



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Unpardonable Sin,” Matthew 12:22-37 – TRANSCRIPT

Now we are reading, for our Scripture reading this morning, a passage that is one of the most interesting, and at the same time one of the most chilling in all of the Bible, and it is the passage that has to do with the unpardonable sin in Matthew chapter 12 verse 22 through verse 37. So will you turn there, now, as we have the Scripture reading for this Sunday. Beginning with the 22nd verse, following the incidents which occurred on the Sabbath day we read,

“Then was brought unto him one possessed with a demon, blind, and dumb:
and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw.
And all the people were amazed, and said, ‘Is not this the son of David?’”

Incidentally, the original text leaves a little bit more doubt in that question. And we probably should render it something like this: “Can this really be the Son of David?” or, “This is not the Son of David, is he?”

“But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.’ And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is

brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand: And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out? therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house. He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.”

I won't say much about that text in the exposition. It is a very important text, and we could devote a lengthy amount of time to the exposition of it.

I want you to notice there is an orthodoxy concerning the person of Jesus Christ. And if we do not really have that orthodox thinking with reference to the person of Christ, then we are in opposition to him. There is no neutrality with reference to Jesus Christ, is the point: He that is not with me is against me.

Now we come to verse 31 and 32, the important verses:

“Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this age, neither in the age to come. Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? (we

have the Lord’s evaluation of human nature, there) for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.”

May God’s blessing rest upon this reading of his inspired word.

We come to one of the most astonishing texts in the Bible. No evangelist is without a sermon on it. And the reason for its popularity is clear. All sins may be forgiven except one. It is called sin against the Holy Spirit. Even sin against the Son of Man may be forgiven, but not that against the Holy Spirit.

What is this sin? Why is it unforgivable? How does this affect the doctrine of the Trinity by which we are taught that the Son and the Spirit are equal in the possession of the fullness of deity, equal in the possession of power, wisdom, knowledge, holiness? These are puzzling questions.

Some years ago, when I was attending theological seminary, and I had not been a Christian very long when I came to Dallas Seminary – just two or three years – I was thrown into contact with a young man who had come from another seminary to enter the institution at the same time that I did. He came from an evangelical institution, a very good seminary and a very good seminary to this day.

Well, we were thrown together in a class, and as a result of being thrown together in a class, developed a friendship, because he was very much interested in sports, and I was very much interested in sports. And because he played a little golf, and I used to play a lot of golf in amateur tournaments around the country, we began to play golf together.

And during the course of our friendship in the first year of the seminary, he began to share with me more of his own experience in the Christian life, which was much deeper than mine. But he began to share with me the fact that he felt it was possible that he had committed the unpardonable sin. And of course, out of my feeling of the knowledge I had, was unable to speak to him with any authority from the Scriptures, but it seemed to me at that time, just a point of personal experience, that if a person was so concerned over whether he had committed the unpardonable sin, the chances were that he had not committed it, and so I thought to encourage him and point out to him that a person who thought he had committed the unpardonable sin would not be so concerned about the question of relationship to the Lord, at least it seemed to me.

But this caused a great deal of anxiety for this young man. In fact, a great deal of distress, a great deal of defeat in the Christian life. He was even afraid to go home to speak to his family, because they were Christians of long standing, and he felt they would not understand. He was characterized in his life around the seminary by a great deal of moroseness and depression and gloom, and the only thing that could make him smile, it seemed, was to hit a good shot out on the gold course [laughter] that ran up close to the pin, or if he’d hole a long putt. And unfortunately, he didn’t make too many of those long shots [more laughter] nor did he hole too many of those long putts, and I usually beat him on the golf course, which made it worse, I guess.

But ever since that time, I became interested in the question of the unpardonable sin. And I wished that I had known then what I know now about the unpardonable sin. I believe that I might have been able to be of some help to him.

It is important to remember as we look at this question of the unpardonable sin that the sin is referred to in only two of the books of the New Testament, definitely. And at one particular point in our Lord’s life, Matthew chapter 12 and Mark chapter 3, and that the remainder of the New Testament is absolutely silent with respect to the unpardonable sin. So, I think we should gain a little perspective from that and realize the fact that this incident is recorded only in this one place, and no reference is made thereafter to the unpardonable sin, that we should not make more of it than the

Scriptures themselves make over it. And we should not treat it immediately as something that is very common in the Christian life. The chances are, from that reference in the Bible, that it is not a very common thing.

Well, we want to look at it and see if we can understand what is meant when the Lord Jesus says, “All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven them. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him. But whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, not in this age nor in the age that follows.

To understand a passage from the word of God, it is of the greatest importance that we look again at the context. And since we have been studying Matthew, I hope that it will not be necessary to do that in great detail. The final, climactic sign is performed by the Messiah when he heals the dumb demoniac. And it is recorded in verse 22.

They brought to the Lord Jesus a man possessed with a demon. He was both blind and dumb. The text does not describe any of the manner by which the Lord healed him. It simply says that he healed him so much so that the blind man saw and the dumb man (the same) began to speak. Now this was, I think, a final, climactic Messianic sign because, in the next chapter the Lord begins to speak of Israel’s blindness and of the necessity of judgment upon them.

So it would seem, then, that this is the final test posed the nation concerning their response to the Messiah. He says in the 28th verse, “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. This is the final proof that the Lord Jesus is the Messiah, and the kingdom has come with the King.

The people respond to the miracle and say, “Is not this the Son of David,” according to the Authorized Version text, but in the Greek text it’s not so definite. That, actually, is what they should have said. They should have said, is not this the Son of David, shall we not bow down before him and worship him and receive the kingdom that he offers? But what they really say is, this man cannot be the Son of David, can he? The authority of the witness was so strong that they sensed

there was some connection with the Messianic king, but they were not yet ready to yield themselves to the clear light of the miracles that the Lord Jesus had performed.

And so, he is accused again by the officials. Mark tells us that the scribes, too, were involved in this accusation. The scribes and the Pharisees, when they had heard what he had done, they said, “This fellow does not cast out the demons by anyone but Beelzebub, the prince of the demons.” In other words, his authority is Satanically originated.

Mark tells us they were hardened. Their hearts were become hardened to the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and in effect, what they say to him is, you are performing the tricks of a magician. Black magic is the source of the authority of the Lord Jesus.

Now you can see immediately that the text has a great deal of application to the duly accredited teachers of the people of God. It was the scribes and Pharisees who made this accusation, and the scribes and Pharisees were those who corresponded to the ministers of the word of God in this present age. Men who have spiritual gifts of evangelism, of pastor-teacher, of teacher; in other words, men who teach us the word of God are these men who are here making the accusation of black magic in the case of the Lord Jesus. So I say, first of all, those who heed the word of warning in this passage are those who pose as our theologians and teachers.

In other words, the text has application to me and to any of you who have spiritual gifts of utterance. It is a very serious thing to open the Scriptures and read the Scriptures and listen to their testimony concerning the plan and purpose of God, and then not to yield allegiance to God in Christ. That’s why James says, “Be not many of ye teachers, for you shall receive the greater condemnation.” So, this text has a great deal of personal application. It has application to me and any others who have these gifts, I say.

The Lord Jesus answers this and answers it in his own unique and typical way. He handles the text of Scripture, and he handles the argumentation of the situation to demonstrate in such a way that they are no match for the Lord Jesus. He knew their thoughts. And so he speaks in short, picturesque, elusive maxims that state the general principle that Satan does not cast out Satan, does

he? If a kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot stand. “Dog does not eat dog, does he?” we might say.

And the common sense of it, as well as the Scripturality of it was enough to make a very convincing argument. Really, what is shown by the miracle is his point. What is shown by the miracle is that he has mastery of the demonic world. And if, in the demonic world there were such a thing as Satan fighting against Satan, it would be impossible for him to carry out his purposes. And so even if he had such power, he would never give it to an individual that he might against Satan’s own authority and kingdom.

Now, in the course of the answer that he gives, there is an interesting point, and I think it has application for us today. He states in the 27th verse, “And if I, by Beelzebub, cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?” It’s evident from this that the Lord Jesus regarded it as a happening in Israel that claims were being made to perform miracles by others. Notice he says, “By whom do your sons cast them out?” So, the Pharisees, evidently, were linked with people who claim to be performing mighty miracles.

Now that’s a very interesting thing, because it illustrates just exactly what we have today in Christendom. For, we have whole groups of people today who claim to be working mighty miracles. So, I think we can learn from this that there are claims for the miraculous that are not necessarily genuine claims.

Later, the enemies of the Lord Jesus said that he learned that he learned his tricks from an Egyptian juggler. You will find this in the early traditions after the apostolic age. One of the early heretics by the name of Celsus adopted this criticism against the Lord Jesus, and he pictured, in one of his writings, an Orthodox Jew confronting Jesus of Nazareth and addressing him scornfully with these words, “You cured diseases, you restored dead bodies to life, you fed multitudes with a few loaves—these are the common tricks of Egyptian wizards which you may see performed every day in our markets for a few half-pence.” So we find reflected here the fact that beside the Lord Jesus’ true

miracles, there were miracles that were supposed to be done under the power of God which probably were the tricks of the wizards.

Now, I know you know that I do not feel a great deal of friendliness for those who claim miracles today. Let me say so that there may be no misunderstanding: I do believe God heals. I do believe that it is possible to go to God in the Scriptural way, and if it is his will he has the power to heal, and he will heal.

The thing I do not think is Scriptural is the claim that there are today healers who heal, and that the healings that are said to be healings are genuine healings. That is, by them. There may be, even, one of them in which God does perform a sovereign work of healing in the midst of a lot that is nonsense in my opinion. But what it appears to me is a lot of claim of healing, which is not really biblical healing.

Well, the important thing I want to say has to do with the unpardonable sin. You’ll notice our Lord’s argumentation winds up on the note, “He that is not with me is against me, and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.” There is an orthodoxy of the person of Jesus Christ, and if the person is not orthodox in his understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ, he is not orthodox. It is not possible for a man to say, “I am a Christian, but I do not believe that the Lord Jesus is the second person of a Trinity. I am an orthodox Christian, and I do believe that I am Christian, but I do not believe that Jesus Christ is truly very God of very God. If we are not with him, we are against him. There is no neutrality concerning the person of Jesus Christ.

The reason is that the Lord Jesus claimed equality with God, and we cannot affirm any submission to him and at the same time reject his teaching concerning himself. But that leads into the unpardonable sin, and now we face this terrifying text in which we are told that all manner of sin and blasphemy may be forgiven but one sin, sin against the Holy Spirit.

First of all, what is the unpardonable sin? What is this stern verse that chills the soul speaking about? Well, first of all, I think we need to clear away a little bit of the misunderstanding. I believe that most people who do not study the word very carefully – and there are lots of professing

Christians like that – generally feel that the unpardonable sin must be some unusual moral debauchery. Some excess of adultery or uncleanness or lasciviousness or fleshly sin.

Now, it is plain from this context that that is not what is meant. The men to whom he was speaking, and of whom he is speaking – the scribes and the Pharisees and the leaders of the Jewish nation – were not men like that. They were men who were characterized by an outward holiness, by a great deal of religion. They were the religious leaders of the day. They were the men that we would have regarded as very upright men, so far as the fleshly side of sin is concerned. Oh true, there were other things of which they were guilty. They were hypocritical, they were envious. They had all of the sins of the mind that the Scriptures speak about, and which, in a sense, are far more important than those other sins. But nevertheless, so far as moral debauchery is concerned, in a fleshly way, they were not guilty of that.

And furthermore, the terms of our Lord’s words are not general. They were very specific. He speaks of *the* unpardonable sin; not of an unpardonable sin but the unpardonable sin.

Well, to explain what he means in the text positively, he says, first of all, it is the sin of blasphemy. He calls it blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in verse 31. What is blasphemy? Well, blasphemy is slander. To blaspheme God is to slander God, to affirm of him things that are not true. For example, if we were to say God is not wholly holy, we would be blaspheming God. We would be slandering him. If we were to speak of him in a way in which we denied his attributes, we would be slandering him. It is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, that is one thing that is said.

And the second thing is that it is sin against the Holy Spirit, specifically. Not sin against the Son of Man. Not sin against the Father, specifically. But sin against the Holy Spirit. It’s blasphemy and it’s against the Holy Spirit.

Now specifically, in the light of the context, it is the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the king and his kingdom. In the 28th verse we read, “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come upon you.” It is evident that the reason the Holy Spirit performed these

miracles through the Lord Jesus was to give the unshakeable testimony to the kingship, the Messianic kingship of the Lord Jesus.

And that is evident by the words he speaks in verse 29, “Or else, how shall one enter into the strongman’s house and spoil his goods except he first bind the strongman.” He is testifying to the fact that he is able to enter into the house of Satan and spoil his goods, and only the Messianic king can do that.

So to sum it up, then, it is the sin of blasphemy. It is sin against the Holy Spirit, and it is specifically his testimony to the king. And we may sum it by saying that it is the sin of refusing the kingdom and the king, brought about through the clear testimony of the Spirit in the miracles performed through the Lord Jesus.

It is something like this. To the presentation of the credentials of the King, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Israel the nation is saying, “These are not the credentials, they are the credentials of hell.” And in that they slander the Holy Spirit. In that, they refuse the testimony to the kingdom and the king.

There is a text in the Old Testament which is very much of an admonition and warning that speaks of the same thing we have here. Isaiah says, “Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light and light darkness; that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.” Or it’s like those who say with the witches in *MacBeth*, “Fair is foul and foul is fair.” What they’re doing is they have finally come to the place where in the light of the plain testimony of God through the supernatural miracles of the Spirit, they reject them – not only reject them – but say that they really come from Satan and not from God.

Well, the second question you might think is unnecessary to ask. Why is the sin unpardonable? Well, two questions might help us if we can answer them. First of all, and this I think is the thing that puzzled me when I read this text for the first time, more than anything else. Why the greater guilt of sin against the Holy Spirit? Why is it the greater guilt to sin against the Holy Spirit than it is against the Son of Man?

Now, the solution cannot lie in the greater dignity of the Holy Spirit, because we are taught in the word of God that the dignity of the Son of God is the same as the dignity of the Spirit. Now, he does say the Son of Man, and that should give us a clue, because he is speaking about the Lord Jesus in his incarnation.

Now, since there is no distinction in the dignity of the first person and the second person and the third person of the Trinity, the distinction must lie in the incarnation of the second person. In other words, the distinction must rest in the *kenosis* – in the self-emptying – which the Lord Jesus underwent when he became a man, when he did what some one has called, “surrender the insignia of his majesty.”

What did our Lord do when he became a man? Well, he veiled his dignity for a time. He had the dignity of the eternal Son of God. He veiled that. Paul says in Philippians chapter 2 that “He emptied himself and took upon the form of a servant and came in fashion as a man.” And being found in fashion as a man, in the likeness of men, he humbled himself. And he says in another place that he came in the likeness of flesh of sin. If you had looked at the Lord Jesus, and had just looked upon his countenance, you might have been amazed at what you saw. But so far as his bodily form was concerned, there was not the element of the glory of the second person of the Trinity about him. He appeared as other men appear.

So he did veil his dignity for a time. Therefore, sin against him then, while it was blameable, was pardonable. This healing, however, that the Holy Spirit performed when a man who is a demoniac and sightless and dumb – when the power of God is manifested in such a way before the multitudes of people that suddenly this man at the Lord Jesus Christ’s healing begins to speak and see again, that is an obvious manifestation of the power of God that anyone could see with their physical sight. So it was a clear manifestation of the salutary power of the Holy Spirit. So to reject the Holy Spirit is to reject manifest revelation, manifest supernatural activity on the part of God.

One of the French commentators – a Roman Catholic, incidentally – LeGrange has written concerning this, “That it is excusable to a point to fail to recognize the dignity of one who hides

himself under the humble appearance of a man, but not disparage works manifestly salutary, which revealed the action of the divine Spirit.” I think he’s caught the point.

There is a distinction for a time between the Son of Man and the Holy Spirit so far as the possibility of confusion is concerned, and it’s in that that we find this distinction between the unforgivable character of sin against the Spirit and the forgivable nature of sin against the Son of Man. So why the greater guilt of sin against the Holy Spirit? Because it was a manifest declaration, clearly observable by all who could see of the power of God, whereas our Lord was here in the hidden-ness of his incarnation.

Well then, what constitutes its unremissibility? Why is it unpardonable? In what does that consist? Why this sin precludes pardon because it precludes repentance. It is the deliberate, final, refusal of light that reveals a hardened heart and a fixed attitude. Let me assure you that the text here supports, with full authority the fact that what we find here was not the only time this was done. Mark tells us twice that they were saying, he has an unclean spirit. That was going on all the time.

What we have here in this climactic miracle is this final evidence of opposition after a lengthy period of rejection by him, so that what we’re seeing is the operation of a fixed attitude of rejection of the testimony of God through Christ, and so that we have finally reached a kind of climax, and this sin precludes forgiveness because it precludes repentance. That is, these individuals, by rejecting the truth of the word of God for so lengthy a period of time have now become the recipient of the hardening ministry of the Holy Spirit.

For it is a principle of the word of God that if we do not respond to the word of God, then hardening takes place. That’s why it’s more difficult for an elderly man to come to faith in Christ than for a child, at least that’s the experience that we have. In the final analysis, it is only the Holy Spirit who brings men to Christ, but experience shows that when hearts are tender, there would seem to be greater response to the ministry of the word.

Now this is supported by the argument of the book to this point. Israel has been rejecting the Lord, and that is a climactic rejection. In the next chapter, the Lord Jesus begins to speak in

parables. And in chapter 13 and verse 10, the disciples come to him and say, “Why are you speaking unto them in parables, now?” He had not spoken to them in parables before this. He answered and said unto them, “Because it is given unto you to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and to them it is not given.”

Verse 12,

“For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, ‘By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive.’ For this people’s heart is become gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed...”

Notice the progression.

“...lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.”

That is our Lord’s pronouncement upon the generation of his day, and is pronounced right after the reference to the unpardonable sin.

So it seems plain, then, to me that the unpardonable character of this sin rests in the fact that the repentance required for the forgiveness of sins is something impossible to men who have passed a point beyond which retributive judgment begins to work. We do not know that time. I certainly

do not know that time. No one knows that time; that’s why we preach the gospel to every creature as long as there is breath. But it is necessary to remember that there is such a thing as divine, retributive judgment. Paul speaks of it as God “giving them over,” three times in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans.

You see, my dear friends in this audience, it is a serious thing to hear the word of God. It is a very serious thing to sit Sunday after Sunday under the ministry of the word of God and not respond to it. It’s a very serious thing to sit there, because we expose ourselves to the possibility, if we do not respond, to divine, retributive judgment.

Jay Sidwell Baxter has been a well-regarded Bible teacher for many years. A Britisher, he has been in the United States for many years now. I have met Dr. Baxter and have heard him preach more than once and have read a great number of his books.

In one of his books, he comments upon this, and he says, “Men can allow and foster in themselves a process of hard refusal toward God which eventually becomes their master and destroys the possibility of repentance. Men cannot repent merely at will.”

And what he means by that is that there are forces by which we have no control if we continually reject.

Then he told a very interesting story – a true story – of a man, a friend of his who had a friend to whom he was ministering. He was a dying man. And when he was on his death bed, he was writing and struggling, and fighting the air in a piteously futile effort to fight death off. He was in stark terror at the thought of leaving this life and passing into the life beyond the grave.

Eventually, Mr. Baxter’s friend said, he died demented. But both before and after his brain gave way, he would periodically groan out at wail in loud tones, “I said I would repent before I died, but it won’t come! It won’t come! I can’t repent.” There is such an experience. There is such a thing. And Esau is a beautiful illustration of it. It’s possible to be subject to retributive judgment.

When is this sin committed? Well, we can say this at least. There is only one time in which sin against the Son of Man is blameable and forgiveable, while sin against the Holy Spirit is blameable

and unforgiveable. There is only one time when that situation exists. Now that the Son of Man is glorified and at the right hand of the Father, sin against the Son is sin against the Spirit.

So it’s evident that the historical situation which called forth the comment from our Lord, the unpardonable sin can only exist while our Lord is here in our incarnate flesh when he looked as other men looked. So it can only be committed, in my opinion, when the king is personally present – the unpardonable sin. That is, the specific historical sin to which he refers here. And I think this is confirmed by the fact that it is only referred to this one time by our Lord, and never referred to elsewhere by the apostles. It was a particular situation that had its particular interpretation with reference to that particular time.

Now the remainder of this section focuses on the real source of the Pharisees’ conduct, and he just illustrates the fact that the fruit of a tree is determined by the tree itself. Conduct is determined by one’s character, and character is determined by the operation of the Holy Spirit, ultimately. The Lord Jesus is the only one who can make the tree good, he implies.

Let me conclude. What is, then, the unpardonable sin? The unpardonable sin is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit’s supernatural work of performing miracles prevalent in the days of the supernatural miracles. It may be committed by hardened, impenitent men.

But now having said that, two other things ought to be said. In the first place, there is an unpardonable sin today. It is not the unpardonable sin to which our Lord refers, but it is the unpardonable sin of rejecting Jesus Christ. In John chapter 3 and verse 18, the Lord Jesus in the continuation of the passage in which he has had his interview with Nicodemus says, “He that believeth on him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already because he hath not believed already in the name of the only begotten Son of God, so that personal faith in Jesus Christ – if it does not come – sin is unpardonable.

There is such a thing as *the* unpardonable sin, historically, and there is such a thing as *an* unpardonable sin throughout this present age. And it is possible for us to commit unpardonable sin in that sense. And furthermore, it is possible for there to exist a prolonged rebellion that leads to

retributive judgment and hardness of heart. That is still possible today. It is my own opinion that that is what is referred to in Hebrews chapter 6, when we read that it is impossible to bring certain people to repentance, who have had great privilege but have turned away from them. They apostasized from the apprehensive sense of truth that they possessed, and there is no hope.

In the Old Testament, we read that God sent the prophets to Israel, and they ministered to them and ministered to them, but they rejected them and rejected them, and then we read “til there was no healing.” Retributive judgment must set in.

There is, I think, a beautiful illustration of the word of God in this principle, and it is the story of Herod. I just remind you of its high points.

Herod was the Tetrarch of Galilee. He feared John the Baptist when he heard of John’s ministry, and in fact, knew that he was a righteous and holy man. And when he heard him, the Scripture said he was “much perplexed but he heard him gladly.” He listened with a great deal of interest to John the Baptist as he proclaimed the message of the coming of the King.

But then later on, when John said a word against his seduction of Herodias, his brother’s wife, Herod became very angry and Herodias even angrier. And as a result, Herod shut John up in prison. And finally when he was in prison, at that famous little party that they had, when Herodias’ daughter danced before him, he said, “Up to the half of my kingdom I’ll give you.”

She hastily beat a retreat to her mother and asked what she wanted. She said, “I’d like to have the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” And Herod was very much upset over it, but nevertheless had him beheaded in prison, put his head on a platter, brought his head out and gave it to Herodias.

Later on, as the days of our Lord draw to a close, there is a rather amazing statement made in the Gospel of Luke. I’ve always wondered about this. Some Pharisees came to him and said, “Get out of the country, and get away from here, for Herod would feign kill thee.” So Herod has in his mind murder of the Lord Jesus. Later on in that same gospel, finally Herod comes face to face with the Lord Jesus and the text says, “When Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad, for he was a

long time desirous to see him, for he had heard concerning him and he had hoped to see some miracle done by him. And he questioned him many words.” What an opportunity for the Lord.

What a great opportunity, naturally speaking. He has now the Tetrarch of Galilee, why not pour out the message? Take out *The Four Spiritual Laws*, [laughter] give them to him, and if Herod could be converted, what might be done for the whole of the kingdom? And then those terrible words, which Luke gives are, “He answered him nothing.” Not a word for Herod. Why? Because Herod’s heart was the heart of an impenitent man.

Back in the 7th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew – and I’ve received some interesting letters concerning this – he had said, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine lest they trample them under feet and turn again and lacerate you.” Our Lord Jesus would not cast his pearls before swine. Herod was that. You see, there is such a thing as a man reaching the place where there is no hope. We don’t know when it is, and so we constantly preach the word of God.

Aaron Burr was one of the most brilliant men ever produced in the United States. He was a brilliant student at Princeton University, and for over a hundred years the academic record that Aaron Burr had was the record in that great institution. About twenty years ago I went to the campus of Princeton two years for a series of meetings on the campus, and while I was there, there was a young man by the name of Bill Rush. He was in the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship.

And the talk among the evangelicals and among their friends was that finally, someone on the campus of Princeton has a chance to beat the academic record of Aaron Burr. This was back in about 1955 or ‘56. Mr. Burr had died around 1840 as I remember, maybe a few years before that. So he was a brilliant man whose record was unusual.

When he was on the campus of Princeton, a revival broke out, and he was deeply convicted of sin. His roommate was a Christian, and his roommate urged him to accept Christ. He went to one of his professors, and one of his professors gave him a Bible and he said to him, “Aaron, take this to your room and settle the matter on your knees.”

Instead of doing that, he tried to shake off the power of the Holy Spirit in testimony to Christ. And finally, in desperation, as he said later, he cried out, “O God, let me alone, and I’ll let you alone.” He said as soon as he said that, all conviction of sin left him.

Many years later, he met a friend whom he admired very much and his friend said, “Dr. Burr, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine.” He said any friend of yours I’d like to meet, too. He said, “I’d like for you to meet Jesus Christ.” And when he said that, the cold sweat – perspiration, we say – the cold perspiration popped out on his forehead, and he told how at the age of 19 he said his prayer in which he addressed to God, God, let me alone and I’ll let you alone. And then he said to his friend, “From that day to this, I’ve never had one desire to become a Christian.” It is possible for me to receive testimony, to reject testimony. They reject it over and over and over again until there comes a time when only judgment can come.

Well, what should we do with our fears that we have committed such sin? Bishop Rile once said something which I didn’t know when I spoke to my friend many years ago. He said, “There is such a thing as sin that is never forgiven, but those who are most troubled about it are the most unlikely to have never committed it.” I think that’s true.

If there’s any question about it, it can be settled immediately by turning in the heart to God and believing on our Lord Jesus Christ. If you are here this morning, and you have never turned to him, it’s a serious thing to hear the ministry of the word of God, and to hear that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has offered a sacrifice that is acceptable to God for sinners, and has given a universal gospel appeal, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” It’s a serious thing to hear that Sunday after Sunday and never respond to it.

May God the Holy Spirit bring the conviction that results in conversion. Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] We thank Thee, Lord, for the exhortations and admonitions of holy Scripture. O God, deliver us from the kinds of sins that keep us from Christ. And if Father, there should be one person here who has never responded, give no rest nor peace until they rest in Christ.

“The Unpardonable Sin” by S. Lewis Johnson
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And for the believers, O God, deliver us from the hearing of the word of God and unresponsiveness to it. Work mightily in our hearts to glorify the Son of God, and cleanse us and renew our inner man.

Now may grace, mercy and peace go with us as we part.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.