

The background of the image is a misty cemetery. Numerous tombstones of various shapes and sizes are visible, some with inscriptions. The ground is covered with fallen leaves, and a small patch of red flowers is in the foreground. Bare tree branches are visible in the upper corners of the image.

# THE SIN UNTO DEATH AND THE SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

HORATIUS BONAR (1808-1889)

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# THE SIN UNTO DEATH AND THE SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

## 1. The Sin unto Death

*“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 John 5:16-17.*

THE sin mentioned here is not the same as the “sin against the Holy Ghost.” The persons spoken of, as respectively guilty, are very different from each other. In the latter sin, it is the scribes and Pharisees, the malignant enemies of Christ, that are the criminals; in the former, that is, the case before us, it is a *Christian brother* that is the offender: “If any man see *his brother* sin.” We must beware of confounding the two sins and the two parties. The sin unto death is spoken of as that which a believer could commit; but no believer could possibly be guilty of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

This clears the way so far, or at least it narrows the ground, and so facilitates our inquiry.

But while removing one difficulty, does it not introduce another? Does it not assume the possibility of falling from grace, and deny the “perseverance of the saints”? We think not. But as much depends on the

meaning of the expression “a sin unto death,” we must first take up this.

Death may mean either temporal or eternal death; either the death of the soul, or that of the body. In the passage before us, it seems to me to mean the latter. The sin unto death would mean a sin involving temporal death; such a sin as God would chastise with disease and death, though He would not exclude the doer of it from His kingdom. The difference between these two kinds of sins may be illustrated by the case of Israel in the desert. The generation that came out of Egypt died in the wilderness because of their murmurings; yet many of these were believing men and women, who, though thus chastised by the infliction of temporal death and deprivation of the earthly Canaan, were not delivered over to eternal death. Moses himself (we might add, Aaron and Miriam) is an example of the same thing. In him we see a believing man suffering temporal death for his sin, yet still a child of God, and an heir of the heavenly Canaan.

But have we any cases of this kind in the New Testament? If we have, they will tend greatly to confirm our interpretation of the passage before us, and show that, in all ages, God’s way of dealing with His saints has been the same; and that, while in some instances there was chastisement, in the shape of pain, or disease, or loss of property, or loss of friends, in others there was chastisement in the shape of death. In the case of Moses, we have this paternal chastisement, involving death; in the case of Job, we see it involving loss of substance, loss of family, loss of health, but stopping

short of death; but in the New Testament, we shall see it in the infliction of *death* upon the saint.

The most remarkable instance of the kind is in the Corinthian church. That church was in many respects noble and Christ-like, coming “behind in no gift” (1Co 1:7). Yet there was much sin in it, and many of its members were not walking “as becometh saints” (Eph 5:3). Specially in reference to the Lord’s Supper, there was grievous sin, as the latter part of the eleventh chapter of the first epistle to that church intimates. God could not suffer such sin in His saints. They are not indeed to be cast away, nor condemned with the unbelieving world; but they are not to be permitted to go on in evil, unrebuked. Accordingly, God interposes. He sends disease on some of these transgressing members, and death on others. “For this cause,” says the apostle, “many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (1Co 11:30). Weakness, sickness, and death were the three forms of chastisement with which the Corinthian church was visited. Some were sinning sins which require to be visited with weakness; others were sinning sins which required to be punished with sickness; while others were sinning sins which needed to be chastised with “death”; for this the word “sleep” evidently means (1Co 7:39 *Greek*; 15:18). Against these sins unto disease, these “sins unto death,” the apostle warns these Corinthians, when he says, “If we would judge ourselves, *we should not be judged*” (1Co 11:31); that is, we might have been spared these chastisements. If we had judged ourselves, and condemned our own sin, we should not have been thus judged by God. And then he adds that even this judgment was in love, not in wrath. When we are thus

judged, it is the Lord chastising us, in order that we may not be condemned with the world (1Co 11:32).

We find the same solemn truth in the Epistle of James 5:15: “The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” Here sickness is spoken of as the consequence of sin—sin in a saint. The sick and sinning one is to be prayed for; and if his sin and sickness be not unto death, God will have mercy on him. The sin shall be forgiven, and the sickness taken away.

We find the same truth in 1 Corinthians 8:11, “Through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?” where the “perishing” is the infliction of temporal death.

These passages shew the true meaning of our text. The sin unto death is a sin such as God chastises by the infliction of disease and death.

What this sin is, we do not know. It was not the same sin in all, but different in each. In the case of the Corinthian church, unworthy communicating was “the sin unto death”; but what it was in others is not recorded.

Thus the passage in John and that in James correspond strikingly, the one illustrating the other. In the case of the sick brother spoken of by James, we have the very thing referred to in the first clause of our text: “If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he [God] shall give him life for them that sin not unto death.” Thus the prayer of faith was to save the sick man from death, to raise him up,

and to secure for him forgiveness of the sin which had produced the sickness.

But then the question would arise: How are we to know when a sin is unto death, and when it is not unto death, so that we may pray in faith? The last clause of the 16th verse answers this question. It admits that there is a sin unto death; which admission is thus put in the 17th verse: "All unrighteousness is sin; and there is a sin not unto death." But what does the apostle mean by saying, in the end of the 16th verse, "I do not say that he shall pray for it?" If we cannot know when a sin is unto death, and when not, what is the use of saying, "I do not say that he shall pray for it?"

The word translated "pray" means also "inquire," and is elsewhere translated so: "The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?" (Joh 1:19; see also Joh 1:21, 25; 5:12; 9:2; 18:21). If thus rendered, the meaning would be, "I say he is to ask no questions about that." That is to say, if he sees a brother sick and ready to die, he is not to say, Has he committed a sin unto death, or has he not? He is just to pray, letting alone all such inquiries, and leaving the matter in the hands of God, Who, in answer to prayer, will raise him up if he has not committed the sin unto death.

The passage now becomes plain; and while it remains as an unspeakably solemn warning, it does not teach us that there is some one mysterious sin which infers eternal damnation; still less, that a saint of God can commit such a sin. It may be thus paraphrased: "If anyone see his brother in Christ sin a sin, and see him also laid upon a sickbed in consequence of this, he shall pray for the sick brother; and if his sin be one of which the punishment is disease, not death, the sick man



shall be raised up; for all sins that lead to sickness do not necessarily lead to death. And as to the difficulty—How shall we know when the sin is one which merely infers sickness, and when it is one which infers death?—I say this, Ask no questions on this point, but pray, and leave the case to God.”

Let us now come to the lessons of our text.

1. *Don't puzzle yourself with hard questions about the particular kind of sins committed.*—Be satisfied that it is sin, and deal with it as such. There are sins unto death, and there are sins not unto death. Do not trouble yourself or others with questions on this point, which no man can answer. Remember that all unrighteousness is sin; and that it is simply with sin, as sin, as a breach of the perfect law of righteousness, that you have to do. It is not the nature or the measure of its punishment that you have to consider, but its own exceeding sinfulness.

2. *Be concerned about a brother's warfare.*—“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phi 2:4), as said the apostle. If any of you see a brother sin, do not let him alone, as if it did not concern you. Do not say, “Am I my brother's keeper?” (Gen 4:9). Desire the spiritual prosperity of all the saints. Seek, too, the salvation of the unsaved. They need your pity and your effort. Leave them not.

3. *Don't trifle with sin.*—Count no sin trivial, either in yourself or another. Do not dally with temptation. Do not extenuate guilt. Do not say, May I not keep my beloved sin a little longer? Part with it, or it will cost you dear. In what way it may do so I know not; but I can say this, that sooner or later it will cost you dear, both in soul and body.

4. *Take it at once to God.*—Don't puzzle yourself with useless questions as to its nature, but take it straight to God. In the case of a brother, do not raise evil reports against him because of it, but go and tell God about it. In your own case do the same. Do not let it remain unconfessed a moment after it is discovered. It is unrighteousness; it is sin; it is breach of law. God hates it; you must hate it too. You must bring it to that God Who hates it; and Who, just because He hates it, wants you to bring it to Him. Give it at once to Him. He knows how to keep it, and to deal with it. If you keep it to yourself, it will be your ruin. It will be poison in your veins. It will eat as doth a canker. It is not too great for Him to deal with or to cover. The blood of His only begotten Son will cover it. Let that blood prove its divine efficacy by the cleansing which it can administer to your soul. Rest not without forgiveness through the great propitiation. An unforgiven man is an unhappy man. Blessedness is the portion only of the forgiven. If you have not yet found the pardon, this blessedness cannot be yours. And if you but felt the misery of the unpardoned, and the joy of the pardoned, you would not rest till you had *made sure* of the forgiveness that there is with God, and tasted the reconciliation that they only know who have settled the great question for eternity at the foot of the cross.

There is such a thing as *the second death*. And who shall deliver the doomed one from it? Who shall pray him up out of hell? The second death! Ah, when it has come to that, all is over! No Christ will do then; no blood; no cross! Oh, wait not till your sins have landed you in that! Take the proffered pardon. God gives it to you in His Son. Take it and live forever. He Who died and lives presents to you the gift of the everlasting

life—life that no second death can touch, life in Himself—life beyond the valley of the shadow of death, in the city of the Living One, from which no life departs, and into which no death can enter.

## 2. The Sin Against the Holy Spirit

*“Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.”*

—Mark 3:28-30.

It would serve no purpose to discuss or enumerate the various opinions that have been held respecting this sin. Let us just take the passage itself and try to find out what the narrative really is meant to teach us.

The key to the passage is contained in the 30th verse—“Because they said [were saying], He hath an unclean spirit.” This is the Evangelist’s remark for the clearing up of the statement; or rather, I should say, it is the Holy Spirit’s own comment on a declaration made specially respecting himself. In the 28th and 29th verses, the Son is speaking of the Spirit, and of the sin against Him; in the 30th, the Spirit interprets the words of the Son, and shows that the sin against Himself is in reality a sin against the Son. In reading these three verses in this connection, as spoken successively by the Son of God and the Spirit of God, we see how jealous the one is for the honor of the other.

The Holy Spirit will not put upon record this testimony of the Son regarding Himself without adding His own testimony to the Son and showing how sin committed against Himself is committed against the Son, and dishonor cast upon Himself is dishonor cast upon the Son.

It was in Galilee that these words were spoken; for Jesus was at this time going through “every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God” (Luk 8:1). He was opposed, reviled, and threatened as he went along, teaching and healing. The opposition, however, did not come from the Galileans, but from the scribes and Pharisees who came down from Jerusalem (Mat 12:24; Mar 3:22). There might be among the inhabitants of that half-Gentile region, ignorance and unbelief; but they did not go so far in their malignity as the more intellectual, better educated, and (in the common acceptation of the word) more “religious” citizens of Jerusalem, as represented by their leaders, the scribes, and Pharisees, and priests. These, though better read in the Prophets, and professing to be waiting for Messiah, were foremost in the rejection of Christ; setting themselves against Himself and His Messiahship with a persevering and desperate malignity, such as we might have reckoned impossible.

Not only did these Jewish leaders show their unbelief in Jerusalem and Judea; but they went everywhere, tracking the Lord’s footsteps, endeavoring to provoke and entrap Him; misrepresenting all that He said and did; maligning Him as a winebibber<sup>1</sup> and a

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<sup>1</sup> **winebibber** – habitual drinker of alcohol.

keeper of the worst company; nay, as possessed of a devil; nay, more, as doing and saying all that He said and did under the influence of this possession. In the present narrative we find them in Galilee, many days' journey from Jerusalem. What were they doing there? They did not come to listen, nor to be taught, nor to be convinced, nor to admire. They had travelled all this distance out of pure malignity. Like demons from hell, they followed the Lord in order to assail Him or plot against Him. They grudged no toil, no travel, no cost, in order to carry out their hatred of Christ. They watched, with hellish eagerness every word and motion, misconstruing all His doings, abusing Him both for what He did and for what He did not do, and seizing every opportunity for poisoning the minds of the people against Him.

In the scene to which our narrative refers, we find Him working a miracle, a miracle of no ordinary kind. The case is a very desperate one. The man is both dumb and blind—perhaps deaf too; and more than this, he is possessed with a devil. He is a signal monument of Satan's power. He is one of Satan's best fortified and best garrisoned fortresses. There could hardly be a clearer or more explicit exhibition of Satan's infernal enmity to man, and of his horrid character as the marrer of God's workmanship, the inflictor of darkness and disease. Seldom had the seed of the serpent been so exhibited in his hatefulness and enmity; and seldom had he been so directly and gloriously confronted with the woman's Seed, in all His lovableness of character and His kindness to man. If ever, therefore, human unbelief were utterly inexcusable, it was here. If ever man's enmity might have been expected to give way, it was here. If ever, in the awful halting between two

opinions, a better choice might have been *forced* upon man, and even the Pharisee made ashamed of siding against Christ, it was here. God had brought heaven and hell face to face before man; He had brought the Prince of light and the prince of darkness into close and direct collision; and that in circumstances most likely to enlist man's sympathies with heaven against hell, with the Son of God against the devil and his angels. It might have been expected that man would, at least for once, have taken the side of God; and that the scribes and Pharisees, the most enlightened and best educated of the land, would have given way in their prejudice and hatred. But it is just here that the greatness of their hostility comes out; and as afterwards the cry arose in Jerusalem, "Not this man, but Barabbas" (Joh 18:40), so here, in Galilee, a like cry is heard, from the lips of the same men, "Not the Holy Spirit, but the devil!"

Thus it was that these scribes and Pharisees sinned against the Holy Spirit by imputing to the devil the works of Christ, which He did by the power of the Holy Spirit in Him. They did not do this in ignorance; for they were not half-enlightened Galileans, but men well-read in their Scriptures; they did it knowingly. They did not do it hastily, and under the influence of passing excitement; they did it deliberately, and resolutely, and continuously. They did it with their eyes open; they did it maliciously, in the desperate hatred of their hearts. They did it without one extenuating circumstance—without anything either to excuse or to account for their malignity. This is the sin which our Lord here declares to be unpardonable. To have said that this marvelous universe was created by the devil, and not by God, would have been a *kindred* crime; a sin of awful daring. To have said that the miracles of Egypt,

the dividing of the Red Sea, the manna, the water, the healing of the serpents' deadly bite, the drying up of Jordan, the overthrow of Jericho, the arrest of sun and moon in Gibeon were all the work of the devil, would have been sins *like in kind* to this of the Pharisees; but not, by many degrees, equal to it in dark malignity. For, in this miracle of Christ, thus misinterpreted, we have more of divine love and power—more of God Himself, than in all these other miracles together. One of the fullest and brightest manifestations of God's character, as our loving, healing, pardoning, redeeming God, is in this miracle; and hence the peculiarly aggravated guilt of those who reviled it as the work of the devil. It was a work done by the special power of the Holy Spirit—a work in which might have been clearly read the Father's love and power, the Son's love and power, the Spirit's love and power. Yet this work of the Holy Spirit, this miracle of Godhead's love and power, is ascribed to Satan! It was calling God the devil, and the devil God; it was calling hell heaven, and heaven hell. It was not mere rejection of Christ; it was not mere disbelief of His miracles; it was not mere refusal of the divine testimony to His Messiahship. It was something beyond all these phases of unbelief. It was the substitution and preference of the evil for the good, of the darkness for the light, of the seed of the serpent for the Seed of the woman. Nay, more, it was the deliberate declaration, not that the works of God the Holy Spirit were unreal and untrue—but that they were not His works at all, but those of the devil. It was the admission of their reality, but the ascription of them to the devil. It was carrying out hatred of Christ to such an extreme, as to be willing to acknowledge Satan as the worker of miracles rather than Christ; nay, it was so hating the

Holy Spirit, because of His thus witnessing for Christ, as to call Him “an unclean spirit” (Mar 3:30), Beelzebub, the prince of the devils!

Such is the sin against the Holy Spirit; a sin which originates in very peculiar circumstances; which can only be committed by those who sin willfully, daringly, and maliciously; and which, in all probability, could only be committed when the Lord was upon the earth, working miracles by the power of the Spirit.

It is worthy of notice, that our Lord does not affirm that even these blasphemous Pharisees had *actually committed* the sin. The awful words regarding the sin that has no pardon are spoken as words of warning. In them the Lord is pointing to the horrible gulf which these Pharisees were approaching, and warning them off. He sees them like a vessel drawing nearer some raging whirlpool, and he speaks that they may be alarmed and turn back. In this there is a blessed mixture of grace and righteousness. He would warn even the Pharisees! He would sound the alarm even to those who were on the very point of plunging into hell!

The sin is thus a peculiar sin. It is not the same as rejection of Christ and final unbelief. It is not even blasphemy against Christ and His work. It is not simply sin against light and knowledge. It is not repeated, or prolonged, or outrageous backsliding. It is something special, something open and before others. It is something deliberate and malicious; it is something which would render the man's state quite hopeless and seal his doom at once. It is something connected directly with the Spirit, and which involves daring blasphemy against Him and His doings. It must, then, be a greater sin than that of Judas, for his sin was



pardonable to the last. It must be a greater sin than scourging, buffeting, reviling, crucifying the Lord of glory. Oh, how unutterably hateful must that sin be, of which we thus read, "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 a word 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...He that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation; *because they said, he hath an unclean spirit*" (Mat 12:31; Mar 3:29-30).

But, while this sin is a very peculiar one, and possibly only committed when our Lord was here, and that by those who ascribed to the devil the miracles which Christ did by the Holy Spirit, there are approximations to it, in all ages, of which men need to be warned. The way in which many attack revivals, and revile those engaged in them, and ascribe the conversions to mere excitement, or hypocrisy, or love of show, or *to Satan himself*, is a perilous approach to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Let men beware how they speak of these religious awakenings. If you dislike them, or see no evidence for their genuineness, at least let them alone. Especially let those who, in their zeal for ecclesiastical order, have set themselves against such movements, and do not hesitate to throw out insinuations as to all these being the devil's work, beware lest they be found fighting against God, and reviling the Spirit of God. They may be nearer the sin of the Pharisees than they are willing to think; and their zeal for sound words, in which they pride

themselves, only helps to identify them the more with these haters of the Lord. The dislike of sudden conversions looks very like a denial of the Spirit's work; just as the dislike of assurance looks like a questioning of the work of Christ—a denial of its sufficiency to give immediate peace to the awakened conscience. Let the ungodly beware of scoffing at revivals; and let professing Christians beware of standing aloof from them, as if they were fanaticism, or excitement, or the work of Satan.

Let us gather, in closing, such lessons as these:

1. *Honor the Holy Spirit and His work.*—As the third person of the Godhead, equal with the Father and the Son, He is to be worshipped. Never let us overlook the Spirit or undervalue either His power or His love. Nor let us lose sight of His great work in the church and in individual souls. Without His almighty hand there is no conversion, no faith, no repentance, no light. Let those who deny His work, or explain it as a mere influence, or affirm that it is nothing but the effect of the Word upon us, consider how much they are dishonoring the Spirit, and how near they may be approaching to the sin against the Holy Spirit.

2. *Prize Him as the gift of the glorified Christ.*—He is the promise of the Father; He is the gift of the Son; and in Him are wrapped all other gifts for sinners. He is in the hand of Christ for us, let us go to Christ for Him; for He is exalted a Prince and a Saviour to give repentance and forgiveness, through the shedding down of the Holy Spirit upon us. We need not fear a refusal from such a Savior.

3. *Beware of grieving and quenching Him.*—Israel's great sin was their resisting the Holy Ghost (Act

7:51). “They rebelled, and vexed his Holy Spirit” (Isa 63:10). Let us beware of Israel’s sin. Oh, grieve not the Spirit, by your unbelief and hardness of heart! He will not always strive.

4. *Receive that Christ of Whom He testifies.*—His office is to *glorify* Christ; to *show* Christ. He is willing to do this for sinners. He wants to show you your need of Christ. He wants to show you Christ’s sufficiency. He wants to give you true and high thoughts of Christ. Oh, turn not away!

5. *Be not scoffers.*—God’s words are very awful ones—“Be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong” (Isa 28:22). Do not ridicule religion; nor speak evil of Christians; nor circulate reports against the work of God; nor deny “sudden conversions.” Beware of everything like irreverence, or levity, or flippancy in speaking of the things of God or the transactions of eternity. Judge nothing before the time; or if you will judge, see that in your judgment you honor the Spirit of truth and holiness. ❧