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UNFORGIVABLE SINS

Today's text: Numbers, Chaps. 15-19; Matt. 12:22-37

Extracts:

1. “**And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, And the priest shall make an atonement for the soul that sinneth ignorantly, when he sinneth by ignorance before the Lord, to make an atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him. But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people; his iniquity shall be upon him” [Num. 15: 1, 28, 30,31b]**
2. “Wherefore I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come” [Matt. 12: 31-32]

There is the story of an overzealous young party activist whose political party was in power in a developing country. In the past, when he had offended against the law, the police would let him go following a phone call “from above.” During one crucial re-election campaign, he physically assaulted a supporter of an opposing party who happened to be the son of a former head of state. He was immediately arraigned before a judge and charged with attempted murder. When asked how he would plead, he said with an arrogant air, “I am guilty with reasons!” The judge snapped back in anger, “Alright, you will give the reasons in prison!”

*Believers are like that overzealous party activist. Because we have Jesus Christ as our advocate before His Father [1 Jn 2:1], we have the audacity to believe that, if we confess our sins, God “is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us **from all unrighteousness**” [1 Jn 1: 9]. If we are not careful, we could one day commit a sin that cannot be forgiven, no matter how much we repent. Like the political activist, we could find ourselves in the prison of death and hell. The blood of Jesus is not for those already in hell!*

What are such sins? In today's Old Testament text, God calls them “presumptuous” [willful] sins. In the New Testament text, Jesus Christ calls them sins against the Holy Spirit. We need to know more about such sins and how to avoid them. Today's lesson is, therefore, a timely one.

1. Ignorance as a saving alibi!

Ignorance simply means “lack of knowledge.” What then does God mean when He says that He forgives sins committed in ignorance? The following references can give us clues:

- ❑ While dying on the cross, Jesus cried, “Father, forgive them, for they *know not what they do*” [Lk 23:34]. The Jewish political and religious leaders handed over Jesus to the Roman authorities because they believed that He had blasphemed by calling Himself the Son of God [Lk 22: 70-71]. The leaders acted on the belief that they were defending the truth of God, as they knew it.
- ❑ Saul was a major persecutor of the early church before he encountered Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. He consented to the death of Stephen. He “made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling {arresting} men and women committed them to prison” [Acts 8: 1-4]. Writing to Timothy later about his past life, Saul, now Paul, said, “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry. Who was before a blasphemer and a persecutor, and injurious: *but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief*” [1 Tim. 1: 12-14]. Here, we see that Saul the Pharisee had the knowledge of Jesus but did not believe in Him. Instructively, on the road to Damascus, the first thing that Saul said after Jesus had asked why he was persecuting Him was “Who art thou, Lord?” [Acts 9:4-5]. Now, his faith was in line with his knowledge!
- ❑ Insufficient knowledge is a form of ignorance for “if any man think that he knoweth any thing, *he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know*” [1 Cor. 8:2]. When Paul met certain disciples in Ephesus [who had performed baptismal rites John the Baptist’s way] and asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit since they believed, they replied, “We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost” [Acts 19: 1-4]. In the light of so many denominations in the modern church, one separated from the other largely by rules and rituals, the tendency for one group to claim spiritual superiority over others is based largely on insufficient knowledge of God’s purpose for each congregation.

The above examples suggest that ignorance can arise from our lack of relevant or adequate knowledge or our spiritual blindness to the truth. Ignorance is still harmful because God Himself has said, “My people are destroyed *for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee*” [Hosea 4:6]. Therefore, “ignorance” as used by God with reference to sin [Num. 15: 28] should be seen as the opposite of “presumptuous” [v. 30], that is, wilful or

deliberate. *God is saying that He will forgive sins that are not committed wilfully, and wilful sins lead to death, that is, they will neither be forgiven in this world nor in the world to come.* John summarizes it as follows:

*And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing 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. **There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.** All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death [1 Jn 5:14-17]*

How can we identify such deadly sins, which cannot be purged by confession and repentance? The main lead that we have comes from the words of Jesus that sins against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven on earth or hereafter [Matt. 12:31-32]. Let us take it from there.

2. Deadly or Unforgivable Sins

The seven sins that God hates are listed as follows [Prov. 6: 16-19]:

- ✓ A proud look
- ✓ A lying tongue
- ✓ Hands that shed innocent blood
- ✓ A heart that devises wicked imaginations
- ✓ Feet that be swift in running to mischief
- ✓ A false witness that speaks lies
- ✓ He that sows discord among brethren

I have heard it preached that these are the seven deadly sins. However, whether they are deadly or not depends on whether they are committed *wilfully*. Therefore, we need to dig more deeply for a clearer understanding. A good way to do that is to look at similar sins committed by different people in the Bible and how God punished them.

The simple rule to apply is this: when a sin will not be forgiven, instant physical death almost always follows because God has already judged the offender and sentenced him/her to hell. Let us take some examples, starting with today's text:

a) *Pride and Rebellion*

Korah, a Levite, led Dathan and 248 other famous princes and leaders from among the congregation and rebelled against Moses and Aaron, claiming, "Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?" [Num. 16: 1-3].

Does that sound familiar to you? Korah was a Levite, a member of the group favoured by God to serve as church workers and have access to the tabernacle of His presence. You mentor up and coming church workers to assist your church and its members in areas of their spiritual gifts. Before you know it, they are up to something else. They criticise their pastors and leaders and divide the congregation to suit their whims and caprices. As proud and rebellious subordinates fight for and claim their places under the sun, splinter groups soon emerge and move away to form new denominations or congregations elsewhere. Lucifer rebelled against God in heaven. Instead of leaving quietly, he fought with the good angels until he was thrown down to the earth [**Rev. 12:7-12**]. Can Satan ever repent and be accepted back to heaven? No way! He has been condemned to the bottomless pit [**Rev. 20: 1-3**].

Moses restrained himself. He did not try to solve the problem the human way. He asked Korah and his group to bring their censers [the fire pans for burning incense] and stand before the Lord the following day. The person that the Lord would choose would be regarded as holy. The proud man refused Moses' offer [**Num. 16:5-12**]. So, Moses appealed to God to resolve the matter. The next day, Korah and his group gathered the whole congregation before the door of their own tabernacle, thus assuming pre-eminence over Moses and Aaron. God descended in a cloud and asked Moses to isolate the others from the group of 250. Moses tried to plead with God for mercy but He did not listen to him [**vv. 15-24**]. God opened the ground under Korah, his supporters and families, which swallowed them up [**vv. 28-35**]. Even those who murmured against Moses, saying, "Ye have killed the people of the Lord" were killed in a plague. On the whole, close to 15,000 people perished [**vv. 41-50**].

b) *False witness*

God has assured us that before He does any thing, He will first reveal it to us through His prophets [**Amos 3: 7**]. However, there are true prophets and false prophets. The latter group stands a very good chance of committing unpardonable sins. A classical example was the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah [**Jer. 28: 1-17**]. Jeremiah had prophesied that the people of Israel would go into exile in Babylon. Therefore, they should not resist the attack of the Babylonian kings because it was God's doing. Hananiah prophesied peace and told the people not to believe Jeremiah. He even tore off from Jeremiah's neck the yoke of wood that God had commanded him to wear as a token of the people's coming bondage in Babylon [**vv. 1-11**]. Hananiah was a false witness because God had not sent him. God sent this message through Jeremiah to him, "Behold, I will cast thee from off the face of the earth; *this year thou shalt die, because thou hast taught rebellion against the Lord.*" Two months later, Hananiah died [**vv. 12-17**].

This is a warning to all of us. Quite frequently, one hears preachers and witnesses claiming on television, over the radio or in the church, that the Lord spoke this or that to them in their hearts, etc. They may well be speaking the truth. However, we should be careful not to interpret our thoughts as God's.

c) *Lying*

Lying means not telling the truth. Before God, there is nothing like a little or big lie. A lie is a lie and "all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" [**Rev. 21:8**]. *Deliberate lying* is a sin against the Holy Spirit and, therefore, unforgivable.

Ananias and Sapphira were a husband and wife who sold some property and brought part of it to the church, claiming that that was the whole price. Peter told the man, "Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? *Thou hast not lied unto men but unto God.*" As soon as Ananias heard those words, he fell down and died [**Acts 5:1-5**]. Three hours later, his wife came in and Peter asked her if that was the whole price. She supported her husband's story, and Peter asked her, "How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and they shall carry thee out." She died instantly [**vv. 7-9**].

This is a warning to us on the payment of our tithes and vows. Any wilful attempt to avoid payment or to pay less than we are required to pay can threaten our spiritual standing with the Holy Spirit. We should also be careful what lies and scandals we carry about others, especially during those popular telephone gossips!

d) *Unbelief*

As we have seen in the last few lessons, the major source of the disobedience and murmuring of the children of Israel was their lack of faith in God and His word. Many of them missed the Promised Land because of unbelief [**Ps. 95: 7-11**], for we cannot please God if we have no faith in Him [**Heb. 11:6**]. It is instructive that the death rate among them grew after God had counted ten instances of unbelief [**Num. 14:22**]. That suggests that they did not sin out of ignorance any more. Rather, it was wilful and merited instant death.

Compare that with the punishment to Moses and Aaron for their disobedience. Aaron was the one who made the molten calf and led the people to worship it [Ex. 32: 1-6]. Yet, when 3,000 people died for the sin, Aaron was spared [vv. 21-29]. When God commanded Moses to strike the rock once the second time, he struck it twice. For his punishment, he was only prevented from entering the Promised Land even when God saw his sin as unbelief [Num. 20: 7-12]. Again, the difference lies in whether it was deliberate or not. Aaron was afraid and succumbed to the people's pressure [a case of insufficient knowledge of God] while Moses fell to his ferocious anger. Peter denied Jesus because of fear. It was not deliberate. That is why he too received forgiveness when he repented [Lk 22: 31-32].

3. Conclusion

We now have a clearer picture of what constitutes an unforgivable sin. It is not the act itself [such as unbelief or blasphemy or lying, or false witness, etc.] but the motive behind it. If we did it out of ignorance, that is, unintentionally, God will forgive us when we repent. That is why He forgave Moses and David, Peter and Paul. However, if it is wilful disobedience, it becomes sin against the Holy Spirit, which is unforgivable. Satan and his fallen angels and people like them belong in that category. No amount of repentance can save them. You can now understand what John means when he writes, “We know that *whosoever is born of God sinneth not*; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not” [1 Jn 5: 18].

The blood of Jesus is too precious to waste for those who have *deliberately* chosen to live in sin, “for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” [Rom. 6: 23].