I disregard the light and reject the truth which the Spirit has revealed - for any reason whatsoever? The Spirit continues to speak, of course, and for a time there is a battle in my conscience. I feel miserable and guilty. Days pass by, and even months, while I keep on violating my conviction of what is right. Gradually, the conscience begins to adjust to what is being done in the physical body. Slowly the guilt feelings begin to subside and the acts of disobedience appear less and less objectionable.

Finally, the truth which seemed so clear and uncomplicated in the beginning turns into a muddle of uncertainty. Rationalizations spring forth to justify disobedience, and the early convictions of sin fade away. Life is almost as comfortable as it was before the light came. What has happened? We have sinned against the Holy Spirit and are sinking into the state of the unpardonable sin.

You see, this deadly sin is not any particular act which can be isolated and labeled. It can be any sin which is cherished in the face of light and knowledge. It actually is a condition of seared sensitivity brought on by persistent disobedience to recognized truth. The reaction is similar to ignoring an alarm clock. The conscience becomes more and more tolerant of the pricking reminder of transgression until, finally, it no longer even recognizes the unwelcome sting of conviction. Like the clock it runs down, too, and just as well, because no one is listening any longer.

Do you begin to see that every-
thing really depends on what we do

with truth? James wrote, "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." James 4:17. It doesn't matter an iota whether we are rich or poor, Catholic or Jew or Protestant; the big issue is whether we are acting upon what we know.

Jesus expanded on this crucial principle. He said, "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin." John 15:22. Who, then, is accountable and chargeable before God? Those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit out of the Word. The sincere souls who are faithful to all they know, be it much or little, will be accepted. Sin will only be counted against those who have heard truth and rejected it.

Christ said, "If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." John 9:41. This whole problem of the unpardonable sin revolves around the issue of obeying what we know. On another occasion Jesus said, "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you." John 12:35.

Where does light come from? It is the Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth. When we refuse to obey the truth, we are rejecting the ministry of the Spirit who is our only link to salvation. We literally drive away the one Person whom God has sent to save us. Can you now see how self-destructive that can be? God's special messenger is grieved away by our deliberate refusal to respond to His invitations of mercy. God said long ago, "My Spirit will not always strive with man." He will say to the Holy Spirit at last, "Let them alone. If they insist in having their own way, do not pursue them any longer."

**Parent's Religion
May Not Be Good Enough**

Probably the most accurate description of the unpardonable sin in the New Testament is found in Acts 7:51: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye." How were these people fighting the Spirit of God? Stephen says they were doing it by hiding behind their fathers' religion. They simply followed in the same religious path that their parents had walked. Is there anything wrong with that? In this case there was, because the text goes on to describe them as those "who have received the law [of God] by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it." Verse 53.

Do you get the picture? Regardless of what their fathers had understood, these people received a law which God required them to obey. Every generation and every individual will be judged on the basis of what they know and how they obey it. Nobody's religion is good enough for anybody else because there are varying degrees of accountability for each person. My grandfather could be saved by following the light he had, but I couldn't be saved doing the same thing. I have a different measure of revealed truth for which God will hold me personally responsible.

The truth is that any person rejects and despises the Holy Spirit when he willfully disobeys any of God's commandments. According to the Bible, the Spirit cannot abide in the life of anyone who does not obey. "And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him." Acts 5:32. Again, Jesus said: "If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever." John 14:15, 16.

Known Sin Drives Away Spirit

Please notice that disobedience immediately disqualifies one to be Spirit-filled. This remarkable representative of God is

offended when His primary function is denied. His very nature is to make sin appear exceedingly sinful. Sin cannot comfortably remain where the Holy Spirit abides. Either the sin is renounced or the Spirit finally will be rejected and depart.

Refusing to walk in the light does not bring an immediate separation from God, but persistent disobedience continues to harden the conscience to the seriousness of sin. That state of darkness developed by repeated violation of known truth is what we refer to as the unpardonable sin.

Are church members and religious people really in danger of committing this sin? In one of my crusades a dear lady shook my hand at the door and told me how excited she was about the Sabbath truth she had learned that night. When I encouraged her to make a decision to keep the Sabbath, she earnestly replied, "I'm going to pray about it, and if God impresses me to do it, I certainly shall."

That answer may have a good sound to it, because it speaks of prayer, but it disappointed me greatly. Even though the truth was clearly revealed out of the Word, she was going to ask God for a final evidence before obeying. What was to be the acid test? A feeling. Is it safe to trust impressions as the criteria for truth? Never. Satan can create feelings as well as God. I was not surprised a few days later when she told me that God had impressed her that she did not have to keep the Sabbath.

Her mistake has been repeated by millions of good people. They do not understand that every impression from whatever source, must be tested by the infallible Word of God. "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." Proverbs 14:12. God never contradicts Himself. To lead anyone contrary to His Word would be a violation of His nature. The Holy Spirit always speaks in perfect harmony with the Bible. Paul asks

his hearers to take "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Ephesians 6:17. This reveals that the Bible is the cutting edge of the Holy Spirit. The two work together in convicting people of sin.

If a person decides that he is not going to obey the truth, will God recognize that decision and allow him to follow it? Yes, God will even permit a person to believe a lie if he chooses to do so. Paul spoke of those who "received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they might believe a lie." 2 Thessalonians 2:10,11.

Those who love a lie more than the truth will gradually be confirmed in it as the Spirit of God is grieved away. The thief who continues to steal after he has been convicted by that Spirit will finally see nothing wrong with stealing. The Sabbath-breaker who willfully continues to violate the Sabbath will someday begin justifying his sin. After a while his conscience becomes seared and insensitive to the influence of the Holy Spirit. There comes a day when God speaks for the last time, and the will, paralyzed by indecision and continued transgression, is unable to respond. Furthermore, the Spirit does not tell us when He begins to make that final invitation. We only know that the Holy Spirit will not always strive with man. At last God will say, "Let him alone."

Obedience Not Optional

The greatest mistake people can make is to believe that they can come to God whenever they choose. The truth is that you can only obey God when the Spirit is speaking to your heart. As a farmer, I knew there was a time to sow wheat and get a harvest of wheat, and there was another time to sow wheat, and get nothing. As an evangelist, I know there is a time you can say yes to God, and there is another time you cannot say yes.

One of the strongest statements Jesus ever made is found in Luke 13:24: "Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able." That text confused me for a long time. How could a loving God hold anyone out of His kingdom who was seriously seeking to enter in? It just didn't make sense. Then I noticed the words, "shall not be able." This placed the problem on the people instead of God. God was willing and able to take them in, but they were not able to accept His salvation. They had become so settled and hard in their long-term disobedience that they were incapable of true repentance. Like the seekers of the Old Testament "they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it." Amos 8:12.

Someday it will be too late to find salvation. Someday the door of probation will close, and no one will be able to enter in. Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. No wonder Jesus called this the sin that can never be forgiven. It is the sin of waiting too long to obey, until the soul is set in its mold of stubborn delay.

I repeat that you can only obey God when the Spirit is convicting you to come. When that Spirit is driven away and rejected, there is no possibility for repentance.

The interesting story is told of a great eagle who spotted the carcass of a calf being swept along the Niagara River on an ice floe. Swooping down on his mighty wings the eagle settled on the ice and began to feed on the carcass. Trusting the strength of those wings, he continued to feast until just before the deadly plunge over the cataract. Then he spread those powerful wings to make his escape, but alas, his talons had frozen into the ice, and he could not move. He was swept over the precipice and crushed on the rocks below.

I've also known people who waited too long to make a decision. Over and over again men have spoken to me at the door after a crusade meeting: "I know what you're preaching is the truth, and I'm planning to do something about it." Others tell me that they really are thinking about the things they have heard.

Is God looking for people who will be great talkers about the truth? And what about those who are always thinking about the truth? Jesus will never welcome anyone into the Kingdom with these words: "Well said, thou good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Neither will the Master ever say, "Well thought, thou good and faithful servant." But He will say to all who enter there, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: ... enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Matthew 25:21.

The most presumptuous thing anyone can do is to pray for an understanding of the truth, and then refuse to obey when God answers that prayer. It is better not to know the truth than to reject it after knowing. "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only." James 1:22.

Hearing and Not Doing

The real test of love is what we do with the truth we understand. It is really not very hard to convince people of what is right, but it is very difficult to convince them to obey. Doesn't that tell us something important? Satan knows that faith without works is dead, and he also knows that continued transgression grieves away the Holy Spirit. His most concentrated attack is upon the will, and obviously, he is having great success in causing people to postpone obedience. The longer they wait, the greater their chance of waiting longer, and the greater their danger of driving away the Holy Spirit.

Jesus faced the same problem in His own ministry. He had to taste the bitter heartache of seeing people turn away from truth. The crowd stayed until He got into some hard thing that required sacrifice and action. Then they all left. That is the most shattering experience for any preacher or teacher. I know because I've seen a few walk out, too. I'm not comparing myself with Jesus, but every soulwinner can empathize with Christ when He asked His disciples, "Will ye also go away?" Then Peter answered, "Where would we go?" What a question! Where do you go after hearing the full, unadulterated truth? Surely there is no need to look further for it, and additional light will only come after you obey what you have.

There is only one safe thing to do with truth - obey it! You cannot get over it, around it, or through it. It won't go away, and it will not change. We don't break God's law; it breaks us if we disobey it.

How can a person know if he has committed the unpardonable sin? The answer to that question is simple and easy. No one has grieved away the Holy Spirit who still has a conviction of sin and a drawing to God. Those who search and seek after truth have not yet passed the point of no return. But since the Spirit does not announce when the last, pleading call is made to the heart, no one should be presumptuous enough to disobey willfully a single known truth. The most deadly danger facing anyone today is to insult the Spirit of God by refusing obedience to His conviction. The results are the same regardless of the words we might use to justify it. The end is always separation from God.

The most deceptive aspect of the unpardonable sin is the seeming comfort with which people are able to live without God. Their lives are finally free from the conflicting turmoil of struggling with conscience. It did not happen overnight,

but the nagging convictions grow fainter and fainter, blending at last into a very comfortable, satisfied lifestyle.

No Christian should marvel at this amazing peace of mind which the unconverted seem to display. That deadly malaise is only apparent in those who no longer have two voices and two natures contending for the mastery. With the Holy Spirit gone, the flesh enjoys uncontested control over the heart and life. No more spiritual battles rage, and the unpardonable sin appears to have brought a measure of relief. But that mirage covers an empty soul, bereft of any capacity to pray or to trust.

Often, in my public crusade meetings, people express concern that they might have driven away the Holy Spirit. Even while they listen to the messages night by night, they are filled with fear that they have committed the unpardonable sin. To such I can give a clear and positive assurance that they are not guilty of this sin. If so, they would never be concerned about the things of God. Certainly they would not be found in the place of prayer and Bible study, expressing concern over their relationship to God. Obviously, the Holy Spirit is still drawing them and creating a desire for truth and salvation.

On the other hand, no one should feel secure from this sin who is walking contrary to the light God has revealed. Every person who is deliberately sinning will continue moving inexorably toward that fatal moment when the conscience is no longer able to respond to the Spirit's call. Our only safety, each moment, is to know that we are claiming the grace of God to obey every ray of light and truth which falls upon our pathway.