

Sermon 16: Hebrews 6:4-8: The Sin of Apostasy

OUTLINE

What the sin involves
Who commits this sin
Why there can be no repentance

INTRODUCTION

Often I have had a young Christian come to me and say, 'Nick, I think I have committed the unforgivable sin.' As a young Christian I thought I had committed this sin. I had come to a knowledge of the truth, I sinned even when I knew I shouldn't, hadn't I committed it? I remember reading John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* where he tells his conversion experience and felt that it matched my own nearly exactly. He tells the story of how he was a young believer and the words 'sell Christ' came into his heart, 20 times repeating over and over, and Bunyan felt like his heart gave some sort of consent and was thrown into deep despond. 'Thus getting out of my bed, I went moping into the field; but God knows, with as heavy a heart as mortal man, I think, could bear; where, for the space of two hours, I was like a man bereft of life; and, as now, past all recovery, and bound over to eternal punishment. "And withal, that Scripture did seize upon my soul: 'Or profane person, as Esau, who, for one morsel of meat, sold his birthright; for ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.'"

For two years and a half, as he informs us, that awful Scripture sounded in his ears like the knell of a lost soul. He believed that he had committed the unpardonable sin. His mental anguish was united with bodily illness and suffering. His nervous system became fearfully deranged; his limbs trembled, and he supposed this visible tremulousness and agitation to be the mark of Cain.

Troubled with pain and distressing sensations in his chest, he began to fear that his breast-bone would split open, and that he should perish like Judas Iscariot. He feared the tiles of the houses would fall upon him as he walked the streets. He was like his own Man in the Cage at the House of the Interpreter, shut out from the promises, and looking forward to certain judgment. "Methought," he says, "the very sun that shineth in heaven did grudge to give me light."

And still the dreadful words, "He found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears," sounded in the depths of his soul. They were, he says, like fetters of brass to his legs, and their continual clanking followed him for months.¹

The portion of scripture before us is one that has haunted many a believer, and it is the very thought of not being able to repent, added with other words from Hebrews 10:26-29 (ESV), "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence

¹ <https://regenerationandrepentance.wordpress.com/2014/06/10/when-john-bunyan-thought-he-committed-the-unpardonable-sin/>

of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" That make this passage so fearful. Our great relief is that God is willing to forgive the great sinners that we are, it is hard to hear that there might be a sin that we can't come back from. The author has been warning these Jewish believers who are toying with renouncing their baptism, and Christ and going back to the Judaism that crucified Christ that they are at risk of committing this very sin. This is a passage of great concern to young believers looking for assurance, parents of children who grew up confessing the faith who turned their back; those who are thinking of walking away from their faith, or any who have loved ones who were once confessed believers. Today we want to look at who can what this sin involves; who can commit it, and why there can be no repentance.

What the sin involves

V4, 'For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit.' The word 'For' points to the previous discussion. The author has been talking about the need to go onto maturity, to grow, to apply the basics, Why? Because in this instance these Jewish believers are in danger of committing a sin from which it is impossible to come back from. The words, 'it is impossible' should be joined with the words in v6, 'to restore them again to repentance.' This is probably one of the strongest warning passages in the Bible. It warns of a terrifying sin from which we cannot repent. We must begin by asking, what is this sin?

Contrary to the fears of the young Christian the sin being described here is not merely any known sin or any sinning against knowledge. In truth, all actual sin is chosen sin and sin against what we know to be good. The problem is not committing one particular sin, but a wholesale turning away from God's grace in the gospel after a full knowledge of the truth. The sin in question here is the sin of apostasy, the sin of having been in the truth, choosing to turn away from what you know to be true for a lie. We are not talking about a sin; not even a period of backsliding but a turning your back on the truth for a lie. In this instance the lie is going back to Judaism and selling out Christ to do so. This sin is equivalent to the unforgivable sin. You remember in the ministry of Jesus, Mark 3:22, 'And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons."' Here are the religious leaders, they are jealous for the loyalty of the crowds, fearful of what Rome will do if Jesus is able to get a large following, and offended at the way He has spoken of their hypocrisy and sin. They have heard John the Baptist; they have seen the miracles, and instead of admitting the truth, repenting of their sins, changing their lives and attitudes, they wage a publicity war spreading slander and lies about how Jesus did the miracles. Knowing the truth they say that Jesus is an agent of satan, doing the miracles by his bidding and power. After telling them two parables about a divided house and a bound strongman, Jesus utters these words, v28-29, "'Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.' Please notice that Jesus calls this an 'eternal sin.'

The sin of apostasy is similar, these are people who have had a full hearing of the truth, they have heard about Jesus as God, as Saviour, as the Son of David,

who has fulfilled the OT promises and types, who is God's own sent sent by God to be the promised Messiah. He is the one who paid the price for our redemption at great personal cost, and now knowing all that they are willing to sell Him for the husk of Judaism! I believe this is why Paul distinguishes his past blasphemy as one of ignorance so as to distinguish it from this sin, 1 Tim. 1:13, 'though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.' He was not beyond the possibility of rescue because he had not committed that particular sin. I think this is the sin that leads to death that John mentions in 1 John 5:16-17, 'If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. ¹⁷ All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.' John is dealing with the Church in Ephesus where some have denied the full humanity of Jesus and departed from the faith. He talks about those who 'went out' and did not continue with the brethren 2:19.

It is important that we get this sin right. The devil loves to makes our sins bigger than they are to ensnare us in morbid introspection bringing us to a standstill in spiritual depression, stealing the joy of our salvation which is our strength; turning our energies away from serving others to fixations and obsessions. The sin in question is not every sin but the sin of apostasy in particular.

Who commits this sin

V4-6a, 'For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away....' We must now answer the question who is committing this sin. This text is a classic text in the Calvinist versus Arminian discussion about the question: can a Christian lose their salvation? On the one hand are the Arminians who say that this list is describing those who have been saved, and it teaches that those who were once born again can lose their salvation making this a key text in their argument. The Calvinist looks at the teaching of the whole NT which stresses that Jesus will not lose one of His sheep, that nothing can separate us from God's love; that God's electing love finishes what it starts and seeks some other way to understand the verses before us. I will pin my colours to the mast I am unashamedly someone who believes along with the Reformed tradition that every true believer, who has experienced the saving grace of God will persevere to the end. This should be distinguished from the once saved always saved doctrine taught by certain free grace dispensationalists. There is a version of this doctrine which we deem to be unbiblical. It teaches that a person gets saved by faith alone, not a faith accompanied by repentance, and this guarantees salvation. That person can go off and do whatever they like, living and dying in sin. Because they teach a faith onlyism (which is different to what we mean by being justified by faith alone) salvation is seen as secure apart from repentance and the actions of perseverance. So that even if they apostatize they only lose their rewards and cannot lose their salvation. This we reject. We teach that because the work of conversion is a work of the Spirit in the heart all true faith is accompanied by repentance, no repentance no true faith. And that true and penitent faith will also, because the Spirit dwells within finally persevere to the end. This does not mean they do not sin, but they do not finally turn their backs on Christ. We would say that those who do turn away were never saved to begin with. And so,

I will be approaching these verses seeking to harmonize them with the teaching of the NT on the question of whether we can lose our salvation.

6:4-6 gives us 6 descriptions of the person who turns away. Firstly, it is implied they have repented because they cannot be restored to it; then we also have the other five of the list, enlightened; tasting the heavenly gift; partakers of the Holy Spirit; who have tasted the goodness of God's word, and the powers of the age to come. Is this list describing a believer? Some have tried to make this a list describing 'almost Christians.' Those who maybe go to Church but have not yet taken the plunge. They would emphasize the word 'taste' as indicating sampling but not a deep partaking. I find this to be inadequate as descriptions like enlightenment and partaking of the Holy Spirit would be the normal ways to describe a Christian.

Another approach that has been taken is to suggest that this whole scenario where true believers can fall away is hypothetical and not a real scenario. They would point to v9 where the author indicates that he does not think that this scenario describes them, 'Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.' I do not find this convincing because the whole tone of warning in this letter is not a bluff but a very real danger.

Another view which gets us half way towards the truth is the view that sees each of these items as describing some aspect of the life of the church that marks them as part of the visible church. This view takes enlightenment as baptism because 2nd century apologist Justin Martyr did; tasting the heavenly gift is then taken as the Lord's Supper; partaking in the Holy Spirit is seen as lining up with the laying on of hands as a symbol for receiving the Holy Spirit; the word relates to the preached word; and the powers of the age to come are thought of as 1st century miracles. I agree that church as visible saints is in view. I just don't take the list the same way. I think that any item on this list can stand alone as a description of salvation. I don't think the list is noting different things that link with things like the sacraments, instead we are seeing a diverse heaping up of descriptions showing the privilege of those in the church, who have heard the truth, and the seriousness of the sin of turning from it.

So how then can this list be descriptive of those who have been saved, while still believing that you cannot lose your salvation? I want you to feel that there is a difficulty here, that there is good reason why Christians disagree with each other. However there are good hermeneutical aids that can help us here. Firstly, it is a common feature of the NT that the author addresses a mixed situation of those who are elect and non-elect, regenerate and unregenerate under a general description of a Christian. In other words, the Corinthian church which had some very problematic people in it is addressed as a whole as 'saints'. When pressed on the question whether a true Christian can ever lose their salvation, the answer is always no. They went out from us because they were not of us 1 John 2:19-20. But when warnings are issued against sin, the author issues those warnings to those who are visible saints, who are part of the church, who for all intents and purposes as it pertains to their outward status are believers.

With all the talk of the Spirit, truth and power, we would initially assume that this is describing those who are born again. Here are the reasons why I think that these verses should be interpreted as describing those who only appeared to be saved. Firstly, I can think of several characters in the Bible who were unconverted who experienced grand experiences as described in this list. Think of Judas, he performed miracles, there we see the power, and the gift of the

Spirit. He walked around with Jesus receiving his teaching, and being enlightened and tasting the good word. But he was never saved. He was never elected unto salvation. In fact we know that he was predestined to betray Christ, it had even been prophesied. Think of Simon Magus in Acts 8. He was a sorcerer who was impressed with Phillip's message and miracles, he received the laying on of hands by the apostles, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Samaritans, yet we see that he was still bound in his sin, and was rebuked by Peter (8:20-23). Add to this Saul, Samson, Balaam, his donkey, etc. And there are many who have experienced much, but not saving grace. This is why Jesus said, Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" Secondly, the context indicates this view. As we look down at verses 7-8 we see that the author envisages 2 different types of fields which bear. 'For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.' The first field receives the rain and it bears a useful crop, but the second field grows thorns. This of course reminds us of the parable of the sower. We had four hearers, and four hearts receiving the word. The first rejected, the shallow soil received and looked like the real thing, and so did that which fell amongst thorny ground, but it was only the fourth that was fruitful and endured. It is the underlying assumption of the author that if someone is truly saved they will bear fruit, one of which is perseverance. Importantly, the rest of the teaching of Scripture insists that we should look to read these verses as describing those who appear saved, and in truth not. Almost every other teaching of the Bible calls for us to read these verses as understanding that a true Christian cannot fall away, here are just a few. The nature of the new life we receive is eternal, this demands that life never end. The nature of the covenant we have entered into is eternal, not like the OT covenant which could end. The nature of our forgiveness is eternal, and all our sins have been paid for, even the author of Hebrews reflects this in Hebrews 10:14 (ESV) "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." We who have become Christians have already been declared perfect. By virtue of the nature of God's work, who finishes what he starts, and those whom he predestines, will finally be glorified. And besides the fact that it is implied, it is also clearly taught, John 6:44 (ESV) "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." We have to say with John about anyone who looks like a Christian but ultimately falls away, 1 John 2:19 (ESV) "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." Just like the author of Hebrews John sees true Christians enduring.

No lets make something very clear at this point. Those who do not like this teaching often attack it from a certain point of view. It is felt that if you tell the Christian that their salvation is secure that they will become lazy and no longer serve the Lord that they will abuse grace and just go about sinning. They say that logic says, this doctrine cannot be true because of the possible abuses that will take place. The author of Hebrews recognizes this and adds the necessary balance to his confidence in these believers that they are truly saved and will endure. He warns them not to be lazy, but to be diligent, continuing in their

good deeds, and to imitate those who have been faithful before them. In other words, although we have been wonderfully saved, this is motivation for action not for laziness. We cannot abuse grace, expect God to wink at sin, and just relax into sin and compromise. We have to continue to strive and work. However we do it with a wonderful assurance and confidence. We do it knowing that ultimately we are secure, we do it knowing that our sins will not be able to exceed God's love and grace. We do knowing that we have a wonderful reward waiting, and those our getting to heaven does not depend upon us.

Let this portion of Scripture scare you away from taking sin lightly, let it wake you up. If you have been entertaining thoughts of going over to the JW's, or leaving Christianity, hear it's warnings to you personally, and let it move you. Let it give you a seriousness and an earnestness about those who have or are falling away. There is much at stake. We cannot simply assume that those who once made a commitment will one day be in heaven.

Why there can be no repentance

V6, 'and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.' We have seen the nature of the sin; who is committing it, now we want to answer the question why they cannot repent. I agree with the traditional answer. Since repentance is enabled by the Holy Spirit; and these have turned away from the truth, being under God's judgment the Holy Spirit does not turn them to God. Instead like Romans 1 they have been handed over to themselves. These Jewish believers, if they turn away from Christ will be acting like they were party to Jesus crucifixion, that is why the author says they are crucifying Christ again, and holding Him up to contempt like the Jews did when they called out for His crucifixion.

I think there are three last pastoral matters that need addressing. Firstly, for those who fear they have committed this sin you haven't. if you are fearful you sinned in this way; if you desire to repent properly, you are not the target of these warnings. Secondly, taking this warning seriously. To know the truth and turning away from it. Hearing the gospel, the words of life, hearing the news of God who has done the unimaginable in seeking to save His enemies and turning your back on it. By not embracing Him, persevering; by willing to trade Him for some sin, or lie, or luxury. It is high sin and can bring God's judgment upon you. The warnings of Hebrews must be heeded, if those who turned away from Moses were punished how much worse it will be for those who turn from Christ. Thirdly, what about our children who have known the truth and turned away, are they beyond hope? I don't know! I see in the parable of the Prodigal Son a true hope that those who do terrible sins can return. I am not a prophet who can decide when someone has gone to far and committed this sin. As long as there is life I will hope that God can restore a sinner to Himself. I will pray, and preach, and seek their return to Christ.