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THE SIN AGAINST THE HOLY GHOST.

In Matthew 12 chapter and 31 and 32 verses Jesus solemnly declares that while all manner of sin shall be forgiven unto men, that is, in the appointed way, when they turn to God by faith and repentance, there is one sin which shall not be forgiven, and which, of course, places the sinner beyond the reach of faith and repentance, and that is the sin against the Holy Ghost. What is this sin? The inquiry is important both to saint and sinner. Many a contrite and trembling saint under deep conviction of sin, has been driven almost to despair from the false apprehension that he has been guilty of this sin. He has greatly feared where no fear is, because he knew not the nature of this sin. Whilst, on the other hand, many a presumptuous sinner living under the light of the gospel, has obstinately continued to reject the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Word, and to resist his strivings in the heart, until he has been given up to final obduracy and impenitency; because he failed to apprehend the fearful import of our Lord's language in this passage, and to heed the solemn warning which it contains.

In discussing this important subject we shall endeavor to answer the two following questions:

- I. What is the sin against the Holy Ghost?
- II. Why shall it never be forgiven?

In answer to the first of these questions we affirm:

1. *That the sin against the Holy Ghost must be some kind of resistance or opposition to the peculiar office and work of the Spirit in the economy of human salvation.* In a certain sense, every violation of the law of God is a sin against the Holy Ghost. For, considered as one of the persons of the Holy Trinity, he subsists in the same divine essence with the Father and the Son, and has the same infinite perfection and supreme sovereignty or au-

thority. The law of God is an authoritative revelation of his will as well as that of the other persons of the Godhead, and is founded upon that holy nature which belongs to him in common with them. Hence every violation of the law of God is contrary to that holy nature, and rebellion against that supreme authority which belongs to him in common with the Father and the Son. In the language of Jesus, however, there is a reference to a sin which is against the Holy Ghost considered in distinction from the Son, and this can be nothing else than some opposition or hostility to him in his peculiar office and work; which opposition, besides being a violation of the law of the triune God, and, therefore, a sin against all persons of the Godhead, is eminently and peculiarly a sin against the Holy Spirit, as it is directly contrary to his peculiar work and antagonistic to his gracious design in the salvation of lost men. Now, in the economy of human salvation, while it was the work of the Father to devise the plan of salvation, and of the Son to work it out, or, in other words, to purchase and procure this salvation, it is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit to reveal and apply it. Hence, the sin against the Holy Ghost must be some opposition or hostility to him in his peculiar work of revealing salvation to lost sinners, striving to convince them of their sin, and to persuade them to embrace the Saviour. And this will be obvious from a consideration of the occasion on which our Lord uttered these words referred to. He had cast out devils and healed diseases by the miraculous power of the Spirit of God. And these miraculous works of the Spirit were intended to convince the Pharisees of his divinity and messiahship, and lead them to embrace him as their Saviour. But, in their malicious and determined opposition to him, they blasphemously ascribed these miraculous operations of the Holy Spirit of God to the wicked agency of the Prince of Darkness. "This fellow doth not cast out devils but by Beelzabub, the Prince of devils." The miraculous works of the Spirit of holiness, they imputed to a Spirit of uncleanness. "They said, he hath an unclean Spirit."

Now, from this impious and blasphemous imputation, our Lord takes occasion to introduce the language recorded by Matthew, in which he teaches that all manner of sin, and even blasphemy, however heinous and aggravated, may be forgiven, and that men might blasphemously oppose and speak against the Son of man, and yet find forgiveness; but that, whoever would thus oppose and blaspheme the Holy Ghost, would never be pardoned. And why this difference between sin against Christ and sin against the Holy Ghost? We answer. Men might and did speak against and oppose Jesus Christ in *his redemptive work* of humiliation, suffering and death, through

ignorance of his true character, and through preconceived error and prejudice in regard to the temporal power and grandeur of the promised Messiah, and such men might be and actually were afterwards enlightened, convinced and brought to repentance by the power and work of the Holy Spirit. But those who oppose, resist and blaspheme the Holy Spirit in *his applying work* of enlightening, convincing and persuading sinners to accept of salvation, sin against the best and highest dispensation of grace, and there is no other resource, no remaining means by which they can be brought to repentance, and so obtain forgiveness.

The sin against the Holy Ghost may be defined as consisting in *a willful and contemptuous denial of Christ and rejection of salvation through him, after a clear knowledge and conviction of the truth of the gospel, from deliberate malice and enmity and with final obduracy and impenitency.*

Whether the Pharisees to whom our Lord at first addressed the words of our text, had already committed this sin against the Holy Ghost, is not certain. It would seem from the connection of the words, that they were, at least, in great danger of committing it, if they had not already done so. And that there is a sin which is connected with final impenitence, and which, therefore, placed the sinner beyond the reach of pardon, is abundantly manifest from other passages of Scripture. This sin comes under the definition which we have now given. And to notice it more particularly we affirm :

2. That the sin against the Holy Ghost consists in a willful and contemptuous denial of Christ and rejection of salvation through him. So the Apostle describes this sin in Hebrews 6 : 6, where he declares, concerning certain apostates, that "they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame," that is, they reject Jesus Christ and his salvation with abhorrence and contempt, and thus in heart and intention, crucify him afresh—they approve of the deeds, and are chargeable with the sin of those who nailed him to the accursed tree and exposed him to shame and reproach as a malefactor. Of such persons, the Apostle declares, that it is impossible to renew them again to repentance. And he refers to the same sin in Hebrews 10 : 29, "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, *who hath trodden under foot the Son of God*, and counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing," that is, who hath rejected and renounced Jesus Christ and his salvation with bitter hatred and haughty contempt, as we reject anything which we trample under our feet, and who hath regarded his blood as a common or unholy thing; that is, as no more valuable and efficacious than any other blood. To such a person,

the Apostle declares that there remains nothing but "a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries." But

3. The sin against the Holy Ghost consists not merely in neglecting Christ and his salvation, but in doing so after *a clear knowledge and conviction of the truth of the gospel*. It is a sin against light and privilege, against knowledge and conviction. It is this that makes it a sin against the Holy Ghost. It is the special work of the Holy Spirit to enlighten the conscience, and to persuade the sinner to embrace Christ. And he who persists in rejecting Christ after he has enjoyed the light, and testimony, and striving of the Spirit, not only tramples under foot the Son of God, but *does despite unto the Spirit of grace*. He resists and opposes the blessed Spirit in his special work and gracious design of bringing the soul to Christ, and is guilty of sin and blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. But without this precious enlightenment and conviction no man can be guilty of the sin that shall not be forgiven—even though his sin may consist in an obstinate and malicious rejection of Christ. The Apostle Paul was not only guilty of the sin of rejecting Christ, but in his blind rage and dreadful infatuation, he cruelly persecuted him in the person of his members. He was a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious. Yet he obtained mercy, because he did it *ignorantly* in unbelief. And the sin of those who nailed our Lord to the accursed tree and blasphemously derided and reproached him as an impostor was not unpardonable, because it was committed in ignorance and error with regard to the character of the work of the Messiah. Hence our Lord prayed for his crucifiers: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They were not beyond the reach of repentance and forgiveness. Hence, the Apostle Peter addressed the crucifiers of Jesus after his resurrection from the dead in the following language: "But ye denied the holy one and the just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you, and killed the Prince of life. And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers . . . repent ye, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord."

We are not, indeed, to suppose that ignorance either excuses or justifies sin, or that those who through ignorance and error, sincerely reject the Saviour, are not guilty before God, for why, then, should our Lord pray for the forgiveness of such sinners? Nay, the sins of ignorance are sometimes very great and aggravated, especially when the means of knowledge have been wilfully neglected or despised. And even the most excusable ignorance can only extenuate the guilt of sin—it cannot nullify or make it void. But a sin

committed through ignorance leaves room for enlightenment, correction and repentance; while the same sin committed in opposition to a clear knowledge of truth and duty, and contrary to the convictions of conscience, evinces a degree of hardness and deep-rooted malignity which places the sinner beyond the possibility of repentance. Hence, the Apostle clearly teaches that when persons have enjoyed the enlightening and convincing power of the Holy Spirit in the dispensation of the gospel, so that they have not only received a theoretical knowledge of the truth, but also some practical impression of its importance and necessity and great value, and then reject Christ and his salvation, and thus totally apostatize from the truth of the gospel, they are placed, even in the present life, beyond the possibility of repentance. "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, . . . if they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance." And the Apostle Peter seems to have reference to the same sin when he says: "If after they have escaped the pollutions of the world, through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them."

4. Again, this rejection of Christ and his salvation must not only be after a clear knowledge and conviction of the truth, but also from *deliberate malice and enmity*. Peter, with a clear knowledge and conviction of the truth, profanely denied Christ, but it was from sudden fear and infirmity of the flesh, and not from deliberate malice and enmity. And many of the early Christians, in times of persecution, were constrained by the fear of death or of some terrible torture, to deny Christ, and offer incense to idols, but it was not from deliberate enmity, and hence they so frequently afterwards obtained repentance and forgiveness, and were enabled finally to seal their testimony with their blood. And so again, many have, and still do, apostatize from the faith through the lust of gain or from an inordinate love of the wealth and promotion of the world, like Demas, who loved this present world, or like the stony-ground hearers, in whom the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches, springing up, choke the Word. Such persons, indeed, sin grievously, and are much less excusable than those who deny Christ from the fear of punishment. But still their sin does not entirely correspond with the description which the Apostle gives of the sin against the Holy Ghost, when he says, "If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there

remaineth no more sacrifice for sins." There can be no doubt that the Apostle here has reference to the particular sin of apostacy, called in the sixth chapter "a falling away," and what he affirms is, that there remains "no more sacrifice for this sin, but a fearful looking for of judgment," if it be committed *willfully*—that is, from spontaneous malice and enmity, and with a free will or deliberate choice—a choice determined neither by the compulsions of persecution, nor by the enticements of lust and passion. The same word in the original here rendered *willfully*, is found in 1 Peter 5 : 2, and stands opposed to all constraint, even that arising from the love of lucre: "Feed the flock of God—not by constraint, but *willingly*, not by filthy lucre, but of a ready mind." Hence, it appears that when persons deny Christ and reject the gospel under the influence of an inordinate desire for the gains and honors of the world, or from the love of carnal pleasure and sensual gratification, there is still some ground to hope that they may be brought to repentance and obtain forgiveness. This sin against the Holy Ghost consists in an obstinate rejection of Christ and a total abandonment of the truth of the gospel—not through the error of ignorance, or the terrors of persecution, or the constraints of carnal lusts and passions, but with the light of conviction and strivings of the Holy Spirit, and from willful and deliberate enmity and deadly hatred. Such a willful, deliberate and contemptuous rejection of Christ and the truth of the gospel is connected with final obduracy and impenitency; so that, although the sin against the Holy Ghost does not consist in final impenitency, yet it is inseparably connected with it. Such impenitency is the necessary fruit and evidence of this sin. For if those who are guilty of this sin could be brought to repentance, they would obtain forgiveness. But

II. Why shall this sin never be forgiven? "It shall not be forgiven, neither in this world, neither in the world to come;" which was the same as to say that it would not be forgiven. And so it is expressed in Mark 3 : 29: "He that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath *never* forgiveness."

And why is this the case? We answer:

1. Not because this sin, intrinsically considered, is unpardonable; not because it is a sin of such magnitude and enormity that the blood of Jesus is not sufficient for its expiation. To suppose that this sin is unpardonable in this sense, would be to suppose that there is a limit to the intrinsic value and efficacy of the atonement of Christ. But it is evident that the infinite dignity of the person of Christ gave infinite value to his suffering. The satisfaction which he offered to the law and justice of God was fully sufficient for the sins of all men that ever have or ever shall live in this world, if God had

been pleased to apply it to all. It is admitted on all hands that the death of Christ was of infinite worth or value as an atonement for sin; and hence there is no sin of so deep a dye that the blood of Christ can not wash it out,—no guiltiness, however great and aggravated, from which that blood cannot redeem. Hence the Apostle declares that “He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him.” That is, he has official and meritorious ability to save, not only to the highest degree of holiness and happiness, but also from the lowest degree of sin, degradation and misery; and no sinner can be so guilty and abandoned as to be beyond the saving power of Christ’s blood, if he will only come to God by him. He came into the world to save sinners, even “the chief,” and “his blood cleanseth from all sin.” And hence our Lord, in the language referred to in the beginning of this discussion, does not declare that the sin against the Holy Ghost *cannot* be forgiven, but only that it *shall not* be forgiven. He declares the certainty of the fact, that it will never be forgiven, but not the *impossibility* of forgiveness. If, then, this sin against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, it is not because of any deficiency in the merit of Christ,—not because forgiveness is not provided in the mercy of God through Christ for any and every sin, however great and aggravated, if the sinner will only turn to God and hope in his mercy. “Let Israel hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is *plenteous* redemption.”

2. Neither is it because forgiveness is not offered in the outward dispensation of the gospel. For the infinite merit—the complete righteousness—of Jesus Christ is brought near to every sinner that hears the gospel, and indiscriminately offered to all, yea, offered expressly and specifically to the very worst of sinners. “Hearken unto me, ye stout-hearted, that are far from righteousness: I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry.” God says to every sinner, without any exception: “Come, now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow, and though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” God clearly informs sinners in his Word that there is an inexhaustible fullness of grace and salvation laid up in Christ. “For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell.” And to this inexhaustible fullness of pardoning, renewing and saving grace he proclaims a universal welcome in the gospel; yea, he invites and entreats sinners, without any exception, to come *just as they are*, without any previous qualifications or conditions, and receive a full salvation in Christ. And there is no sin

so great as to exclude the sinner from the outward invitation of the gospel. But—

3. This sin is unpardonable because it consists in *the obstinate, persevering and ultimate rejection of pardon*. There is, as we have seen, no objective impossibility of the pardon of this sin, that is, no impossibility so far as the external provisions and proposals of the gospel are concerned; but there is a subjective impossibility in the nature of the sin itself, and the moral condition of the sinner who commits it. A disease which is of such a nature that it causes the patient to resist and reject the application of the only remedy by which it can be cured, though it may in itself be no more fatal or incurable than other diseases, yet must remain uncured. And so, that sin which not only rejects the blood of the atonement but does despite unto the Spirit of grace, that is, withstands and resists all the external means and influences which the Holy Spirit employs in order to apply this blood, until the Spirit withdraws and finally abandons the sinner to himself, can never have forgiveness. How can it ever be pardoned, when there is no other blood by which pardon can be obtained and no other Spirit by which it can ever be applied? The guilt of this sin, indeed, may be no greater than that of other sins, and it may in itself be no more unpardonable than other sins, if that blood which was shed for the remission of sins were applied. But certainly the sin which consists in the persistent and final rejection of the application of the blood of Christ can never have forgiveness. And, let it be observed, that there is sometimes a final rejection of the blood of Christ even while natural life still remains, and the external means of grace are still continued with the sinner. There is sometimes a rejection of the blood of Christ connected with so much knowledge, deliberation and obstinate malice, that it terminates in a confirmed state of final obduracy and impenitency. There is a degree of resistance to the striving of the Spirit beyond which the Spirit ceases to strive, and judicially gives the sinner up to the darkness and delusion of sin. "But my people would not hearken to my voice, and Israel would none of me; so I gave them up unto their own hearts' lusts, and they walked in their own counsels." "But they rebelled and vexed his Holy Spirit; therefore he was turned to be their enemy and fought against them." Sinners, living under the light of the gospel, may continue to reject the overtures of mercy and obstinately persist in unbelief, until God finally gives them up to the power of unbelief, with all its fearful consequences, and says to them as he did to the house of Eli: "I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering forever."

We have an illustration of this in the case of the children of Israel in the wilderness. They persisted in their disbelief of the promise of God that he would bring them into the possession of the land of Canaan, notwithstanding all the signs and miracles which he wrought in proof of his power and faithfulness, until he gave them up to the power and to all the fearful consequences of their own unbelief, which consequences were eternal exclusion from the promised land and a miserable death in the wilderness. But there is a promise of entering into God's rest left to us, and we may also persist in our unbelief and rebellion against God, until he swears in his wrath that we shall not enter into his rest. We may resist the influence of the external means of grace, until the Holy Spirit withdraws from these means, and they become mere empty forms, which are observed in vain. We may stifle the impressions produced by the Word, until the Word has no more power to produce impressions, and may smother the convictions of conscience until conscience loses its susceptibility of feeling convictions. And then God will say, "Because I have purged thee, and thou wast not purged, thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee." "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still." Having answered the two questions, we shall now conclude with a few suggestions.

1. We are not to infer from this subject that sin, as such, against the Holy Ghost is worse than sin against the Son of God, as if the Spirit of God were a person of greater dignity and sanctity than the Son. For the different Persons of the Holy Trinity are all the same in substance, and are equal in dignity, power and glory. Opposition to the Son of God in his redeeming work is just as wicked and abhorrent to God as opposition to the Spirit in his applying work. And the latter sin excludes pardon, not because the Person of the Spirit is more glorious, or his work more sacred and important than that of the Son, or because opposition to him is in *its own nature* more wicked and damnable, but because the work of the Holy Spirit is the last and decisive work in the order of divine operation for the salvation of the soul. For he who violates the laws of the Father may find a remedy in the atonement of the Son, and he who, through ignorance and error, rejects the atonement of the Son, may also find a remedy in the grace of the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to cure our ignorance and correct our prejudices and errors; but he who persistently and effectually resists the Holy Spirit, in his enlightening, persuading and applying work, has no remedy left. His sin

can never have forgiveness, because it excludes the last and only remaining means of forgiveness.

2. This discussion of the subject may bring relief and comfort to those who fear that they have been guilty of the sin against the Holy Ghost, or of what is called the unpardonable sin. This very fear is itself the clearest evidence of the fact that they have not been guilty of this sin. Yet frequently there are persons living under the light of the gospel who are in deep distress, and who are sometimes driven almost into the anguish of despair, from the impression that they have committed the unpardonable sin. But their distress always arises from an erroneous view of the nature of this sin. They always suppose that its unpardonableness arises from some defect or insufficiency in the provisions of mercy, and not from the subjective condition of the sinner. They always seem to think that they have been guilty of some sin of such enormity and aggravation that, however much they may regret the commission, and desire the forgiveness of it, yet there is no forgiveness for it provided in the mercy of God, nor accessible to them in the offers of the gospel. What a fearful delusion! It is one of the suggestions of the father of lies, who, if he cannot keep the soul in a state of carnal security, always strives to drive it into a state of utter despondency.

The sin against the Holy Ghost consists, not only in a state of total insensibility with respect to the evil nature and fearful consequences of sin, but in the willful and obstinate rejection of Christ as a Saviour. And none who believe that Jesus Christ is really a Saviour, and desire pardon and salvation through him, can be guilty of this sin. It consists in a contemptuous despising of Christ and his blood as an atonement for sin, and in the obstinate and final rejection of all the evidences and proofs of his divine mission, which the Holy Spirit gives under the outward dispensation of the gospel. It consists in treading under foot the Son of God, and counting the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and in doing despite unto the Spirit of grace.

3. This subject, as unfolded, may speak a warning and admonition to those who are living under the light of the gospel, and yet living without God and without hope—continuing to despise Christ and reject the testimony of the Holy Spirit concerning him. What multitudes are living in this fearful condition! Let all such remember that every time they hear the free proposals and offers of the gospel and neglect them, they are guilty of rejecting Christ, and that such rejection may, for aught they know, be final—death may overtake them at any moment, and then their sin will never have forgive-

ness. Think of this, ye that forget God—ye that neglect the great salvation.

“Seek the Lord while He may be found, and call upon Him while He is near.” “To-day, if you will hear His voice, harden not your heart.”

WM. WISHART.

THE CHURCH AND THE LABOR PROBLEM.

NUMBER ONE.

The impression generally prevails that the Church sustains some important relation to the labor problem. Does such a relation exist, and if so, what is its nature? In glancing along this line of inquiry we notice, first and briefly, the present tendency to solidarity of capital on the one hand and labor on the other. If this growing solidarity were accidental or artificial, due to transient and avoidable causes, we might ascribe to it but little significance; but, on the contrary, we believe it to be natural and necessary. On the part of labor, as well as of capital, it results inevitably from the economic conditions existing, and the laws governing social and economic life. If it be true that capital and labor are “allies, not enemies,” the difficulty of solving the labor problem can not prove greater than that of accounting for its very existence. How can elements, having a powerful chemical affinity for each other, repel each other continually and separate more and more? The truth is, that employers and employes sustain to each other two distinct relations—the one harmonious and the other antagonistic. The interests of the two classes harmonize in the creation of the product of industry; they conflict when that product comes to be divided. The fruits of industry are limited in amount; and whether that amount be greater or smaller, it is true in general that the larger the share of the employer the less is that of the laborer, and *vice versa*. When such wages are paid as are necessary to the laborer’s physical welfare and industrial efficiency, there may still remain to capital a larger profit than is required to insure the maintenance of the industry and the provision of employment. In such case it would be to the interest of the laborer to obtain, and of the employer to withhold, an increased share of the fruits of industry. Capital and labor are engaged in a joint war of conquest over nature, and the labor problem is the contest waged by the victorious allies over the division of the spoils of conquest. “If it be incendiary to proclaim an irrepressible conflict between capital and labor, it is