

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 11

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

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We have noticed already that Hebrews is a sermon, composed like many good sermons, of alternating sections of exposition and application. The preacher makes an argument of the truth of God's word and then applies that argument to the life-situation of his hearers. We have come again to such a section of summing up, of bringing the points so far made home to the consciences of his hearers or readers. It is a major section of application in the heart of the letter and reminds us, in no uncertain terms, what Hebrews is about, what concern prompted its being written and sent, and what the preacher is after in his sermon.

- v.14 The exposition of Christ's high priesthood, which began in 4:14 and which we considered last Lord's Day evening, is now interrupted for the sake of another exhortation. This exhortation, in distinction from those that have preceded it in the letter, is more severe in its tone. He wants to say more to them about Jesus Christ, but has to prepare them to receive what he has to say. Their spiritual childishness reveals itself in their contentment with the *status quo*. In part, at least, this is due to the fact that further progress in their Christian life and understanding, in their devotion to Christ, would only put greater distance between themselves and their Jewish past and sharpen the already painful opposition they are encountering from their Jewish family members, friends, and acquaintances. You and I face this same temptation all the time: to stay put spiritually because progress would create greater problems for us with a spouse or with parents or with children or fellow-workers or friends. But, he goes on to say, spiritual stagnation is dangerous. True spiritual life and vitality depends upon solid food, just as the body requires meat as well as milk for health and strength. What is more, the spiritual and ethical discernment necessary to keep oneself from falling prey to falsehood and the temptations of the world requires a deepening knowledge and the constant exercise of faith.
- v.2 Each of the elementary teachings mentioned here had a place in Judaism, but had been invested with new and deeper meaning in Christian preaching and teaching. It reminds us of how Jews had been taught the gospel. The evangelists started with what Jews already knew and with the familiar trappings of their faith and worship and explained from them how they were fulfilled and found their meaning in Christ. Repentance from sin, faith, baptism, the laying on of hands (perhaps especially in regard to sacrifices and ordination but in Christian practice also a sign of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit), resurrection and judgment were all part of the Jewish religious worldview. But Christ imparted to them the meaning that had been largely lost in first century Judaism. Anyway, clearly, these were the first principles, the way the gospel was taught to Jewish people early on. It was now time to move on. Their faith is flagging and they need more meat to strengthen it.

By the way, "baptisms," or "washings," in this context, clearly refers to OT ceremonial washings and Jewish ceremonial washings. One of these washings, the ritual of the red heifer from Numbers 19 will be mentioned in 9:13. Few, if any of these was an

immersion, but here they are called “baptisms.” It is an argument against the view of Baptists that the word “baptism” means and must mean “immersion.”

- v.6 It is possible, perhaps likely, that some in this Christian community have already apostatized. Others are certainly in danger of doing so. So, the preacher does not hesitate to warn his hearers of the grim and irrevocable consequences of apostasy. There are many reasons to hold fast to Jesus Christ, but one important one is that if you turn away, there is no coming back.
- v.9 The little parable, like others in the Bible, reminds us that fruit is the evidence of living faith.
- v.10 Familiar as he is with the spiritual history of these people, he is confident that they really are true believers in the main and that, therefore, they will heed his warnings and remain faithful to Christ.
- v.12 Another of the many restatements of his great point in this sermon: hold fast to Christ unto the very end so that you can be sure that you will inherit what has been promised to those who believe in Jesus.

If you want an argument against allowing faith to flag, against dabbling with the idea of turning away from Christ and making peace with a spiritual culture that is antagonistic to a full-blooded Christianity, here is a show-stopper: once you turn back there is no changing your mind. There will be no possibility of righting this wrong. No chance to undo what will turn out to be the gigantic mistake of all mistakes. Apostasy, and that is what we are talking about, is the one sin that is not and will not be forgiven.

Now much is unsaid here, to be sure. This reality is addressed in a number of places in the Bible and it is elaborated in different ways under different names. John called it the sin unto death. Jesus called it the sin against the Holy Spirit. In the OT sacrificial ritual it is known as the high-handed or the intentional sin. But always the point is made that there is no possible recovery from this sin.

Now, that has troubled people. It seems to them to reflect poorly on God’s mercy and grace that he would not be willing to forgive certain people. I did a quick web search on “unpardonable sin” and got what was perhaps a typical cross-section of belief and teaching on this subject. A number were teaching that there was no such thing as a sin unto death or unpardonable sin and that the Bible had been misunderstood. One man taught that the unpardonable sin must be very rare today because one of the features of the sin is ignoring the evidence of miracles and we don’t have many miracles today. One dispensational site encouraged its readers with the thought that they could not commit the unpardonable sin because that sin was unique to a particular period of Israel’s history. When you have Christian teachers sure that there is no such thing as a sin committed in this world that will never be pardoned, no matter the Bible’s plain-speaking, you know that here the preacher has touched a nerve!

It is fair, of course, to say that, appearances notwithstanding, people who commit this sin, who apostatize were never genuinely Christians at all. John makes that point explicitly in discussing apostasy in his first letter: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” [1 John 2:19] Jesus said similar things in his parables and some of his other teaching in which he made the point that many seem to begin the Christian life, sometimes very impressively, whom subsequent events will prove were never Christians in truth, never born again, never genuine followers of Jesus Christ. They thought they were, others took them to be, but they were not and their eventual apostasy proved it.

It is also fair to say that the *cannot* is also a *will not*. It is not at all that such apostates will see the error of their ways and come back to God pleading for a second chance and find him implacably unwilling to extend them his mercy. No, what is said is that they will not repent, they will not see the error of their ways, they will not come back to God pleading for a second chance. They will remain hard of heart and convinced in their rejection of the gospel they once professed to believe.

Throughout Christian history and still today sensitive consciences, alive to the reality of sin and guilt, have wondered, have agonized over the thought that perhaps they had committed this sin unto death, this unforgivable sin. Read John Bunyan’s account in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* of those days, early on in his Christian life, when he came to think that he had committed this unpardonable sin and, in fact, *was told by an older Christian* that he probably had committed it – a Christian whose age, obviously, bore little relation to his spiritual maturity or understanding. Those were dark days for the young believer, wanting peace with God and thinking that he may have forever cut himself off from that peace. But, that is not what happens with this sin. The man who commits the sin unto death does not worry afterward that he might have done so. In the nature of the case he does not worry about it for he has rejected the very basis of such a concern.

I have a number of times dealt in my ministry with dear folk who have worried that in one way or another they may have committed the unpardonable sin and I have seen the fear and the confusion in their faces. They don’t doubt their guilt but they are terrified that now there may be no way to remove it, ever. They know there is a judgment and they are frightened because they think they may have forever cut themselves off from the only way human beings can stand in that judgment, namely by the grace of God through faith in Christ. And I always tell them, very confidently, the same thing. If you are frightened, if you are terrified that you may have committed the unpardonable sin, *in the nature of the case* you have not committed it. People who commit this sin don’t worry about it afterward because the sin itself is the rejection of the very idea that it is only by a living connection to Jesus Christ that we can be saved. People who commit this sin have given up the notions that Christ alone can save sinners or that only by God’s grace can sinners be made right with God, if they have not given up also the very idea of a divine judgment of human beings.

In his old-fashioned way, Thomas Guthrie, the author of the Presbyterians’ spiritual classic on the subject of assurance of salvation, *The Christian’s Great Interest*, put it this way:

“Whatsoever thou hast done against God, if thou dost repent of it, and wish it were undone, thou canst not be guilty of this sin; for in it heart-malice and despite against God do still prevail.” [160]

A story is told of a woman, a very devout woman, in the days of the Scottish covenanters who had lost her sense of salvation, believing that she had committed the unpardonable sin. She several times attempted to take her life. Her minister and other Christian friends had tried to console her to no avail. Donald Cargill the great minister and later martyr was called in and tried on several occasions to reason with the woman with no success. Finally, he came to see her again, and found her in the same determined mind as before. And so, staring at her, he took out his Bible, pronounced her name, and said, “I have this day a commission from my Lord and Master, to renew the marriage contract between you and him; and if you will not consent, I am to require your [swearing] on this Bible that you are willing to quit all right [in], interest in, or pretence unto him.” Well, when he spoke those words she knew she couldn’t do that and was right away brought back to a sense of peace with God. [Howie, *Scots Worthies*, 386] Well there is the difference between other sins and this sin: it yields no repentance, it brooks no repentance, it is interested in and seeks no repentance.

Nevertheless, it is a real sin and it is committed and has been committed times without number in the real world. It is, we are told here, the rejection of Christ and the way of salvation in him – in that sense it is crucifying the Son of God all over again – after one had been taught that way, had claimed to believe it, had confessed and worshiped Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and had been given some measure of confirmation of the truth of Christ and salvation in his or her own experience. Thomas Boston provided this classic definition of the sin unto death:

“It is a rejecting, opposing, and blaspheming, of Christ and the way of salvation through him, after a man hath been clearly convinced of the truth, and tasted the goodness thereof, by the inward operation of the Holy Ghost, and that deliberately, and wilfully, and avowedly, out of malice and despite against Christ and his Holy Spirit.” [*Works*, xi, 535]

You see how precise Boston’s definition is. Many times you encounter definitions of this sin that are not as precise as they need to be. For example, Augustine defined this sin as “perseverantia in nequitia et in malignitate cum desperatione indulgentiae Dei [continuance in iniquity and in evil together with despair of God’s forgiveness].” But many continue defiantly in evil for years before they are genuinely converted. The Apostle Paul is a case in point. And, those who commit the sin do not despair of the forgiveness of God. They have come either to a point of indifference toward God’s forgiveness or a positive disbelief in any such thing. Abraham Kuyper’s definition of this sin was “systematic opposition to God.” [*Work of the Holy Spirit*, 612] But that omits the crucial factor of the previous confession of faith in Christ and life as a Christian in the world. No, the Scripture’s teaching requires us to be precise about this particular sin.

Note the ingredients of this sin, then.

1. You have to be someone who has claimed to be a Christian, thought himself or herself to be a Christian, and was taken by others to be a Christian. Unbelievers, outside of the church, cannot commit this sin. The deepest, foulest sin that ever a man commits before he comes to Christ cannot exclude him from the promise of salvation or the hope of forgiveness.
2. You have to have had some real experience of the grace of God. This is very mysterious to us, of course, because we wonder what can be meant by saying that someone has “been enlightened, has shared in the Holy Spirit, has tasted the heavenly gift, has tasted of the goodness of the Word of God” when that person was not born again and never had true faith in Christ. But, strange as it seems, and difficult as it is fully to explain, we have seen it happen. Jesus spoke of those who received the Word with joy but then later had their faith choked by the cares of the world, the love of money, and so on. We have in this congregation seen what we took to be dramatic and wonderful conversions only to see them come to nothing over time. The joy seemed real to us and to the individual, he knew very well what the gospel meant and what was being offered to him, he rejoiced in the accepting of it and the hope of eternal life, but a year later or two, he was back in the world. Whatever these phrases mean, we have seen them come true before our very eyes. Robert Murray McCheyne put it this way in one of his solemn sermons: “Grace brought Lot’s wife out of Sodom, but it did not bring her into Zoar!” There was some kind of a beginning, but there was no happy ending. I know I have been amazed at this phenomenon through the years: people who seem so soundly and joyfully converted, who for some years even seemed to be such ardent Christians, and then, for whatever reason, the air is let out of the bag and they lose all interest and turn back to the world as if nothing had happened to them.
3. But, there is another thing: we are not talking here about backsliding, about a Christian who finds himself or herself caught up in sin and a sinful way of life. There is repentance for backsliders and forgiveness. We know that and are treated to cases of it in the Bible’s history. David’s case is only the most famous one. He fell into sin terribly but he did not commit the sin against the Holy Spirit and he was forgiven and lived the rest of his life a believer. No, to commit this sin, one must reject Christ and the gospel. One must fall away from more than simply holiness of life. One must leave Christ, turn away from him, commit apostasy in other words. There are many, many Christians, real Christians, who have passed through times of real rebellion against God, spiritual coldness or indifference, and active disobedience but have been restored by the grace of God, through repentance, to earnest faith and active holiness of life. Hebrews is not talking about that phenomenon. It is quite distinct from the sin against the Holy Spirit.

In the case of the sin unto death there must be a deliberate hardening of the heart, in full view of the implications of that hardening, in the face of the evidence of the truth of God in the mind and the experience of the individual. There is an overt refusal to hear what God is saying by someone who claimed to be a follower of Christ. That is why you have the sin against the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ teaching when he applies it to the Pharisees who could hardly be classified as former Christians. They claimed to be God’s people, the followers of the Messiah, they claimed to revere the Word of God, Holy Scripture, but when the Messiah came among them and when he was accredited by the most amazing miracles, time after time, miracles that occurred before their eyes, apparently Jesus detected the same obdurate spirit, the same defiance of the truth as it was revealed, the same unwillingness to bend before God that one finds in the Christian apostate.

They were like many religious people in Hosea's day who had committed the same sin. The prophet says of them [5:4-6]:

Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the Lord. ... When they go with their flocks and herds to seek the Lord, they will not find him; he has withdrawn himself from them."

There is a point of no return and Israel had passed it. They would not return, so hardened were their hearts through persistent refusal to heed the Word of God and God would not turn them, so offended by their arrogance as he was.

We do not necessarily know when that line is crossed. We cannot always be sure whether it has been crossed. But we know people who have crossed it. I know people who have crossed it.

There is a time, we know not when,
A point, 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.

Now that is true of every human being in a way. We never know when God will stop knocking at the door of any heart. We never know when the last real opportunity for salvation has come and gone in a life. But those lines exist and God knows where they are. But the difference with this sin unto death is this: in the case of the sin unto death that line is crossed while a man or woman is still in this world. The die is cast and it will not, cannot be changed even though a man or woman have many years left to live. And the line is crossed by the overt action of the person himself or herself. These former professors of faith in Christ turn away from God and all hope of salvation is lost forever. It matters not how long they may live in this world, nothing is going to change.

It is a terrible thing to see a person utterly disinterested in God's grace and Jesus Christ who once professed faith in Christ, to see a person utterly disinclined to serve Christ who once acknowledged him as Lord and Master. I've seen it and I know some of you have as well. These are people already dead though they don't know it. Without any hope though they care not. They are waiting for hell and nothing can change that.

And what was it that they did: they turned away from the gospel of Jesus Christ and went back to the world with their eyes wide open. Nothing a man or woman can do more profoundly offends the Father than such a betrayal of his son. Don't you ever do that. If you ever want to be in heaven, don't you ever, ever do that!