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1906-07

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THE
Union Seminary Magazine

VOL. XVIII

OCTOBER—NOVEMBER, 1906

No. 1

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN.*

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In the immediately preceding context, the apostle is discussing the subject of prayer. "And this is the confidence we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us; and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death." He then adds the text: "There is a sin unto death. I do not say that he shall pray for it." What that sin is, he does not tell us. How those to whom he was writing might know when one had committed it, and so not pray for him, he does not inform us. Perhaps they had information on the subject of which he gives us no account. But, however that may be, what it concerns us to observe is, that the text plainly teaches that there is a sin that is unpardonable; a sin in regard to which no prayer is to be offered; a sin that crosses the "mysterious boundary that separates between God's patience and his wrath," and irretrievably dooms the soul to eternal death.

This solemn truth is taught in many other passages in these pages. It is taught in the Old Testament, as, for instance, by the Prophet Isaiah. When that prophet was commissioned to preach to his countrymen, he was informed beforehand that they would hear, indeed, but that they would not understand; that they would see, but that they would not perceive; that the only effect of his preaching on them would be that their eyes would grow dull, and their ears grow heavy, and their hearts wax fat;

*A sermon preached in the Seminary Chapel December, 1905.

that, indeed, in righteous retribution for their past abuse of the truth, it was not intended that it should have any other effect on them, and that, therefore, only a remnant of them would be saved. It is taught, also, by the prophet Hosea: "Let Ephraim alone; he is joined to his idols." The reference is to the tribe of Ephraim, which, because of its size and importance, is taken as the representative of the Northern Kingdom. "Let him alone. He has wholly given himself up to the grossest idolatry. In spite of all the instructions and warnings that have been given him, 'he is joined to his idols.' Make no further efforts in his behalf. Leave him to his fate." In such passages as these is this alarming truth taught in the Old Testament.

It is taught, also, in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark, our Saviour says: "All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme; but he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation;" or, as it is in the original, "is guilty of an eternal sin;" a sin whose guilt shall never be extinguished. Concerning his betrayal by Judas Iscariot, he said, "it had been good for that man if he had never been born"—a declaration that could be true, of course, only on the supposition that he would never be saved. Over the inhabitants of Jerusalem he exclaimed: "O that thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace; but now they are hid from thine eyes." In the sixth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews it is said, "it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame." And in the tenth chapter of the same Epistle it is said, "if we sin wilfully after that we have received a knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation that shall devour the adversaries." Thus, in a number of passages in the Old Testament and in the New, it is taught that "there is a sin unto death;" a sin in respect of which prayer is not to be offered; a sin for which no pardon has been provided.

Indeed, at first view, there would seem to be a number of such sins. I suppose that a casual consideration of the different passages I have just quoted would make the impression on almost any one, not only that each one of them makes mention of "a sin that is unto death," but that each one of them makes mention of a different "sin that is unto death." In the case of the Israelites, to whom Isaiah preached, it would seem to be taught that there is an indifference and insensibility to truth that is "a sin unto death." In the case of the tribe of Ephraim, it would seem to be taught that there is an idolatry that is "a sin unto death." In the case of the Jews mentioned by our Saviour in the Gospel of Mark, it would seem to be taught, and is taught, that there is a blasphemy against the Holy Ghost that is "a sin unto death." In the case of Judas Iscariot, it would seem to be taught that there is a betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ that is "a sin unto death." In the case of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, it would seem to be taught that there is a failure to improve seasons of gracious visitation that is "a sin unto death." In the case of those mentioned in the sixth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, it would seem to be taught that there is a falling away from great spiritual influences and privileges that is "a sin unto death;" and in the case of those mentioned in the tenth chapter of the same epistle, it would seem to be taught that there is a wilful sinning against clear light that is "a sin unto death." Thus, I doubt not that, at first view, these different passages would make the impression on almost any one, not only that each one of them make mention of "a sin unto death," but that each one makes mention of a different "sin that is unto death;" and no doubt that would be the conclusion after the most careful consideration, if the Saviour and the text did not so definitely assert that there is but *one* sin of this dreadful character.

But while there is but one "sin that is unto death," it is manifest, and it is a truth that it profoundly concerns us to observe, that this one sin presents itself in the Scriptures under a number of different forms. In the case of Isaiah's countrymen, it presented itself under the form of profound indifference and insensibility to the truth. In the case of the Ephraimites, it presented itself under the form of gross and obstinate idolatry. In the case of certain Jews, it presented itself under the form of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. In the case of Judas Iscariot,

it presented itself under the form of a shameful betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the case of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, it presented itself under the form of an utter failure to improve seasons of gracious visitation. In the case of those mentioned in the sixth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, it presented itself under the form of a total falling away from great spiritual privileges and influences; and in the case of those mentioned in the tenth chapter of that Epistle, it presents itself under the form of wilful sinning against clear light. It is manifest that the sin presents itself in the Scriptures under all these different forms, because all these sins are expressly declared to be sins unto death, and yet, at the same time, it is plainly taught both by our Saviour and the text that there is but *one* sin that is "a sin unto death."

Now, in what respect these sins, apparently so different, are all one; by what profound and controlling trait they are all gathered up into the dreadful unity of the single sin of the text, it is, I suppose, impossible to point out. Certainly there is little agreement among those who have made the attempt. The fact seems to be that God, in his Word, intentionally leaves the nature of the sin so obscure that it can not be accurately defined; and that he does this for at least two reasons:

One is that we have no right to know what it is, nor when it will be reached in the path of sinful progress. Suppose there were somewhere on our Atlantic coast a dreadful maelstrom that no one could approach with safety. Suppose, however, at the same time, that none of our citizens had any right upon that portion of our high seas; that no duty called them thither; that no interest demanded their presence there; that for some reason, no matter what, they could not go thither without violating the laws of our country; would the government of our country, in such circumstances, be under any obligation to have prepared a chart of that portion of our high seas distinctly pointing out the latitude and longitude of that maelstrom, and indicating just how near it might be approached with safety from the different points of the compass? Certainly not; and to any demand for such information on the part of any of its citizens, the government might well respond: "You have no business on that part of the ocean. No legitimate interest of any kind demands your presence there; as you well know, you can not go thither

without disregarding the authority of your government; and the very fact that you are seeking the information you now demand, seems to indicate you want to do something you have no right to do, and are trying to find out how you may do it with safety." Well, so no one has any right to know where this deadly sin is in the wide domain of rebellion against God. No one has any right to enter that domain; he has no right to enter it at a single point; he has no right to take a single step into it; and, therefore he has no right to know just how he may enter it, and just where he may enter it, and just how far he may go into it, without encountering this sin and incurring its fatal consequences. God does not give us this knowledge, then, because we have no right to it.

The other reason why he does not give us this knowledge is, that it would be grossly abused. Who does not know that if this sin were distinctly defined in the Scriptures and the point plainly marked out where it is reached in the path of sinful progress, the great mass of men would go boldly forward in transgression until they came right up to it, knowing that they could do it without forfeiting the hope of salvation? The nature of this sin, then, and its location, are concealed in the Scriptures, that men, not knowing certainly what it is, nor where it is, nor how soon they may reach it, may be deterred from going any farther in the direction in which it is known to lie. If a husbandman (as William Jay once suggested in substance,) wished to protect an orchard of valuable fruit from depredation, he might employ a pitfall for that purpose, and he might give notice by placards around the enclosure that he was employing that means for his protection; but he would not tell where the pitfall was, for then the depredators could easily avoid it, and enter the orchard at other points. But he would keep its location a secret with himself, that they might be afraid to enter it at any point, lest the very point at which they should enter should be the point of danger. Well, so it may be said that God seeks to protect the domain of his rights from invasion, and employs this sin as a kind of dreadful pitfall for the purpose; a pitfall on which, if any man steps, he plunges through into a hopeless eternity; and, not being willing that any should perish, he again and again gives notice in his Word that he is employing it for that purpose; but he does not tell just where it is. If he did, men would boldly and defiantly trample all over that domain, except right on that

fatal spot. But he keeps the location of it as one of the secrets that belong unto himself, that men may be afraid to invade that domain at any point, lest the very point of invasion should be the point of doom. For such reasons as these God has not told us precisely what the sin is, nor where it is, nor just how it may be committed.

But I now add, that, while he has not done this, he has graciously given us information about the sin of the most important character. He has plainly pointed out how we may know when we are approaching it. In other words, he, in his Word, names a number of sins of such a sort that pressed far enough—and we know not how far is sufficient—pass into the sin of the text and incur its doom; and to some of these sins I wish now to call your attention.

1. He teaches that indifference and insensibility to the truth, pressed far enough, becomes the sin of the text, and so “a sin unto death.” This, as we have seen, was the sin of the Israelites to whom Isaiah preached. Their ears were so dull; their eyes were so heavy; their hearts were so irresponsible to the truth, that even such preaching as Isaiah’s made no salutary impression on them; and it was fatal to them. Thus men may, under the preaching of the truth, so stifle the right emotions of the heart that they shall practically be destroyed, and then one of the most dreadful declarations of the Scriptures becomes true of them: they are “*past feeling*.” I heard a chaplain in the Confederate Army once say that during the war a surgeon was examining the wounded arm of a soldier, and he pricked it near the wrist, and asked him if he felt it. “No,” he answered. He pricked it higher up. “Do you feel that?” “No.” He pricked still higher up. “Do you feel that?” “No.” He pricked it near the shoulder joint. “Do you feel that?” “No.” The surgeon then turned, he said, to a friend standing by and whispered, “he is a dead man. He is past feeling.” What was thus true of a portion of that soldier’s body, may become true of the soul. It is with the sensibilities of the soul as it is with the organs of the body. A man may, for instance, abuse his eyes to a certain degree, and still be able to see, but let him carry the abuse too far, and, no matter what the consequences may be, he will never see again. So a man may resist and suppress the sensibilities of his soul under the truth for awhile in some measure, and still those sensibilities may

struggle for expression, but let him carry the irrational violence too far, and he will never feel again as he ought to feel, but his fate will be as certainly sealed as was that of many of the Israelities. He may afterwards "hear" the truth, but he will not "understand." He may "see," but he will not "perceive."

Are there any present who are indifferent and insensible to the truth? Does it arouse in your minds no serious thoughts; in your hearts no serious emotions? And has this been true of you for months, for years? I would not be faithful to you if I did not warn you that you are on the direct road to the sin of the text and no one knows how soon you may reach it!

2. God teaches that idolatry is a sin of such a sort that, pressed far enough, becomes the sin of the text. This, as we have seen, was the sin of the tribe of Ephraim. Notwithstanding all the instruction and warning they had received, they were not only guilty of idolatry, but they were so "joined" to their idols, that God forbad any further efforts in their behalf. He abandoned them to their fate. Thus their sin became the sin of the text.

Idolatry, however, has not disappeared from the earth. Men have not ceased to be "joined to idols;" for in what does the sin essentially consist? It essentially consists in bestowing upon some other being that worship which is due to God alone. But what is worship? How do we worship God? We worship him when we fix our thoughts upon him; when we fix our affections upon him; when we seek him; when we trust him; when we delight in him; when we serve him. When, then, these exercises of soul are bestowed supremely on any other object, that is idolatry. But every unconverted person bestows these exercises of mind and heart supremely on secular good in some of its different forms. Does he not fix his thoughts on it more than he does upon God? Does he not fix his affections on it more than he does upon God? Does he not seek it more than he does God? Does he not trust in it to supply his wants more than he does in God? Does he not delight in it more than he does in God? Does he not serve it more than he does God, in the sense that he puts forth more effort to secure its ministrations than he does to secure God's favor? His own consciousness distinctly tells him that he does, and thus, in God's sight, he is as truly an idolator as if he bowed down to stocks or stones? He is as truly an idolator as if he kissed his hand to Ashtoreth or offered incense to the moon.

Every unconverted person, then, is an idolator. And now, if any one has been guilty of this sin for years—for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years—is there no danger that the time may be near when God will say in regard to him, what he said in regard to Ephraim: “let him alone. He is joined to his idols?”

3. God teaches that the sin of rejecting Christ is a sin of such a sort that, pressed far enough, becomes the sin of the text. This, we know, was the sin of the Jews. Although “he was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners;” although “he spake as never man spake;” although he gave sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf, and speech to the dumb, and health to the sick, and life to the dead; although he furnished to them these and other incontestable proofs that he was what he claimed to be, their long-predicted and long-expected Messiah, they nevertheless rejected him; not only rejected him but insulted him; spat on him; scourged him, and, at last, put him to death between two thieves, as though he were a greater criminal than either of them. Thus did they reject him, and it was fatal to them. Rejected by them, he rejected them, and thus their sin became the sin of the text.

But men are still rejecting him, and in circumstances less excusable, perhaps than were those of the Jews. Most men now in christian countries know more about him than the Jews knew. They know more about his Person than the Jews knew. Many of the Jews thought he was a mere man. Many who are rejecting him at the present day know that he is “God manifest in the flesh.” They know more about his character than the Jews knew. Many of the Jews thought he was an imposter and “a ringleader of sedition.” Those who now reject him know that “he was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners.” They know more about the kingdom he came to establish in the world than the Jews knew. The Jews thought he had come to establish a great earthly kingdom. Those who now reject him know that he came to establish that glorious spiritual kingdom of which the Scriptures have so much to say. They know more about the meaning of his death than the Jews knew. They thought his death was the deserved penalty of violated law. Those who now reject him know that his death was a “propitiation for the sins of the whole world;” and so in many other respects. Thus, those who now reject him know much more about

him than the Jews knew. Therefore this solemn question presses for an answer: If their persistent rejection of him, with less knowledge, was so fatal to them, why should not the persistent rejection of him by multitudes at the present day, with greater knowledge, be equally fatal to them? Is there no danger that many are pushing this sin, as the Jews did, beyond the limits of God's patience and forbearance?

The unconverted, however, may say: "After all, our rejection of Christ is very different from that of the Jews. They shed his blood and put him to death. We certainly have not done that." That, of course, is true; and yet there is not that difference between their rejection of Christ and the Jews' rejection which they may imagine. They have not, indeed, shed his blood, but how have they treated it since it was shed, and shed that they might be saved? The Scriptures say they are trampling it under their feet; and if that be true, I suppose Christ would about as soon have had them shed his blood, as to have them thus, after it has been shed, trample it under their feet as they do the common dirt on which they walk. They have not put him to death, but how have they treated him since he was put to death, and put to death that they might live? The Scriptures represent that they are practically "crucifying him afresh." But if that be true, I suppose he would about as soon have had them crucify him in the first instance as to have them thus crucify him in this second instance, especially as the first crucifixion, painful as it was, was all over in a few hours, while this second crucifixion is repeated, continued, protracted, cruelly stretched out through months and years! There is no great difference, then, between Christ's rejection then and now; and, therefore, the solemn question may be repeated: If the Jews, with their less knowledge of him, pressed this sin so far that it became fatal to them, why may not men, with their greater knowledge of him, be guilty of the same disastrous folly at the present day?

4. God teaches that a failure to improve seasons of gracious visitation is a sin of such a sort that, pressed too far, becomes the sin of the text. This was the sin of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. For years they had had in their city the temple of God, and the oracles of God; the priests and their sacrifices; and prophet after prophet had been sent to them, and latterly Christ himself had preached the gospel in their streets. They had thus

had every needed means of salvation, but they had not improved these seasons of gracious visitation, and, therefore, the Saviour wept over their folly, and exclaimed: "O that thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things that belong to thy peace; but now they are hid from thine eyes."

But men are still failing to improve seasons of gracious visitation? Often the truth makes upon them a profound impression. Their minds are enlightened; their consciences are awakened; their affections are moved; their fears are alarmed. They are almost persuaded to become Christians. They have every advantage, at least, that the ancient inhabitants of Jerusalem had, and yet many of them as signally fail properly to improve their opportunities as they did. Ought they not greatly to fear that the final result will be the same?

5. There is time to mention, in a word, only one more sin, that, pressed too far, becomes the sin of the text. "If we sin wilfully," says the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "after we have received a knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation that shall devour the adversaries." Thus sinning against clear light may be carried so far as to become "a sin unto death." But are not multitudes deliberately and obstinately sinning against clear light? Are they not sinning against all the light of reason; all the light of conscience; all the light of nature; all the light of God's Word? Did the sun ever at noon-day pour down upon this world a clearer light than that light against which multitudes are every day wilfully sinning? Are they running no risk, then, of committing the dreadful sin of the text?

We thus see, that, according to the Scriptures, there are a number of sins, that, pressed too far, merge into the sin of the text. We should now observe that of all these sins every unconverted person is guilty. He is indifferent and insensible to the truth; he is an idolator in the sense explained; he rejects Christ; he has failed to improve seasons of gracious visitation and he wilfully sins against clear light. Thus, in all these different ways, he is running the risk of committing the sin of the text. Dr. Addison Alexander, describing this sin said:

"There is a time we know not when;
A place, we know not where;
That marks the destiny of men
To glory or despair.

"There is a line by us unseen,
That crosses every path,
The hidden boundary between
God's patience and His wrath."

To cross that limit is to die. And many of the unconverted, as if to make sure of crossing it, are pressing forward to it, not by one route simply, but a number of different routes! Is not this a fact of which it profoundly concerns them to take account?

In conclusion, I make just two brief remarks:

1. If any one wishes to know whether he has committed this sin, he has but to inquire whether he is truly concerned about his spiritual welfare. If he has a sense of sin and of its ill desert, and a desire to be delivered from it, and to obtain the favor of God, that is evidence that the Spirit of God is still in his heart, and that, therefore, he has not been abandoned. But if he is wholly indifferent to the subject of religion, and has been for years, it is impossible to say what is true of him. He is certainly in great peril.

2. It is important to observe, that, while there is a sin that in a special sense is a sin unto death, it is to be remembered that any sin that men commit may at any moment become as fatal as that sin is. There are diseases of the body for which there is no cure. They always result fatally. There are other diseases for which there are cures; but those diseases for which there are cures will, some of them, just as certainly prove fatal as the diseases for which there are no cures, unless the cures are used. So, while there is but one sin for which there is no remedy, and while for all other sins there is an all-sufficient remedy, those sins for which there is a remedy will just as certainly prove fatal as the sin for which there is no remedy, unless the remedy is employed. Let no one imagine, then, that he is in no special peril because he has not committed the sin of the text. Any other sin, through the sudden intervention of death, may at any moment become as fatal as that sin is. Let him, therefore, with all haste and earnestness, "flee for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before him" in the gospel.