

THE UNFORGIVEABLE SIN

Scriptures: Mark 3:20-30; Mark 8:11-13

Last year Doubleday published a collection of letters by Mother Teresa called *Come Be My Light*. Mother Teresa spent most of her life as a nun working among the poor and terminally ill on the streets of Calcutta. She also started a new order of nuns called the Missionaries of Charity who replicated her work in other cities. Mother Teresa was almost synonymous with saintliness, but very few people knew about the inner spiritual darkness and turmoil that she experienced for much of her life. She wrote of this in a letter to her archbishop in 1956:

I want to say to you something—but I do not know how to express it. I am longing—with a painful longing to be all for God—to be holy in such a way that Jesus can live His life to the full in me. The more I want Him—the less I am wanted. I want to love Him as He has not been loved—and yet there is that separation—that terrible emptiness, that feeling of absence of God (p. 164).

In another letter she writes,

There is so much contradiction in my soul. Such deep longing for God—so deep that is painful—a suffering continual—and yet not wanted by God—repulsed—empty—no faith—no love—no zeal. Souls hold no attraction—Heaven means nothing—to me it looks like an empty place—the thought of it means nothing to me and yet this torturing longing for God. Pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything (pp. 169-170).

The whole book is an amazing testimony. For almost sixty years Mother Teresa served God even though she rarely felt God's presence. Even though she often felt abandoned by God, she kept praying, kept worshiping, and kept serving in some of the most desolate and depressing circumstances imaginable, because she felt she owed it to God whether she felt God's presence or not.

Recently I read a review of this book by Christopher Hitchens in *Newsweek* magazine. Christopher Hitchens is the currently fashionable atheist who wrote the book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Commenting on Mother Teresa's anguish, he says,

Now it might seem glib of me to say that this is all rather unsurprising, and that it is the inevitable result of a dogma that asks people to believe impossible things and then makes them feel abject and guilty when their reason rebels.

Further on he says,

It seems, therefore, that all the things that made Mother Teresa famous—the endless hard toil, the bitter austerity, the ostentatious religious orthodoxy—were only part of an effort to still the misery within (*Newsweek*, August 29, 2007).

Isn't that interesting? Christopher Hitchens takes an extraordinary life of faith, a person who for 60 years served God among the poorest, most destitute, most hopeless people in the world, even though she herself felt abandoned by God—Christopher Hitchens takes this extraordinary story and uses it as a case for atheism. In effect he says that Mother Teresa felt the absence of God because God is absent. There is no God, and when Mother Teresa finally realized this, she compensated for it by working even harder to prove God's existence through her works.

With that in mind, let's go back to our second scripture lesson in Mark 3. Prior to this scripture reading Jesus has cast out many demons, healed Peter's mother-in-law, cleansed a man from the disease of leprosy, healed a paralyzed man brought to him on a stretcher, and restored the withered hand of a man in the synagogue. But his family thinks he is crazy, and in verse 22 the scribes say, "He has Beelzebul." Beelzebul was apparently a kind of head demon. They say, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

Do you see what is going on? Jesus does all this good in people's lives, and the scribes attribute it to sinister motives and powers of delusion. Mother Teresa does all this good in people's lives, and Christopher Hitchens attributes it to sinister motives and self-delusion. You wonder what possible evidence of God would convince them.

There is a story I have shared before about a man in a psychiatric hospital who believed he was dead. Everyone at the hospital tried to convince the man that he was alive, but he shook his head and said, "No, I'm dead." Finally, an intern at the hospital asked him, "Do dead men bleed?" "Of course not," the man said. "Who ever heard of a dead man bleeding?" "All right," said the intern, and he took a needle and pricked the man's finger producing a drop of blood. "There," said the intern, "what do you say now?" The man looked at his finger and said, "Well, what do you know? Dead men do bleed."

Later in our scripture reading Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter." Stop there, and let that sink in a moment. People will be forgiven their sins. Whatever you have done, whatever you have said, whatever you have thought, the darkest secrets of your past can all be forgiven. There is nothing that cannot be forgiven if you bring it to God. But then Jesus says, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven." And what is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit, as I have said in other sermons, is the power that bring us to God, the power that works to open our eyes, to open our hearts, and sometimes when necessary to cast out demons—powers of evil in our lives. A sin against the Holy Spirit is when the Holy Spirit works to open your eyes and you choose instead to shut them, when God works to cast out the powers of evil from your life and you choose instead to embrace them. It is like the man at the hospital who refused to believe that he was alive, even when shown that blood was still moving through his veins. A sin against the Holy Spirit is when we don't want God to reach us, when we don't want anyone to persuade us of God's power and love.

I have known many Christians who felt doubt, myself included. Mother Teresa felt doubt. But she never quit wanting God to reach her. Your relationship to God may be rocky at times. There may be times when you have rejected God. There may be times even now when

you are not sure about God, when, to put it frankly, you would prefer not to be bothered by God. God can work with that, Jesus says. Any sin, any blasphemy, can be forgiven, even a blasphemy against God. But when the Holy Spirit begins to tug at your heart, when the Holy Spirit begins to show you that lives can be changed by the power of God's grace, and you choose to interpret the whole thing as a delusion, then there is not much more that God can do.

Jim Edwards, one of the religion professors at Whitworth College, makes an interesting comment about this scripture. He says, "Anyone who is worried about having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit has not yet committed it" (*The Gospel according to Mark*, p. 124). If you are still worried about your past, if you still want to be forgiven, if you still want to be convinced of God's love and power in your life, then there is hope. Because all sins can be forgiven. Everyone's past can be redeemed. If you still want God's love and grace to come into your life, it can happen. Jesus proves it. But if you don't even want that to happen, if you choose to regard every overture of God's love as a trick, then there is not much that God can do.

One of the most powerful letters in Mother Teresa's book is not really a letter but a prayer. It is addressed to Jesus. She writes,

They say people in hell suffer eternal pain because of the loss of God—they would go through all that suffering if they had just a little hope of possessing God. In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing. (Jesus, please forgive my blasphemies—I have been told to write everything.) That darkness that surrounds me on all sides—I can't lift my soul to God—no light or inspiration enters my soul. I speak of love for souls—of tender love for God—words pass through my words, and I long with a deep longing to believe in them. What do I labour for? If there be no God—there can be no soul. If there is no soul then Jesus—You also are not true. Heaven, what emptiness—not a single thought of Heaven enters my mind—for there is no hope. I am afraid to write all those terrible things that pass in my soul. They must hurt you (pp. 192-193).

Wow. There is no question that Mother Teresa had doubts about God. On that point Christopher Hitchens was right. But what Christopher Hitchens failed to notice, and what I find so intriguing, is that Mother Teresa addressed all her doubts about God to Jesus. She acknowledges her deep doubt and personal sense of emptiness, but she pours them out in a prayer. When Mother Teresa says, "Jesus, please forgive my blasphemies," she has not committed the unforgiveable sin. Because Jesus says, "People will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter." Mother Teresa may have felt God's absence, just as Jesus did on the cross, just as you may have felt. But she kept bringing herself to God, and that is what allowed God to work in her life in such extraordinary ways.

There is no sin that can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ, except the sin of not even wanting it.

- Ken Onstot
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