

Intro to “It Shall Not Be Forgiven”

By Mark Lama

INTRODUCTION:

Is there any sin too bad for God to forgive? Are some sinners lost forever? In this sermon, which might be better titled, "It *Shall* Be Forgiven," George MacDonald addresses these questions.

MacDonald's text is Luke 12:10, which deals with what has been called "the unpardonable sin." He also looks at another passage (Matt. 6:15) in which Jesus speaks of a person's sin as not being forgiven.

MacDonald explores God's forgiveness by looking at how a wise and loving human father forgives his children. He then shows that God always makes his forgiveness triumph in the end, even if he has to withhold it for a long time while he clears a path for it to the sinner's heart.

The sermon opens with a forceful prologue in which MacDonald addresses how we are to approach the words of Jesus, and the Scriptures in general.

SUMMARY:

To understand what George MacDonald is trying to say in this sermon, it helps to ask why he chose Luke 12:10 as his text in the first place. The answer MacDonald gives within the sermon is, "It is reason enough for inquiring into such passages as the one before me, that they are often torture to human minds."

Of course, it is mental torture if you believe you may have committed such a sin as Luke 12:10 describes, one that ostensibly can never be forgiven. But it is also torture to think of God refusing to forgive anyone, when he himself tells us to forgive our worst enemies. It makes us feel as if God is less good than we need him to be. It ought to be a mental torment to us to think of any of our fellow human beings being shut outside God's forgiveness forever.

MacDonald's purpose in this sermon is to offer a solution to this tormenting difficulty. He is aware that his solution is a radically different, controversial interpretation of the text. Therefore, he begins the sermon with a prologue in which he stresses that it is our duty, in approaching the sayings of Jesus, to refuse any interpretation of Jesus' words that seems to us unlike him, unworthy of him. MacDonald reasons everything from God's perfect love. And he believes us capable of judging for ourselves what would be consistent with God's love and what would not be. While God's love must be higher than anything we can imagine, certainly no interpretation can be true that presents God as less faithfully devoted to his children than the best human parent would be.

It is through human fatherhood that MacDonald arrives at an understanding of forgiveness that enables him to solve the problem posed by his text. His solution is this: God's apparent refusal to forgive someone may itself be part of his forgiving them.

This sounds paradoxical, but MacDonald points out, "All sin is unpardonable." God never forgives *sin*, in the sense of overlooking or condoning it. What God does is forgive *people* by destroying their sins. By destroying his children's sin, God the Father removes it as a barrier from between his child and himself. How does God destroy sin? By leading the sinner to hate the wrong he has done, turn from it,

and choose to do right again. When once God has accomplished this, he has his child back in his arms, and all is well. The child has been forgiven.

But what if the child will not repent? What if he has so set himself against the light and the truth that he has silenced the voice of God inside him that leads him to repentance? (That is how MacDonald interprets the sin against the Holy Spirit in Luke 12:10.) What does God do then? He refuses to forgive that person--not so that he may be damned forever, but so that the horror of being without God and alone with himself (which is truly hell) may shatter his willful deafness and cause him to respond to God's voice once more.

God's refusal to forgive is his last resort in his effort to make his forgiveness reach his child. God never stops loving the sinner. He loves even where, because the sinner is not yet ready for his forgiveness, he cannot yet forgive. His love goes ahead of his forgiveness and clears a path for it to the sinner's heart. That love may have to take the form of severity and punishment, but it is always focused on the goal of making the sinner able at last to repent and accept God's forgiveness, which is the destruction of his sin.

But will God succeed? What if he knows that there are some sinners too hardened ever to repent? MacDonald cannot believe that God ever stops doing his very best for every creature that he has made. And he believes that where God has a will, there must be a way. No matter how long God has to delay his forgiveness in some cases, his love will cause it to prevail in the end.