

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 29, 1996 by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 12:31-32

“I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

IS ANY SIN UNPARDONABLE?

I have chosen this awesome subject today because on next Lord’s Day we hope to celebrate World Communion Sunday, when we sit down at the Table of our Lord with millions of other Christians around the world. It is perhaps on this Sunday each year, beyond all others, that we become very conscious of what it means to be part of “The Communion of Saints” — this glorious fellowship of blood-bought believers in every land and clime.

But today and during this coming week, it is our solemn duty to prepare ourselves spiritually so that we may partake worthily of the Feast to which our Lord calls us to be His guests. We want to deal with our sins, and have them forgiven so that we may come with joy to the royal banqueting Table.

Over the years I have encountered many people who feel that they have “messed up” so badly that for them there could be no forgiveness; and sometimes in their despair they have quoted these words of Jesus.

Now, it is surely impossible to reflect upon these words of our Lord without an almost frightening sense of awe, for they clearly pose this question: “Is there a sin you can commit for which you can never be forgiven?”

It is a preacher’s joy to tell his people that Christ can deal with sin, and with sin’s penalty and power; that He can bury our transgressions in the depths of the sea and remember them no more against us forever; that He can give us the moral strength and the spiritual motivation to defeat every foul assassin of the soul.

And yet, I must tell you this morning about one sin for which there can be absolutely no forgiveness. Some people think they have committed it. A doctor told me once that during his years of practice, many young people had come to him in a condition of anguish, thinking they had committed the unpardonable sin, usually because of some immoral sex adventure, with the accompanying fear of contracting communicable disease.

But let us get this clearly into our minds at the very outset — if you are genuinely worried because of any sin in your life, then you can be certain that you have not committed the unpardonable sin. If you are capable of worrying about it, you are incapable of committing it.

The person who has committed the unpardonable sin has no worry and no concern about his sins whatsoever. If you think you have committed it, then listen to the words of our Lord — “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men.” That includes your sin and mine. What you ought to do if your sins torture and condemn you is by simple faith to accept Christ as your sin-Bearer and Savior, receive the forgiveness He offers, allow His precious, shed blood to cleanse and purify your whole personality, and then leave this church a new creature in Him, rejoicing in His great salvation.

Brownlow North was an evangelist whom God used mightily to lead men and women to Christ in nineteenth century England. As a young man, North had lived an unspeakably vile life. But one day he encountered the living Christ, accepted Him by faith as his personal Savior, and thus became a completely transformed person. He felt called to preach the Gospel, and this he did with phenomenal success. On one occasion, while conducting an evangelistic crusade in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland, he received a letter from a woman who had at one time been his companion in sin. She wrote scornfully, “How can you stand up and preach after having lived as you have done?” And then she listed some of his more lurid sins. “Stand up before your audience tonight and read this letter to them, and let them see the kind of person you are. I challenge you to do it.” That night Brownlow North quietly read that letter to his congregation. And when he had finished, he said, “Everything she says concerning my past life is true. That is the kind of man I was. But it is not the kind of man I am tonight. For since Jesus saved me, I hate the things I used to love, and I love the things I used to hate.” Even Brownlow North had not committed the unpardonable sin. “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men.”

What, then, is “the unpardonable sin”? Mark tells us that the words of our text were addressed by our Lord to “the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem.” (Mk. 3:22) These religious leaders said that Jesus had “an evil spirit.” (Mk. 3:30) There was something in that slander of theirs that told our Lord that these teachers of the law were in peril of committing this sin against the Holy Spirit.

Notice how Christ draws a distinction between all other sins and the sin against the Holy Spirit. “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven.” Why this distinction? How can one sin against one Person of the Holy Trinity without sinning against the others? The answer is this — Jesus knew perfectly well that He was quite unlike the popular ideas concerning the promised Messiah; and therefore, misunderstanding and criticism of Him did not necessarily mean that a person had a hopelessly corrupt nature. Even His own mother misunderstood Him. His brothers and sisters thought Him mad. For a long time, even His own disciples did not realize Who He was. Jesus acknowledged the fact that a person might conceivably misunderstand, reject, and denounce Him in all good faith. In the days after Pentecost, the Apostle Peter told the Jews quite bluntly that they had “killed the Prince of life”; “but,” said he, “I know that you did it through ignorance.” (Acts 3:17) Therefore, “sin and blasphemy against the Son will be forgiven.”

But the work of the Holy Spirit is inward; it is the voice of God in a person’s own soul. These Jews, to whom our Lord spoke, did not understand the work of the Holy Spirit as we do, for Pentecost had not come. However, according to Jewish teaching, the Holy Spirit had two

supreme functions:

- First, the Holy Spirit brought God's truth to men and
- Second, the Holy Spirit enabled men to recognize and to understand that truth when they saw and heard it.

This means, of course, that there is in man a Spirit-given faculty which enables him to recognize goodness and truth when he is confronted by them. So the Jews believed.

So, you see, when a person sins against the Holy Spirit, he sins against his own conscience. He sins against the light that is in him. That is exactly what those teachers of the law had done. They had seen Jesus heal a man who couldn't see and who couldn't speak. Indeed, they had seen our Lord do many wonderful things. They had witnessed His deeds of mercy; they had heard His words of compassion; but deliberately they had hardened their hearts, and declared His ministry to be the work of the devil. That is to say, the vision of these teachers of the law, these so-called religious leaders, was so distorted by anger, fear, and hate, that they called this compassionate and marvelous work evil. They called light darkness, and they tried to persuade others that an act which was obviously a good act was an evil act, done by an evil man, for an evil purpose.

Let me try to illustrate what a dreadful thing that is to do. Many of you have visited the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky, caves that go back under the cliffs so far that the waters in the farthest recesses of the caves are completely dark. Now the fish that swim back there are quite blind. If such a fish is caught and examined, it is found that the structure of the eye is perfect, but the optic nerve is an insensate and shriveled thread. What had happened? Just this — the fish, living in the inky darkness of those waters and having therefore ceased to use the gift of sight, had lost its sight. The dread law of atrophy has been at work, the law by which the misuse or disuse of a faculty leads to the faculty being withdrawn. What you don't use, you lose.

Now, of course, a fish cannot sin. It has no power of choice. But, for the sake of argument, let us imagine for a moment that the fish swimming in the waters of those vast caves had the power to choose, and that some of them deliberately chose to swim only in the dark water. Having chosen darkness, in the course of time such a fish could not distinguish between darkness and light. If, later, it swam out into the blazing light, it would call it darkness! If it were confronted with the blazing midday sun, it would be unconscious of the fact. It now knows no difference between midnight and noon. It has committed the unpardonable sin. It has so blunted its power to distinguish light from darkness that it calls light darkness, and it cannot regain its sight. It has so disused and misused the faculty of seeing that the power to see has perished.

What, then, is the sin for which there is no forgiveness? It is the sin against your own conscience. The Spirit of God keeps trying to get through to each one of us, whispering to us in the innermost sanctuary of the soul, and saying, without any possibility of misinterpretation, "This is right, and that is wrong!" Suppose a person refuses to obey that still small voice of God as it speaks to heart and conscience. What happens? Slowly but inexorably the voice of the Holy Spirit is silenced, conscience is blunted, and the pitiable individual is rendered incapable of distinguishing between light and darkness, between good and evil.

Here is a person who does something which makes him feel utterly ashamed of himself. He vows he will never do it again. But he does. And each time he does it, it seems a little less wrong. Soon he begins to rationalize and say, "Lots of other people are doing it and enjoying it. Why shouldn't I?" And in time he reaches the point where he doesn't think it is so very wrong at all. Ten years later he does it, enjoys it, and his conscience troubles him not in the slightest! Am I speaking to someone this morning who is in that sad and perilous condition?

The unpardonable sin is not unpardonable because God refuses to pardon it, but because it leads a person to the place where through his own fault, he becomes increasingly incapable of distinguishing between what is sinful and what is not. It is the sin of so continuously calling good evil or evil good that the power of discrimination is destroyed, and therefore, the power to repent and flee from sin is irretrievably lost. The soul cannot respond to the light of God's truth, for it now knows no difference between light and darkness.

One of the most difficult tasks for a pastor to perform adequately is to minister to the dying. But if the dying person has lived his life without Christ, the minister's task at the end is often a nightmare; for when you witness to such a person concerning Christ and the salvation Christ offers, you are often confronted by sheer indifference. In the face of death itself, the person often feels no need of Christ whatsoever. He may be trusting in his own righteousness, like those Scribes and Pharisees of old; or, he may have resisted God for so long that the Holy Spirit has ceased to strive with him or to convict him "of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." (John 16:8) There is no repentance, and therefore, there can be no forgiveness.

Jesus Christ personally confronts every individual who has heard the Gospel, challenging us to surrender our will and our life to Him. When you stand in the presence of the living Christ, you know that you are face to face with incarnate Purity and incarnate Love; and if you spurn Him, then you are in grave danger of committing this sin against the Holy Spirit; for you thereby put yourself beyond the reach of God's forgiveness; and every time you evade the ultimate issue and deliberately reject Christ, you cause your heart to become just that much more hardened to the pleadings of His voice.

This leads us inevitably to the grim truth that you cannot be converted just when you please. Perhaps this is the kernel of truth in the mysterious and awesome doctrine of predestination. Do you know that most people are converted before they are out of their teens, and that a very small percentage of Christians were over thirty years of age when they made their commitment to Christ? And this is not difficult to explain. The prime time to be saved is when the conscience is tender and before it becomes blunted or even atrophied through misuse or disuse.

We have been reminded this morning of the physical law which is also a spiritual law, namely, what you don't use, you lose. Refuse, like those fish in the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky, to use your sight, and you lose your sight. And if a person, having heard the Gospel over the years, refuses to open the door to the Savior, the hinges will become so rusted that the door will never be opened — but the person doesn't even realize that the door cannot be opened, for he has no desire to open it!

It is possible for you to be concerned about your salvation today, but if you don't do anything about it, if you develop the habit of procrastination, if you don't immediately close with God's offer of mercy in Christ, then a year from now, you may not be the least bit concerned -- and that is eternal tragedy in the making.

The Puritans used to say that you cannot live for self and sin, and die in grace. D. L. Moody, the evangelist, once said that out of two thousand cases he had personally known of so-called "death-bed conversions", where the people didn't die but recovered, only two were genuine conversions. But you say, "What about the dying thief on the cross?" But I ask you -- "Which thief?" There were two of them, you remember. But one of them could be within inches of the Savior's outstretched arm, and yet die and be lost for all eternity! One was saved in the twelfth hour so that no one need despair; but only one, in order that no one should presume.

I read some time ago the brilliant biography of King George V of England, written by Harold Nicholson. I have always had a soft spot in my heart for King George V. I was born during his reign and spent my first sixteen years as one of his loyal subjects. I shall never forget the revulsion, indeed, the horror that I felt as a teenager, when his son, the new king, after a reign of only ten months, renounced his throne to marry a twice-divorced woman. But King George was a devout Christian who was never ashamed to stand up for his faith and for his Lord. He used to say with a smile that he loved his summer vacation at Balmoral Castle in Scotland because when he attended worship in Scotland, he was always sure to hear a good sermon from the Presbyterian preachers! But on his study desk in his library, he had a little plaque, placed there in front of him, where he could not fail to see it, and on the plaque were inscribed these three words — DO IT NOW!

The ancient Rabbis used to say to their people, "Repent the day before you die!" And when someone would say, "But I don't know the day of my death", then the reply would come like the thrust of a sharpened rapier — "Then repent today!"

If this discussion of "the unpardonable sin" has spoken to your condition, it has surely said this, in the words of the Psalmist:

"Today, if you will hear My voice,
Harden not your heart." (Psalm 95:7-8)

Or in the words of St. Paul:

"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor,
Now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:2)

"Today the Savior calls: Oh hear Him now;
Within these sacred walls to Jesus bow.

The Spirit calls today: Yield to His power;
O grieve Him not away; 'tis mercy's hour!"

AMEN.