

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Miracles of Jesus	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	14	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Mark 3:28-29; Hebrews 6:4-8, 10:26-31; 1 John 5:17	
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THE UNPARDONABLE SIN: A MOST SOLEMN WARNING (Part II)

Last week I cited Old Bishop Ryle, who said the unpardonable sin that is mentioned in all three of the synoptic Gospels is a doctrine that, “is to be found in other places of Scripture beside this. I allude of course to the well-known passages, Heb. vi. 4-6; Heb. x. 26, and 1 John v. 17. In all these places there seems a reference to a sin which is not forgiven. What then is the unpardonable sin? It must be frankly confessed that its precise nature is nowhere defined in holy Scriptures. The most probable view is, that it is a combination of clear intellectual knowledge of the Gospel, with deliberate rejection of it, and willful choice of sin. It is a union of light in the head, and hatred in the heart. Such was the case of Judas Iscariot. We must not flatter ourselves that none have walked in his steps. In the absence of any definition in Scripture, we shall probably not get much nearer to the mark than this. Yet even this view must be carefully handled. The limits which knowledge combined with unbelief must pass in order to become the unpardonable sin are graciously withheld from us. It is mercifully ordered of God, that man can never decide positively of any brother, that he has committed a sin which cannot be forgiven.”¹ The great Puritan theologian John Owen wrote along similar lines. “There was in the sin of these persons *blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*; for they had received in themselves, or seen in others, those mighty operations of his whereby he gave attestation unto Christ and the gospel. Therefore they could not renounce the Lord Christ without an ascription of these works of the Holy Ghost unto the devil, which the devil acted them unto. So saith our apostle, *No man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus anathema, or accursed*, 1 Cor. xii. 3. To call him anathema is to declare and avow that he was justly crucified as an accursed person, as a public pest. This was done by these persons who went over to the Jews, in approbation of what they had done against him. This no man can do speaking by the Holy Ghost, -- that is, whosoever doth so is acted by the spirit of the devil; and if he have known the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the contrary, he doth it in despite of him, which renders the sin irremissible.”²

- I. **THE TERRIBLE REALITY OF THIS SIN.** What is the nature of the sin that confronted the Hebrews? Apostasy – but what kind? They were in danger of returning to the old cultic structure of Judaism and to its works-righteousness. In other words, as O’Brien points out, “This sin is Trinitarian in its scope, for it involves a persistent and culpable refusal to obey the voice of the living God who speaks in his Son and warns from heaven (Heb. 1:1-4; Heb. 12:25). It treats Jesus with utter contempt by crucifying him again, subjecting him to public disgrace (Heb. 6:6), and rejecting his new covenant sacrifice by which the work of atonement was completed (Heb. 10:29). And it arrogantly insults God’s gracious Spirit through whom Christ offered himself to God and who applies the definitive forgiveness of sins to believers (Heb. 10:29). The fact that it is willful, persistent, and committed in view of the knowledge of the truth rules out the possibility that it is due to ignorance (Heb. 10:26). Unlike other sins, offenses, and weaknesses of believers referred to in Hebrews that have been wonderfully atoned for through Jesus’ new covenant sacrifice and high priestly ministry, there is no provision for the sin of apostasy. For those who utterly reject God’s

gracious plan of saving people and bringing them to glory *there remains no more sacrifice for sins* (Heb. 10:26). In the light of this, the special character of the sin of apostasy must be understood clearly and not confused with other sins and weaknesses of Christians, as has often been the case throughout church history. Since this offense constitutes a total renunciation of everything that is distinctively Christian and which the person has previously professed, it is not the sin of the outsider or the one who is on the edge of church life.”³ The kind of disobedience that is foremost in our author’s mind is captured by Luther in his *Table Talk*. “Idolatry is all manner of seeming holiness and worshipping, let these counterfeit spiritualities shine outwardly as glorious and fair as they may; in a word, all manner of devotion in those that we would serve God without Christ the Mediator, his Word and command. In popedom it was held a work of the greatest sanctity for the monks to sit in their cells and meditate of God [solitude], and of his wonderful works; to be kindled with zeal, kneeling on their knees, praying, and having their imaginary contemplations of celestial objects [meditation], with such supposed devotion, that they wept for joy. In these their conceits, they banished all desires and thoughts of women, and what else is temporal and evanescent. They seemed to meditate only of God, and of his wonderful works. Yet all these seeming holy actions of devotion, which the wit and wisdom of man holds to be angelical sanctity, are nothing else but works of the flesh. All manner of religion, where people serve God without his Word and command, is simply idolatry, and the most holy and spiritual such a religion seems, the more hurtful and venomous it is; for it leads people away from the faith of Christ, and makes them rely and depend upon their own strength, works, and righteousness.”⁴

II. ***GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE.*** Notice that this description of God is directly connected with the absence of a sacrifice for sin. 10:19-39 is transitional material which exhorts the readers on the basis of the previous discussion (10:19-25), warns them of the punishment for “spurning” the Son of God, whose blood is the blood of the new covenant (10:26-31) and reminds them of their need for endurance in the struggle they face (10:32-39). The warning itself is directed against ongoing sin (cf. the present tense of the participle *hamartanonton*). This sin is deliberate, the note of willfulness being emphasized by the position of *hekousios* which echoes (but not precisely) the distinctions in Numbers 15:22-31. Such sin occurs after receiving the knowledge of the truth (10:26), which was a standard way of referring to making a profession of faith and is parallel to the description of Christian experience in 6:4-5. The argument is expanded by use of another *a fortiori* argument involving the threat of punishment under the old order. A greater punishment than the merciless retribution laid down by the Mosaic Law for murder, false prophecy, idolatry, and blasphemy is to be meted out on those who commit this deliberate ongoing sin.⁵

III. ***THE FATE OF THOSE WHO ABANDON THE FAITH.*** Apostasy is seen in three aspects.

A. ***The Act of Trampling Upon the Son of God.*** The sin in mind is therefore clearly seen as “willful apostasy,” which leads some to leave the Church (10:25). The readers are invited to consider the implications for themselves (*dokeite*). As in 6:4-8 there is no “way forward” for those who commit this most heinous of sins against the Son of God (the same title for Christ used in 6:6). The warnings this time are much more explicit and terrifying than any of those previously delivered. In 2:1-4 there was only brief mention of “just retribution;” in 6:4-8 there was the merest intimation of punishment of the apostate in the illustration of 6:8; in 3:7-4:13 the thought was of falling short of God’s rest but not of the punishment this would incur. Here in 10:26-31, however, the note of punishment is uppermost and is driven home by the use of the powerful images in 10:27, two scriptural quotations on the theme of God as the avenging judge (10:30) and a strong asyndetic sentence (10:31). The note of fear is captured by the inclusio between *phobera* (10:27) and *phoberon* (10:31). As the writer

elaborates the gospel more and more clearly, showing the superiority of Christ and the insufficiency of the Old Covenant, the warnings become more severe. The implications of apostasy become starker as our understanding of the gospel becomes more mature, and as the writer explains that gospel ever more clearly. The purpose of the warnings in 10:26-31, then, is to warn the *Hebrews* of the implications of rejecting the great high priest who has secured our entry into the sanctuary by his own blood, thus inaugurating the new covenant – an understanding of the work of Christ developed from Jeremiah 31, the author’s fourth major Old Testament text.

- B. ***Contempt for the Cross.*** The blood of Christ is what established the new covenant. The apostate, by turning away, treats the blood of the covenant as unimportant.
- C. ***Insult The Spirit of Grace.*** This is an assault of insolence against the Holy Spirit. My late professor of theology, S. Lewis Johnson, summed it up this way: “You notice here we have in the first case the act of trampling the Son, then counting the covenantal blood of the Lord God in heaven common, and then insolence against the Spirit or insulting the Spirit, and so the Trinity is involved; the Father, the Son and the Spirit, it seems. And so the Spirit is despised in the sense that the displays of the evidences of salvation are not taken as being real. Remember in chapter 2 in verse 4, where the author writes, *God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will.* These are individuals who have seen the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Gospel, but they’ve rejected it. Just like in our Lord’s case, and when he had performed the miracles they said, *He does his miracles by means of Beelzebub.* And our Lord, then, talks about the eternal sin against the Holy Spirit. And in this case, it would seem that unpardonable sin.”⁶

CONCLUSION: Kent Hughes has observed, “The Pharisees who committed this sin fit well into the experience of the apostates in Hebrews 6. They had been *enlightened* by their contact with Christ and his teaching (John 3:11; 9:39, 41). They had inchoately *tasted* of the heavenly gift in their beholding the spiritual blessings of Jesus’ ministry. They had been partakers of the work of the Holy Spirit in witnessing the significant deliverance of the crippled man. They had *tasted* the goodness of the Word of God both in their knowledge of the Old Testament and in Christ’s teaching. They had *tasted* the powers of the coming age in witnessing the miracles enacted before their eyes. But despite all these spiritual blessings, they attributed the miracles to Satan rather than God. Both in the case of the Pharisees and in that of the apostates in Hebrews, the sin is the same: *man’s full rejection of God under conditions of full exposure to light.* This amounts to *crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.* They stand with the crucifiers. They treat Christ, in effect, as only a man. If those who have been catechized and baptized and have become communicants and have experienced spiritual realities reject Christ, it is all over. Repentance is impossible. The Apostle Peter says of such, *For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them* (2 Peter 2:20, 21, NASB). There could scarcely be a greater warning imaginable for church attenders who, although they have been taught and baptized and are communicants, are not true believers.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹Ryle's *Expository Thoughts On The Gospels I* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 58.

²*The Works of John Owen VII* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1965), p. 51.

³Peter O' Brien, *The Letters to The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 2010), cf. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/01/09/warning-passages-ahead>.

⁴Martin Luther, *Table Talk*. This can be found at <http://toddruiitt.blogspot.com/2012/01/counterfeit-spiritualities.html>.

⁵I owe much of the exegetical analysis of this passage to Lee Gatiss for his handling of the warning passages in Hebrews. <http://www.theologian.org.uk/bible/hebrews-warnings.html>.

⁶<http://www.slj.institute.net/sermons/new%20testament/general/pages/hebrews33.html>.

⁷K. Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul I* (Crossway, 1993), p. 160.