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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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The Unpardonable Sin

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcribed from a message given in November 1957. Words which were unclear are in [square] brackets.

You have heard it announced that this evening we are going to seek light from the Lord on a matter which has a long, painful, terrible history, called the unpardonable sin.

We will first of all read the scriptures which are most closely connected with this matter, in the gospel by Mark, chapter 3, verse 28 - in verses 28 to 30: "Verily I say unto you, all their sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men and their blasphemers wherewith soever they shall blaspheme, but whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin, because they say he hath an unclean spirit."

In the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 6, verses 4 to 8: "For as touching those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew *them* again unto repentance; while they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame. For the land which hath drunk the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them for whose sake it is also tilled, receiveth blessing from God: but if it beareth thorns and thistles, it is rejected, and nigh unto a curse; whose end is to be burned."

Chapter 10, [verses] 26 to 31: "For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire which shall devour the adversaries. A man that hath set at nought Moses' law dieth without compassion on the word of two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment,

think ye, shall he be judged worthy, who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know Him that said, Vengeance belongeth unto Me. I will recompense. And again, The Lord shall judge His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God."

So we very solemnly and with trepidation take up this matter of the unpardonable sin. This, of course, is no new matter, not something which has recently arisen, it has a very long history. In my own ministry of over 45 years - right from the earliest days, again and again one has had to deal with this matter in cases which have come under the terrible shadow and cloud of this accusation. It's far reaching. You find it everywhere where there are Christians, at all times, in all places, there it is. Many, many have come under the power of this assault, and its consequences in human lives are nothing less than devastating - crippling life, paralysing testimony, nullifying service, or often wrecking minds and driving to terrible excesses. It is not without knowledge that I say that many, many in our mental institutions are there because of the harass of this very thing.

Now, it may not be that many of *you* are troubled personally about it, but it's as well that we all have some understanding of this. We may have to try to help others, and not one of us knows when our turn will come to suffer this very assault in an hour when things are extremely difficult, for that's the time when these things arise.

I propose to divide this matter this evening into two, spending a little time firstly, on the non-spiritual and the non-scriptural side and then passing over to deal with the scriptural aspect of it. It would be very unwise to just deal with one side of this, even the scriptural side of it alone, because a very large proportion of those of the cases who are suffering in this matter, are not on scriptural ground at all. There is no scriptural basis for the position and the condition that they're in. There are other reasons, and so it is only right that we spend a little time on this *non-spiritual* and *non-scriptural* ground for this accusation and its acceptance.

Now, out of this long experience that one has had, there is this that to me is very significant: it is that this thing is *not* the trouble or the malady of the grossly abandoned sinner. I have never yet met such a person - godless, abandoned to sin - who has suffered from this accusation, and had any worry or trouble or bother about having committed the unpardonable sin. This is ever and always the trouble of the sensitive, would-be devoted child of God; those who really in their hearts love the Lord, who want nothing more than to be wholly the Lord's. I could say in practically every case that has come to my knowledge, it has been like that. It is the particular malady of those who would, if they could, go all the way with the Lord and who really, in their heart of hearts, have a great love for Him. I could say that in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred it is like that. Well, we'll have to deal with the hundredth case presently, where the case is perhaps a true one. But first of all, let us look at these ninety-nine. And I have already said that in their case it is not basically a spiritual matter at all.

This particular thing can be classed with many other things that go by the name of 'obsessions'. You know there are many obsessions that people get: someone will get a ministry obsession, they are called for a special ministry, and it becomes a perfect obsession. And one could mention many things like that, and this is just one of many things which become obsessions. They get a grip upon the mentality, make a groove in the mind, and become the one thing - the one thing - haunting day and night, pursuing and being the centre around which they continually circle. Yes, an obsession,

and the ground of such, is not Mark 3:29. It is other ground, and we would analyse that other ground.

First of all, it is very often a matter of:

Moral weakness.

Now, I use that word 'moral' in its broadest sense, not in a particular sense, but in its broadest sense. Somewhere in the background of the life, there has been, and is, a lack and absence of discipline, of real hardship being faced mentally, courageously; a moral toughness. This may be due to a number of things, but I have found in many cases that often it is due to one of two extremes: one, a childhood that was pampered and spoiled, where the child was given everything that either it cried for or asked for, completely pampered, spoiled, and it had only got to whimper and it got all that it wanted. And over an extended time, with nothing to the contrary, of discipline or deprivation or training, the child grew up to youth, manhood, or womanhood like that: self-centred, wholly self-centred. Eventually when difficulty, adversity, denial, hardship arises, they haven't the moral stamina to stand up against it and are predisposed to the acceptance of a thing like this when failure comes.

Very often the background is that which in itself indicates the necessity for self-control and for discipline and for facing life, as Paul says, "Gird yourselves like men". The glass case and cottonwool person is exceedingly open in the day of adversity to this suggestion, and will take it on. And the characteristic of such people is *always* to be occupied with themselves, drawing to themselves, and *never* content unless they are occupying you and obsessing you with themselves! And you can trace that back very often to the lack of discipline and training. We better face this thing in a common-sense way because it's very practical. It isn't always spiritual, dear friends.

On the other hand, there is the other extreme of a frustrated life, frustrated childhood, and life frustrated since childhood; ambitions disappointed, expectations not materialising, many adversities and difficulties in life bringing about a frustration complex. And anything like that is very dangerous and susceptible ground for suggestions of this kind. We have to be very careful how we react to adversity, to disappointment, to contradictions, and to frustrations, for a frustration complex is just the contrary to a faith complex.

Then pursuing it along this level further, very often the basis and background of this terrible malady (and no one will think that I'm making light of it because it is *terribly* true to the person who suffers) it is very often due, again, to a nervous and constitutional deficiency or disorder. It is really a case of constitution; some lack in the vital nervous constitution. Very often it's that. It represents a terrible handicap for the people concerned, but there it is. They just, *because* of this something in, or lacking in, their constitution, collapse before every onslaught of difficulty and adversity. They go down - people who come up a thousand times, but they go down just as many times. There's just something there that is lacking in the matter of stamina, and it's a physical matter and a nervous matter. We ought to face this quite frankly. It is not necessarily a spiritual thing at all, it is just that, or again, it is what we call temperament.

Temperament

we speak of people being temperamental, but when we use that word we are thinking only of one class, one temperament of the half dozen or more temperaments that there are, that temperament

which is particularly prone to rising at one time to high levels and then as quickly sinking to the very deepest depths of despondency and despair. It's temperament, and it's something quite natural. It doesn't make it easier for the person. It makes life very difficult for those who have that temperament, but, mark you, there are great values in that temperament as well as weaknesses and losses, but I'm not here to deal with these things in particular or fully. I'm simply pointing them out. Some people are temperamentally prone or predisposed to depressions and despondency and morbidity, and they become therefore very fruitful ground for this whole idea of the unpardonable sin.

Going further, and getting nearer to the centre of this, it's often a matter of:

Spiritual Debility and Spiritual Ignorance.

It's an imperfect apprehension of the fundamental facts of the Christian life. Those facts may be known: the great facts of justification by faith, the great facts of Christ's substitutionary work on the cross and much more. These are the fundamentals of the faith. They may be known in theory, but there may be a missed or a weak apprehension of these fundamental facts, and when you come to it, you really find that these people are not standing upon the ground that they believe in, in a way. They either do not *know* the true ground of faith, or they are weak in their stand upon that ground and their apprehension of these facts of the faith. There's a gap between their theory and their life. They are really standing upon some other ground than God's declared facts.

Here let me say that for such, and for all of us, it is imperative that we know what God has declared in His Word as His facts, as His *facts* - in the matter of sin and what He's done with it, and so on. What are God's facts? Not what we feel about things at all, but God's facts. Here our rescue lies very largely.

But still I have to proceed on this very unpleasant and unwholesome line. Another thing which brings us, again, very near to the heart of the matter is what we might call:

Psychical Exaggerations and Excesses.

If you don't like the word 'psychical' you can put the word 'soul' in, if you like. I am thinking of those people, and they're a great company, who set their whole strength of soul upon getting an experience; assert and extend and strain themselves in a psychical or, as we understand it here, a soulical way. It's an excess, it's an exaggeration of soul, and it very often results in some kind of experience which is a deception. Which is a *deception!*

Many of you will know what I am referring to. It is possible to get a psychical imitation of the Holy Spirit in an experience. And because it is psychical, wherever there is action, there is always reaction - invariably - and that excess will pass. Sooner or later, it will come into the realm of question and when it's past, *of course*, you have sinned against the Holy Spirit, and there's no pardon! And it is not spiritual ground at all. It has been wholly psychical.

I would like to enlarge upon that in a particular way, but there's no time at the moment. Take it as a warning. *Take it as a warning* that is not meant to indicate that we must not be, as we so often put it: "utter for the Lord," but let us beware of *soul* assertiveness, either in the emotional or in the mental, or in the volitional, in the will, where *we* are projecting *ourselves* in a forceful and excessive way. We

lay ourselves wide open to deception and to coming into a place where there may be no return, no getting out, we may be locked up.

Now, all that is an attempt at explaining this from the natural side. But while the explanation is never the remedy, it is of great importance that we should know ourselves - really, we should:

Know Ourselves.

And if we did but know ourselves, we should be able to track down our trouble very largely. You might, perhaps, not be a very good sleeper, and then overnight you might take something, a drug to help you sleep. Well, you might have your sleep, your good night's sleep, strangely during the next day you feel terribly depressed, terribly depressed. Your very heart has gone out of living. There's no longer any purpose in life, and you explain that the Lord is grieved with you. You see, you bring it into the spiritual realm. Everything's wrong, everything's wrong.... Faith is gone, and hope is gone, and peace is gone, and joy is gone. Has it? Is that true? Now, if you were only alive to the simple fact, you can trace it right to that little thing that you took last night and you say, "Oh, well, this is only the after-effect of that. It'll wear off!" But you see what I mean? That's only an illustration.

David on one occasion had one of those fits of despair, of this depression. There was nothing good anywhere, in anybody, nothing was worth anything. He went over it all and then he said, "*But* this is my infirmity. I will remember the years of the right hand of the Lord, this is *my* infirmity." If we knew ourselves, we would be saved quite a lot and we wouldn't be blaming the Lord for everything and not always the devil, either! I think we very often blame the devil for our overnight drug and its effect. So you see, it's like that. I say, while the explanation is not the remedy, it is something to know ourselves temperamentally, constitutionally, and in every other way; it may help quite a bit. All the things that I have mentioned do make life a great battle. They do. But here is where grace has its meaning.

When we have said all that, we have yet to face the scripture, for here in this scripture or these scriptures, we are presented with a true case, where it is possible to commit a sin which has no forgiveness. There *is* such a thing as the unpardonable sin, according to the Word of God. What is it, what is it? Have you ever tried to answer that question? That question must be faced and answered by anyone who is tempted to think this about himself or herself, anyone who has got into the toils of this accusation, the very first thing that they are really called upon to do is to answer the question:

What is the Unpardonable Sin?

If you ask, the answer is usually their feelings or some very flimsy usage of scripture. And they refer to the scriptures that I have mentioned, but they don't know what they're talking about. They've never studied those scriptures, they've never looked into them. They've taken them sheerly on their face, suggestion, or meaning. They have never got down to it and said, "Now what really does the Word of God teach about this matter? What is the answer to the question? What is the sin without pardon?"

So we must come now to the teaching of the Word on this matter. First of all, may I suggest to you that in coming to the Word of God, you must come to the best translation of the Word of God that you can get. I say that because the old King James or Authorised Version is *not* the safest one in this matter. Indeed, you may get a wrong impression from its terms and language in this matter. So I

suggest that you have something that is safer and surer as to exactly what was said originally on the matter. That, by the way - but you've got to come to the Word of God on this, so come to it and compare your versions if you like, but my advice is that you get the most up-to-date or at least the Revised Version in this connection.

Now, to come to it, you'll notice the Lord Jesus in what He said about this matter focused it down. He focused it down to one point, to one thing, and called it: "the sin against the Holy Spirit". That is, He narrowed it down to the Holy Spirit. He calls it "to blaspheme the Holy Spirit." That's big enough, wide enough, comprehensive enough, that it will rule out quite a lot. I think you've perhaps failed to recognise the comment of the writer in the last brief sentence, "because they said of Jesus He had an unclean spirit." Have you said that of Jesus? That's the sin against the Holy Ghost - saying that the Spirit that was in Jesus was an unclean spirit or, if you like, a demon, an unclean spirit. Attributing to Jesus the spirit of Satan! Have you done that? It's narrowed down to that. That's the sin against the Holy Ghost. That is blaspheming against the Holy Ghost. Jesus calls it blaspheming.

What is it? That's a word that is used many times in the scriptures. What does it mean? It means to revile, to rail upon, to speak contemptuously of, or to slander. That's blasphemy. To rail upon the Holy Spirit or the Lord Jesus, to revile the Lord Jesus, to speak contemptuously of the Lord Jesus, to slander the Lord Jesus. Have you done that? That's blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

But, you see, this is where one of our English words leads us astray. We think of 'blasphemy.' Blasphemy: you know what we mean, what we think of, but this does not mean what we in our English interpretation mean by blasphemy. A man on the street lets go with oaths and curses, foulness of language, and brings in the name of God. We call it blaspheming. But that is not the New Testament meaning. Now, you have the classical case in that of Paul, 1 Timothy 1:13, he spoke of himself who was before a blasphemer: "I, Paul, who was before a blasphemer." What did Paul do? How was he a blasphemer? Yes, he vehemently reviled the Lord Jesus. He denounced the Lord Jesus. He maligned the Lord Jesus. He defamed the Lord Jesus. He attributed to the Lord Jesus evil and wrong; that was Saul of Tarsus. In ignorance, he said, I did it. But he did it. That was his blasphemy. Have you done that? Have you done that? Test every case by the true exegesis of the Word of God.

Now let us look at this matter, this inclusive matter of the Holy Spirit. Notice Paul, the word here later is: doing despite to the Spirit of grace.

The Spirit of Grace

What is the specific and particular purpose for which the Holy Spirit has come and is here in this dispensation? Why did He come and why is He here?

Do you know, the Holy Spirit is here with only one object, only one object, and that object is *not* to draw attention to Himself. That is a testing and challenging fact which should test many things. However, His one inclusive object is to bear *witness* to Christ - to bear witness to *Christ*, Christ Jesus as God's full and final speech; Christ as God's inclusive and conclusive work.

That, of course, is the substance of this whole letter to the Hebrews from which we have taken these two fragments. Christ supreme and Christ final. As to sin, the Holy Spirit is here to bear witness to Christ in the matter of sin, in all His relationship to human sin, and what He has done regarding human sin. Christ in the matter of reconciliation with God through His own blood, making peace by

the blood of His cross. Christ, God's gift of eternal life to those who will believe on Him. Christ! Christ, God's gift of hope for all despairing men and women. Christ, God's crown of glory for a humanity such as we are. Christ, His cross, His blood; Christ in all His comprehensive way is the one sole and *only* object of the Holy Spirit's presence in this world, to bear witness to Him.

What, then, is the sin against the Holy Ghost, the sin which has no forgiveness? It is blasphemy, the deliberately and persistently rebutting of that witness of the Holy Spirit. Discrediting what the Holy Spirit says about the Lord Jesus and says it's not true and saying, "It's not true, it's false. The Holy Spirit's a liar, He's not bearing witness to the Truth, He's not the Spirit of Truth." Who would put it in that way? But that's what it amounts to, you see.

That is what the apostle means by treading underfoot the blood, crucifying anew the Son of God, doing despite to the Spirit of grace. For all that I have said is the grace of God in Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of grace to tell us all about that and then for men to say, "There's nothing in it, I don't believe it, won't have it, it's all nonsense, it's all false, it's all [untrue]!" and tread it underfoot. And that's it. Refusing, rebutting the Holy Spirit's testimony concerning Jesus. That is what the Lord meant by His own words, "whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin."

But then what about these other passages from Hebrews 4 and Hebrews 10? They can both, and all like them, be gathered into this one little fragment, fragmentary clause in 10:29, "doing despite to the Spirit of grace." *Despite*. Again, what's the meaning of the word? If you really mean business, you'll make it your business to find out what the Bible means by its words as well as its statements. *Despite*. And the meaning of the word despite just is to treat with insulting disdain, to treat with insulting disdain. Doing despite to the Spirit of grace, to treat the Spirit of grace with insulting disdain.

Note the immediate context. The immediate context of these words is "seeing, they." "Seeing... they" the margin is even more helpful: "whilst they crucify to themselves." It is the present active tense "while they are at present, keeping on, crucifying afresh the Son of God and putting Him to an open shame". That's the immediate context, but there's the larger context of this whole book, this whole letter to the Hebrews; it's the context of Israel as you know so well.

The whole history of Israel is brought into the argument, about their perishing in the wilderness and not entering in because of unbelief, and their example is taken up and applied. "Harden not your hearts as they did". What was their trouble that deprived them of the land and when they would repent they found no place of repentance? What was it? There's one fragment which explains it all, the old context: "They turned back in their heart to Egypt". The *persistent heart hankering* after and relationship to Egypt.

Now, I need much more time for that than I have, but I'm going to try and finish even if you are late. We mustn't leave this unfinished.

The writer of this letter analyses this whole thing very much for us. He says, about these people for whom there is no way out - no way out, no more sacrifice for sin, no more forgiveness - he says they were once enlightened. They were once enlightened! What did he mean? If you go back into your Old Testament, you will find this: when the Lord sent Moses to Israel in Egypt to say, "The Lord, the God of your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has sent me", what did they say? They said, "What is

His name, what is His name?" Four hundred years in Egypt, they'd lost the knowledge of the name of the Lord, they didn't know their God. They didn't know the Lord, they didn't even know His name.

Moses went to recover for them and to them the *knowledge* of God, of their God, the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them - note the fragment - the knowledge of the truth about God, the name of the Lord - to recover that. They had forgotten. Moses brought them to the knowledge of the truth, but in Egypt where they had lived through those many long years, they had got to know the names of the gods of the Egyptians alright, the gods of the Egyptians were very real, and one of the chief gods, if not the chief god in Egypt, was worshipped in the form of a molten calf - Egypt's false god worship in the form of a molten calf and they'd lost the knowledge of the name of the true God. When Moses brought them out and left them for a bit while he went into the mountain, what happened? Their hearts turned back to Egypt, to the god of Egypt, and they made them the molten calf, "These be thy gods oh Israel...". From that beginning, right to the end, through the whole wilderness journey right to Kadesh Barnea, their heart was continually turning back to Egypt. Right there you'll notice at the end they said, "Let us make us a captain and return to Egypt."

So persistent, so persistent, so deeply ingrained, was this thing, this *Egypt* worship. You know, Stephen said some extraordinary things about that, some extraordinary things which we dare not even stay to mention, about really what was in their hearts and their thoughts. He even suggested that when they made the tabernacle, they were thinking of something in Egypt: the tabernacle of Molech. Their mentality was Egyptian; it pursued them, and continued with them and this heart circumcision between the gods of Egypt and the true God never really took place until they passed over the Jordan. What a meaning it gives to Jordan.

Now, it's on *that* ground that these things are said about unpardonable sin. A heart that persistently and with impunity, in the presence of enlightenment concerning the truth of God, turns back, turns back and hankers for the old life and the old world. Have you done that? That's the sin which puts us beyond the pale of forgiveness. It is said that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was doomed, there was no salvation. But to Israel, the Lord said, "Harden not your hearts - don't you harden your own hearts. The same doom will await you as awaited Pharaoh if you harden your heart. Harden *not* your heart."

Well, I'm not going to stop with that bit on the argument from nature which the apostle uses here in chapter six. You know the bit there, but it simply amounts to this: that if the mercies and blessings of God have been given and given, as the rain and the dew to the land and the cultivation and the care of the soil, if God has shown His grace and given His mercies and then the only result is thorns and briars, the end of that must be the fire. That's all. That's sin against, or doing despite to, the Spirit of grace.

What is the occasion of this warning or these warnings? They fell away! They fell away, it says, but from what and to what?

Well, take up the book again, the whole book, and it answers those questions. They fell away from a truly and wholly spiritual position to a palpable and external and sacerdotal system. That's what it is, that's what it says here; the argument of this book. These believers had come to Christ in a spiritual way. They had come out of the old sacerdotalism, out of the old palpable system of externals and forms of the Old Testament, onto spiritual ground. Now they fell away from spiritual ground to that old system again. If there were such there amongst the Hebrews who did it, if they did, and one is

almost led to conclude some have gone right back, they'd fallen right back, forsaking the true spiritual ground, the ground of Christ spiritually, the ground of Christ inwardly, the ground of Christ finally in this dispensation and gone back into the old dispensation in its meaning.

Well, there's no way back from that if you forsake true spiritual ground for a purely external, sacerdotal system, the forms and externals and so on and leave the spiritual. Dear friends, this is a solemn word for us. We are *not* come to a palpable mountain, says the apostle here, which can be touched or cannot be touched, which burneth with fire. You come to the spiritual counterpart of that! You don't want to go back to Sinai once you've touched Zion!

From the spiritual to the mystical - because that's the enticement of it all - these vestments and these sacraments and all these externals of that system. You know, they appeal to something mystical in the human makeup and they *seem* to be spiritual, but they're false; it is mere mysticism. It makes a *tremendous* appeal to some makeups and some temperaments, but it's not spiritual. They fell away from grace to works, from faith to forms, and from the light of the Spirit to the darkness of a pre-Holy Spirit era. They fell away.

Well, once enlightened, once tasted, and then to say, "I repudiate it all, I reject it all. I choose this alternative, this other." Don't do it, for that is it, this is it. There's no way back, that's all. Once you've abandoned yourself, taken the step, burnt your boats, however you may put it, there's no way back.

Well, there's, as I say, great solemnity about the warnings, and there is intended to be, but I like the lighter note, the lighter note, "But, brethren, we are persuaded better things of you and the things which accompany salvation". That's the note on which to finish, isn't it?

Yes, it's possible to commit that sin, but you see what it is to do it. I trust that the Lord has enabled me to analyse it sufficiently, to make you understand what it is, to be able to answer your own heart problem or that of some other sorely tried and pressed child of God, and to stand against this master weapon of the evil powers, the one who goes by the name of "the accuser of the brethren". For I think this is the focal point of *all* the accusations.

My experience, dear friends, is that once a person has really taken this on, really taken it on, it doesn't matter what you say: you appeal to the Blood, you appeal to the Name, it's hopeless, hopeless. Oh, don't succumb to that until you've analysed the whole thing and asked the question "what is this sin?" and answered it according to the scriptures, according to the Word of God, and then you can decide where you stand in that matter. If your heart still is wistful to the Lord, if still you love Him really in the depth of your heart and would go on with Him despite the thing that worries and troubles and even curses you, the Holy Spirit's not finished with you. Oh no, the day of grace is not over, the dark, terrible, hopeless, emptiness and void, with no love for God anywhere, that's the abyss, but not yet, not yet, for anyone who wants the Lord.