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## The Three Most Abominable Sins

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# *The Three Most Abominable Sins*

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H. Dean Garrett

Alma experienced a great teaching moment when he interviewed his son, Corianton, who while serving as a missionary to the Zoramites had become involved with the harlot, Isabel (Alma 39:4). As Alma counseled with him concerning his mission, Corianton's rationalizations prevented him from fully realizing the enormity of his sin and his precarious current spiritual status. Alma informed him: "These things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord, yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost" (Alma 39:5). With this declaration, Alma identified for Corianton the three most abominable sins in the sight of God: (1) denying the Holy Ghost, (2) shedding innocent blood, and (3) committing sexual sin. Adultery was third to murder and the sin against the Holy Ghost as abominable sins. To fully grasp the seriousness of his sin, Corianton needed to understand its relationship to the two most abominable sins, thus allowing him to realize the possibilities of repentance and forgiveness.

Alma distinguished between unpardonable and pardonable sins. A sin that is unpardonable cannot be paid for either by the atoning blood of Christ or by the personal suffering of the sinner. The only sin that falls into this category is denying the Holy Ghost "when it once has had place in you, and you know that you deny it" (Alma 39:6). All other sins are apparently

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forgivable or pardonable because the demands of justice can be met through the atonement of Jesus Christ or through personal payment by the sinner (see D&C 19:15-18). The Apostle John taught that “There is a sin unto death . . . and there is a sin not unto death” (I John 5:16-17). Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote that the death John referred to meant “spiritual death”:

There are sins for which there is no forgiveness, neither in this world nor in the world to come. There are sins which utterly and completely preclude the sinner from gaining eternal life. Hence there are sins for which repentance does not operate, sins that the atoning blood of Christ will not wash away, sins for which the sinner must suffer and pay the full penalty personally (*New Witness* 231).

There is a difference between the sins that are unforgivable but pardonable and those that are forgivable. The Lord said, “I, the Lord, forgive sins unto those who confess their sins before me and ask forgiveness, who have not sinned unto death” (D&C 64:7).

### *Denying the Holy Ghost*

Alma identified denying the Holy Ghost as the most abominable sin. According to the Lord, individuals committing this sin do five things: (1) They “know my power, and [2] have been made partakers thereof, and [3] suffered themselves through the power of the devil to be overcome and [4] to deny the truth and [5] defy my power” (D&C 76:31). The key to these requirements appears to be the power of the priesthood. An individual must bear and be a partaker of the priesthood and then defy that power. This leads that man to deny “the Holy Spirit after having received it, and having denied the Only Begotten Son of the Father, having crucified him unto themselves and put him to open shame” (D&C 76:35). Joseph Smith indicated that such an individual must “have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against Him. . . . He has got to say that the sun does not shine while he sees it; he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens have been opened unto him, and to deny the plan of salvation with his eyes



open to the truth of it” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 358; hereafter *TPJS*). Thus they become Sons of Perdition. These qualifications limit those who receive this judgment. A person must have made priesthood covenants with God and then have received knowledge and power beyond what the vast majority of us have received. Spencer W. Kimball stated, “The sin against the Holy Ghost requires such knowledge that it is manifestly impossible for the rank and file to commit such a sin” (*Teachings* 23).

This knowledge must be gained in mortality. An individual cannot become a Son of Perdition in the post-mortal spirit world. Joseph Smith taught, “A man cannot commit the unpardonable sin after the dissolution of the body” (*TPJS* 357). However, if a mortal today gains sufficient knowledge, light, and truth, and then turns against that illumination and denies what he knows, he has committed the unpardonable and non-redemptive sin, he will be cast into outer darkness forever.

Once individuals deny the Holy Ghost, the penalty is final. The Lord declared that these were the ones for “whom I have said there is no forgiveness in this world nor in the world to come” (D&C 76:34). Alma taught that all sins are pardonable except the sin against the Holy Ghost: “For behold, if ye deny the Holy Ghost when it once has had a place in you and ye know that ye deny it, behold this is a sin which is unpardonable” (Alma 39:6). For a sin to be unpardonable, it must be of such a nature that it would not be covered by the atoning blood of the Savior, nor could the personal suffering of the sinner pay the price for the broken law. All other sins can be covered by either of these methods and, therefore, are pardonable.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “The unpardonable sin is to shed innocent blood, or be accessory thereto. All other sins will be visited with the judgment in the flesh, and the spirit being delivered to the buffetings of Satan until the day of the Lord Jesus” (*TPJS* 301). In his sermons the Prophet used the term “innocent blood” in relation to both the sin against the Holy Ghost and murder. In relationship with the sin against the Holy Ghost,



this apparently refers to those who have so rebelled against the Savior that they seek after the blood of Christ and if possible would shed his blood anew.

Because the sin against the Holy Ghost is unpardonable, no redemption will be made through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Therefore, no glory will be inherited by these people. President Joseph Fielding Smith said: “It is the purpose of the Almighty to save all mankind, and all will enter into his kingdoms in some degree of glory, except sons of perdition who sin beyond the power of repentance and redemption, and therefore cannot receive forgiveness of sins. All the rest shall be saved, but not all with the same degree of glory or exaltation” (2:21).

The unpardonable nature of this sin is such that “it had been better for them never to have been born” (D&C 76:32). They become the “vessel of wrath” and the only ones “on whom the second death shall have any power.” They are the “only ones who shall not be redeemed in the due time of the Lord” (D&C 76:32–38). If they have lived on this earth and have received a mortal body, they shall come forth in the last resurrection with an immortal body; but that body will not be glorified. Instead they “go away into the lake of fire and brimstone, with the devil and his angels” (D&C 76:36), “into everlasting punishment, which is endless punishment, which is eternal punishment, to reign with the devil and his angels in eternity, where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched, which is their torment” (D&C 76:44). Only those who commit this sin will know the nature of this torment and its duration:

The end thereof, neither the place thereof, nor their torment, no man knows; neither was it revealed, neither is, neither will be unto man, except to them who are made partakers thereof; . . . wherefore, the end, the width, the height, the depth, and the misery thereof, they understand not, neither any man except those who are ordained unto this condemnation. (D&C 76:45–46, 48)

However, it is important to note that although no human knows the eternal state of these people, it would be incorrect to teach that there is possible redemption for them at some future



time. In response to such doctrine taught by a Brother Hulet, Joseph Smith wrote:

Say to the brothers Hulet and to all others, that the Lord never authorized them to say that the devil, his angels, or the sons of perdition, should ever be restored; for their state of destiny was not revealed to man, is not revealed, nor ever shall be revealed, save to those who are made partakers thereof: consequently those who teach this doctrine have not received it of the Spirit of the Lord. . . . We, therefore, command that this doctrine be taught no more in Zion. (TPJS 24)

Therefore, if mortals today gain sufficient knowledge, light, and truth, and then turn against that illumination and deny what they know, they will have committed the unpardonable and nonredemptive sin, and will be cast into outer darkness forever. Denying the Holy Ghost is an unpardonable sin, thus differing in a key aspect from the sin of murder by the shedding of innocent blood.

### *Shedding of Innocent Blood*

Alma listed murder, the shedding of innocent blood, as the second most abominable sin. The Church defines murder as “the deliberate and unjustified taking of human life” (*General Handbook* 10–13). Alma indicated: “Whosoever murdereth against the light and knowledge of God, it is not easy for him to obtain forgiveness” (Alma 39:6). In this dispensation, the Lord gave further insight on the eternal condition of those members of the Church who commit murder. In giving the law of the Church, the Lord declared: “I speak unto the church. Thou shalt not kill; and he that kills shall not have forgiveness in this world, nor in the world to come” (D&C 42:18). This appears to contradict Alma 34:6, but it is important to note the Doctrine and Covenants section 42 is the Law of the Church, and in verse 18 the Lord specifically stated that he was speaking to the Church. Elder McConkie wrote: “We do know that there are murders committed by Gentiles for which they at least can repent, be baptized, and receive a remission of their sins” (*New Witness*



231; see also 3 Nephi 30:12). The light and knowledge that the murderer possesses will be a factor in determining his or her eternal condition. Elder Spencer W. Kimball wrote:

Even among willful murderers there are grades and categories. . . . There are those who kill in drunkenness, in rage, in anger, in jealousy. There are those who kill for gain, for power, for fear. There are those who kill for lust. They certainly will suffer different degrees of punishment hereafter. (*Miracle of Forgiveness* 12930)

The Lord will judge.

For persons not to receive forgiveness neither in this world nor in the world to come does not mean that they will be cast into outer darkness, for the sin of murder can be pardoned even though it is unforgivable. Joseph Smith taught: “A murderer, one that sheds innocent blood, cannot have forgiveness” (*TPJS* 339). The Prophet used David as an example. “David sought repentance at the hand of God carefully with tears, for the murder of Uriah; but he could only get it through hell: he got a promise that his soul should not be left in hell” (*TPJS* 339). President Joseph F. Smith indicated that this meant “even he [David] shall escape the second death” (434).

Murder is unforgivable because of the nature of the sin. In order for a sin to be forgiven, the sinner must repent. If the sin is of such a nature that repentance cannot take place or if the sinner refuses to repent, then it remains “as though there had been no redemption made, except it be the loosing of the bands of death” (*Alma* 11:41). President Harold B. Lee stated:

One of the most serious of all sins and crimes against the Lord’s plan of salvation is the sin of murder or the destruction of human life. It seems clear that to be guilty of destroying life is the act of “rebellion” against the plan of the Almighty by denying an individual thus destroyed in mortality, the privilege of a full experience in this earth-school of opportunity. It is in the same category as the rebellion of Satan and his hosts and therefore it would not be surprising if the penalties to be imposed upon a murderer were to be of similar character as the penalties meted out to those spirits which were cast out of heaven with Satan. (“The Sixth Commandment” 88)



Because of this rebellion, the fulness of the atonement of Jesus Christ is not effective in murderers' lives. In order for the demands of justice to be met, murderers must pay the price themselves before they can enter into a kingdom of glory. Elder McConkie suggests that it appears that they "shall eventually go to the Telestial Kingdom" (*Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* 3:584).

The fact that they will go to the telestial kingdom becomes apparent from comparing two scriptural verses. In describing the inhabitants of the telestial kingdom, the Lord told Joseph Smith: "These are they who are liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers and whosoever loves and makes a lie" (D&C 76:103). This same wording is used in Revelation 22:15 except murderers and idolaters are added to the list. Peter taught the Jewish people that David did not resurrect with the Saints that came forth at the time of Christ's resurrection: "For David is not ascended into the heavens" (Acts 2:34). Joseph Smith further explained David's situation by stating that his

remains were then in the tomb. Now, we read that many bodies of the Saints arose at Christ's resurrection, probably all the Saints, but it seems that David did not. Why? Because he had been a murderer. If the ministers of religion had a proper understanding of the doctrine of eternal judgment, they would not be found attending the man who forfeited his life to the injured laws of his country, by shedding innocent blood; for such characters cannot be forgiven, until they have paid the last farthing. (*TPJS* 188–89)

However, after paying the last farthing, murderers will reside in the Telestial Kingdom and thus be saved in the kingdom of God. Although the sin of murder is unforgivable as far as the atonement of Christ is concerned, the repentant murderer can still qualify for salvation in the Telestial Kingdom. Thus the sin of murder is different from the sin against the Holy Ghost and sexual sin.



### *Committing Sexual Sin*

The third most serious type of sin is sexual transgression. Although forgivable and pardonable, this is still a most serious sin, for Alma declared to Corianton: “I would to God that ye had not been guilty of so great a crime” (Alma 39:7). To understand the seriousness of sexual sins, we must comprehend the role of the procreative powers in the plan that God has given his children. A careful study of Doctrine and Covenants section 132 reveals that sacred role. Those who live worthy to pass by the gods and the angels “to their exaltation and glory in all things” will receive the glory of a “fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.” They shall become “gods, because they have no end” and shall have a “continuation of the seeds” (see D&C 132:19–22). If an individual does not qualify through the marriage covenant for this exaltation, that will be the “end of his kingdom; he cannot have an increase” (D&C 131:4). The key words—“continuation of seeds,” “continuation of the seeds,” and “increase”—all suggest the role of the continuing power of procreation. Of all the power which God possesses, this power separates him from the angels. He has granted this deifying power to men and women on this earth for this short probationary period. How we use it and the attitudes that we develop about it determine whether we will have the opportunity to possess it during the eternities. The misuse of this power can be very condemning.

President Joseph F. Smith emphasized the significance of this power when he stated:

The man and the woman who engage in this ordinance of matrimony are engaging in something that is of such far-reaching character, and is of such vast importance, that thereby hangs life and death, and eternal increase. Thereupon depends eternal happiness, or eternal misery. For this reason, God has guarded this sacred institution by the most severe penalties, and has declared that whosoever is untrue to the marriage relation, whosoever is guilty of adultery, shall be put to death. This is scriptural law, though it is not practiced today, because modern civilization does not recognize the laws of God in relation to moral status of mankind. The Lord commanded, “Whosoever sheddeth innocent blood, by man shall his blood be



shed.” Thereby God has given the law. Life is an important thing. No one has any right to take life, unless God commanded it. The law of God as to violation of the marriage covenant is just as strict, and is on a parallel with law against murder notwithstanding the former is not carried out. (273)

The seriousness of this sin has been repeatedly restated in this dispensation. For example, in 1942 the First Presidency stated: “The doctrine of this Church is that sexual sin—the illicit sexual relations of men and women—stands, in its enormity, next to murder. The Lord has drawn no essential distinctions between fornication, adultery, and harlotry or prostitution. Each has fallen under His solemn and awful condemnation” (Grant 758).

Joseph Smith declared: “If a man commit adultery, he cannot receive the celestial kingdom of God. Even if he is saved in any kingdom, it cannot be the celestial kingdom” (HC 6:81). This troublesome statement has caused some to feel a hopelessness because of their transgressions. However, after making a thorough review of scriptures on repentance revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith, President Spencer W. Kimball observed: “Going back to the Prophet’s original statement, had he inserted in it the three words I believe it implies ‘and remains unrepentant,’ this statement would fit perfectly in the program as given in the numerous scriptures, many of which came through the Prophet himself” (*Miracle of Forgiveness* 350). In stating this, President Kimball emphasized that he did not intend to minimize “the seriousness of the sexual sins or other transgressions but merely to hold out hope to the transgressor, so that men and women of sin may strive with all their power to overcome their errors, wash themselves ‘in the blood of the Lamb’ and be purged and purified, and thus be able to return to their maker” (351).

The word “adultery” also implies fornication. President Harold B. Lee taught that “the Master used interchangeably the words *adultery* and *fornication* in defining sexual impurity, and it has been severely condemned in every dispensation by authorized church leaders” (*Stand Ye In Holy Places* 332).



One major difference between adultery and fornication is the making of covenants. The act of being married is an act of covenant making. This is even more serious when the marriage covenants are made in the temple. Committing sexual sin after having been endowed in a temple and not yet being married is also very serious. To a young unmarried man who had been endowed in the temple, seeking forgiveness after committing fornication, President Kimball wrote: “Your sin is the most serious thing you could have done in your youth this side of murder” (*Teachings* 266).

### *Possibilities of Repentance and Forgiveness*

Repentance is possible for sexual sins, but the process is very demanding. President Kimball stated:

The grievousness of the sin enhances the difficulty of repenting. Sometimes offenders reach the point of no return and cannot repent, for the Spirit of the Lord will not always strive with man. . . . One sad experience may not totally destroy, for repentance is in order, but one experience of fornication can break down the bars, blast and scar a life, and start a soul on a lifetime of regret and anguish. (*Miracle of Forgiveness* 63)

Alma taught Corianton the steps necessary to repent of his sexual sins; he counseled him to “give so much heed unto my words as did thy brother” (Alma 39:2). Instead of following the prophet, Corianton had gone about “boasting in [his] strength and [his own] wisdom” (Alma 39:2). Pride and arrogance are a common cause of sexual sin. Corianton failed to observe “the steadiness of [his] brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God” (Alma 39:2). Instead, he wanted to go his own way and do his own thing. Although he had been taught by precept and example what was right, he forsook the ministry with which he had been entrusted. Apparently believing that he did not have to follow counsel of prophets and family, Corianton’s pride and desire for independence led him through boasting in his own strength and wisdom into sin.



To overcome his pride, Corianton needed to sink into the depths of humility and recognize deep in his soul that without God and Christ he was in a “carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:2). He had to recognize that he could not repent on his own without the help of Christ, and he needed to “turn to the Lord with all [his] mind, might, and strength” and exercise his faith in the atoning power of Christ who was to “come to take away the sins of the world” (Alma 39:13–15).

Corianton’s sin not only affected himself, but it also negatively influenced others. By his actions, Corianton had brought great iniquity “upon the Zoramites; for when they saw [his] conduct they would not believe” his prophet father (Alma 39:11). President Joseph Fielding Smith observed: “The Lord says if we labor all our days and save but one soul, how great will be our joy with him; on the other hand *how great will be our sorrow and our condemnation if through our acts we have led one soul away from this truth*” (1:314).

It was important that Corianton understand his relationship with God. He could not “hide [his] crimes from God” (Alma 39:8). Instead he had to humble himself before God and repent of his sins. This type of humility and dependency on Christ led Corianton to be obedient to God and to “cross [himself] in all these things” (Alma 39:9). To his disciples in Jerusalem the Savior said, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt 16:24). The Savior, at another time, counseled: “It is better that ye should deny yourselves of these things, wherein ye will take up your cross, than that ye should be cast into hell” (3 Nephi 12:30). To “cross yourself” means to deny yourself of “all ungodliness, and every worldly lust, and keep my commandments” (JST Matt 16:21). In order to cross himself in these things, Corianton could no longer go “after the lusts of [his] eyes” (Alma 39:9) but rather needed to forsake his sins and confess them. Alma was very concerned that Corianton seriously consider his situation: “I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, if it were not for your good” (Alma 39:7). Later he



counseled Corianton to “let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance” (Alma 42:29).

Among the other requirements of repentance, the Lord declared that a person has repented when the sins are confessed and forsaken (see D&C 58:43). Corianton took this step by appearing before Alma, who was the prophet. Just as today, sexual sin must be confessed to one’s bishop, the “Judge of Israel.” The sinner must also eternally forsake the sin. If the sinner returns to the sin, then “shall the former sins return” (D&C 82:7). Confessing and forsaking one’s sins, however, do not constitute full repentance. President Spencer W. Kimball testified: “There must be a washing, a purging, a changing of attitudes, a correcting of appraisals, a strengthening toward self-mastery. And these cleansing processes cannot be accomplished as easily as taking a bath or shampooing the hair, or sending a suit of clothes to the cleaners. There must be many prayers, and volumes of tears” (*Miracle of Forgiveness* 155).

To repent means to change. The suffering that one experiences allows for a purifying and sanctifying influence on the soul. The repentant person will no longer focus on the temporal or the physical. The spiritual influence will be the driving power of the soul. The repenting sinner will “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

Making restitution for sexual sins is very difficult because it is impossible to physically restore virtue. However, it can be restored spiritually; and the cleansing process of Christ’s atonement will restore that virtue. One way that restitution can be made is through service to others and to God. Elder Derek Cuthbert stated: “Service . . . helps to recompense for sin. . . . We can express regret and feel remorse for things done wrong, but *full* repentance should include recompense, such as service gives” (12–13).

The key to Corianton’s repentance process for his sexual sins was to understand the power of the Atonement in his life.



Alma wanted Corianton to comprehend fully that he would have restored to him “evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous” (Alma 41:13). It was his choice. He could live in a “carnal state . . . in the gall of bitterness in the bonds of iniquity” (Alma 41:11), or he could follow the plan of happiness. Whatever his choice, justice must be satisfied, and if he would live the laws of God, mercy would “appease the demands of justice” (Alma 42:15). Because mercy “claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement” (Alma 42:23), it was critical that Corianton should “deny the justice of God no more,” but rather he should “let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway” in his heart and let it take him “down to the dust in humility” (Alma 42:30).

Corianton allowed the words of Alma to sink into his heart. The limited knowledge we have of him after this exchange with his father illustrates the path of repentance that he followed. Alma instructed him to “go thy way, declare the word with truth and soberness, that thou mayest bring souls unto repentance, that the great plan of mercy may have claim upon them” (Alma 42:31). One year later we find that the preaching of Corianton and his brothers had produced peace and prosperity in the church (Alma 49:30). Eighteen years later, Corianton sailed to the land northward to deliver provisions to the people who had gone into that land to settle. In Corianton’s absence Helaman became the keeper. Had Corianton kept the plates we might have learned more of his repentance process.

## Conclusion

From Alma’s discussion with his son Corianton, we learn the three most abominable sins in the sight of God and the categories in which these sins fall. Those who commit the unpardonable sin of denying the Holy Ghost will not have the power of the Atonement of Christ, but will be cast out into outer



darkness forever. The unforgivable sin of murder is unrepentable and the influence of the Atonement is limited. After the demands of justice have been fully satisfied, a murderer will come forth in a degree of glory and receive salvation in the kingdom of God. All sins for which repentance can take place are forgivable. Sexual sins fall into this category. However, before the Atonement can have full power in the lives of individuals committing these sins, repentance must take place. Through repentance, the tender mercies of the Atonement provide the cleansing power to purify the repentant individual.

Corianton learned that all sinners, especially those guilty of committing any of the three most abominable sins in the sight of God, must come down to the dust in humility. Those guilty of committing the unpardonable sin of denying the Holy Ghost and the unforgivable sin of shedding innocent blood must face the justice of God. They must pay the full demands of justice. However, those who commit sexual sins must throw themselves upon the tender mercies of the Lord and qualify themselves through full repentance to gain forgiveness from God. Corianton came to understand the fulness of his father's counsel as he concluded his instruction with these words: "Therefore, O my son, whosoever *will* come *may* come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds" (Alma 42:27; emphasis added).

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