

THE CHRISTIAN RACE AND OTHER SERMONS

BY

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SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS.

“He spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.”—LUKE xviii. 9.

ARE there none to whom this parable is applicable in the present day? Truly, if it were so, the ministers of Jesus would have comparatively a light employment and an idle post. We do not often meet with men who deny the divinity of Christ, or the personality of the Holy Ghost, or disbelieve the Bible, or doubt the existence of a God, and so bring upon themselves swift destruction; but, alas! we have daily proof that the disease spoken of in our text is as deep-seated and hard to cure as ever, and of all the mischievous delusions that keep men out of heaven, of all the soul-destroying snares that Satan employs to oppose Christ’s Gospel, there is none we find so dangerous, none so successful, as self-righteousness.

Perhaps you think this strange, and I daresay there are few who would not say, if asked the ground of their hopes, and how they expect to be saved, “We trust in the merits of Christ”; but I fear that too many of you are making the Lord Jesus but half your Saviour, and could never stand the sifting of an inquiry which would draw out into daylight the secrets of your hearts. How much would then come out by degrees about doing as well as you could, and being no worse than others, and having been sober and industrious and well-behaved, and having attended church regularly, and having had a Bible and a Prayer book of your own ever since you can remember, and the like; besides many other self-approving thoughts, which often never appear until a death-bed, and all prove the root of all evil, which is pride, to be still vigorous and flourishing within.

Oh this pride of heart, beloved!—it is fearful to see the harm that it does, and the carelessness with which it is regarded: it is melancholy indeed to think of a man, weak frail man, the descendant of fallen Adam, the inheritor of a corrupt nature, forgetting his own countless shortcomings and backslidings, trusting in himself, and despising those who are his brethren according to the flesh; and wisely has our Lord spoken the parable immediately following my text, which I propose to bring under your notice this afternoon.

“Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself: God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Luke xviii. 10-14).

Observe now how much more striking the lesson sounds when conveyed to us in the form of an example. How little many persons would have been affected if our Lord had given a general discourse about the evil of pride and the excellence of humility, about the danger of formality and the importance of a truly penitent frame of mind, if he had merely said,—“Be not self-righteous in your dealings with God, but be lowly and self-abased”!—and how much more are our hard hearts likely to be moved when we see, as it were, living specimens of two sorts of worshippers, placed vividly before our eyes!

May God the Holy Ghost direct the instruction here contained to the awakening of the self-righteous, to the comfort of those who labour and are heavy-laden, and to the edification of all!

Now, before entering closely into the parable, I would have you mark, that the first verse tells us there was one point on which the Pharisee and the publican were agreed—one point which they had in common, and one only—and this was “They both went up into the temple to pray.”

They both set their faces the same way, they walked in the same path, they entered the same house, and so far we can discover no difference whatever between them, in their outward behaviour at least; but we shall soon find that their hearts were far asunder, and like the first worshippers recorded in the Bible, even Cain and Abel, there was a mighty gulf between them—for God, we shall see, accepted the sacrifice of the one, but rejected that of the other.

Oh, beloved, this passage suggests very awful reflections, and for our sakes no doubt it was written. Both these men, it appears, “went up to the temple to pray,” and yet how fearfully the narrative ends! Jesus had just been speaking of the necessity of constant prayer, in the parable of the unjust judge, and immediately, without anything happening to break the thread of his discourse, he adds the parable we are now considering. Surely, then, this must be meant to remind us, as a thing we are liable to forget, that, however important prayer may be, we are not to suppose all who pray have a prayerful spirit, and that outward service is often given where there is no real dedication of the heart to God.

Truly it is cheerful and encouraging to see a multitude going up to the house of God, but still it is painful to remember that too many go in the spirit of the Pharisee and far too few in that of the Publican. They all use the same prayers, they bow the knee, they move the lips together, and yet they are as widely different as gold and base metal. All are not Israel, who are called Israel; all are not Christians who name the name of Christ; all are not acceptable worshippers who are found in the temples of the Most High; and what is the line of distinction? We learn this in the parable. Some come as Pharisees, and some as publicans; some appear with a broken and a contrite heart, such as the Lord will not despise, and others with an unhumiliated and self-exalting spirit, wise in their own eyes and pure in their own sight, and the sacrifice of all such is abominable in the sight of God. Oh that you would try to bear in mind more constantly, that “the Lord seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart”; that to Him “all hearts are open, all desires known, and from Him no secrets are hid”—and if you felt this more, you would be more careful about the spirit in which you draw near to His throne, you would avoid anything like vain or trifling conversation both before and after service, and so observe the advice of Solomon, “to keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God.”

Let us, however, return to the parable from which I have been led to turn aside. I have shown you that there was one point in common between the publican and the Pharisee; and I shall now proceed to call your attention to the main object of the parable, by tracing out distinctly the four great points of difference which we perceive existed between these fellow-worshippers. I observe, then,

- I. There was a difference in their character.
- II. There was a difference in their behaviour.
- III. There was a difference in their prayers.
- IV. And, lastly, there was a difference in the reception their prayers met with.

I. With respect to their characters, the parable,—or rather narrative, for it is probably a true story, adapted by our Lord to the purpose of the moment—begins by stating that “One was a Pharisee, the other a publican.” Now, it is almost impossible to imagine a more striking contrast in the opinion of a Jewish congregation. The Pharisees were the strictest sect among the Jews: “I was of the strictest sect of the Pharisees,” says St. Paul. “They prayed often—which was very right; but they also made long prayers for a pretence, and they would pray at the corners of the streets where two roads met, that they might be seen by people going and coming both ways and so get a name for uncommon sanctity. There is no reason for supposing they were generally anything but moral men, but their grand fault was that they relied on their outward performance of the things written in the law as a ground of acceptance before God. They seem to have been indifferent as to the real state of their hearts, and to have cared only for keeping up a fair appearance before men, for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. We may get some idea of their real character from our Lord’s saying, that they gave tithe of mint, anise, and cummin, while they neglected the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and truth, and from His comparison of them to whitened sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful before men, but inwardly are filled with dead men’s bones and all corruption. They “made broad the borders of their phylacteries,” they had pieces of parchment sewed to the edge of their long robes, on which some texts of Scripture were written, that people might see them and infer therefrom that they were great lovers of the law of God. They were very strict about outward purifications, and set great value on the washing of pots, brazen vessels and tables, and many other such-like things that they did. They were particularly zealous for the traditions of the fathers, and for the observation of the rites and ceremonies of the Church, and yet they often made the law of God void by their traditions. They were exceeding exact in the outward observation of the Sabbath—so much so that they called our Lord a sinner, and said he was not of God because upon the Sabbath day He had healed a man who was born blind. And for all these reasons they were held in high esteem by the people; for men always prefer the things of sight to the things of faith, and think more of outward service than of heart; they had the uppermost places in the synagogues and greetings in the market-places, and were called of men Rabbi; and, in short, they got such a reputation for piety, that it became a proverb among the Jews, that if there were but two men saved, one of them must be a Pharisee.

Such were the Pharisees. But what was the character given to the publicans? It was very different in every respect. They were generally Jews who were employed to collect the Roman taxes; and as the Jews always disliked to pay tribute to the Gentiles, their office as collectors was looked upon as disgraceful and disreputable. Besides this it is pretty clear that they used to exact much more than their due, and to amass much wealth by false accusations, to the great disgust of their fellow-countrymen. On these accounts they were so universally infamous, that our Lord Himself tells His disciples that if any man would not hear the church, he must be to them as a heathen man and a publican. The enemies of Jesus thought it a heavy charge against Him that He was a friend of publicans and sinners; and in one place we find the publicans and harlots mentioned together, as people of like reputation. On the whole, then, we may fairly conclude that in teaching the nature of acceptable worship, our Lord could not have chosen two examples more unlike each other than a Pharisee and a publican. One is of great repute with his fellow-creatures, while the other is peculiarly offensive; but which will God respect? We shall soon see.

II. Let us in the second place consider the different behaviour of these two worshippers. Behold the Pharisee. "He stood and prayed thus with himself." Observe this: he went to some conspicuous part of the temple, where he could stand alone near the altar, separate from the rest of men, that all might see what a devout man he was, and not lose sight of him in the crowd. He stood "with himself," not among the congregation, lest he should be defiled by touching them; he was too good for them. We do not read of anything like humility here; we do not learn that he even bowed his head, as a mark of respect to his Creator; but there he stood erect, like one who felt that he had done all that God required of him, that he had no sin to repent of, that he had a right to expect a blessing as a profitable servant.

Turn now to the publican. "Standing afar off, he would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast." He stood afar off—probably in the outward court, as one who did not feel himself worthy to come beyond the threshold of Him whose name is Holy. "He would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven." He felt the remembrance of his sins so grievous, and the burden of them so intolerable, that, like a child who has offended its father, he dare not look his Almighty Maker in the face. "He smote upon his breast." He could not control the feelings that arose in his mind: he recollected the mercies he had received and his own neglect of them, the life he had led and the God he had despised, and, like those who saw Jesus hanging on the cross, "he smote his breast," in sorrow, self-abasement and godly fear. Beloved, the posture of the body and the expression of the face are certainly not always sure signs of the state of a man's heart, but you may rest assured that a truly humble and devout worshipper will generally be distinguished by his conduct in the house of God.

He that is duly sensible of his own guilt, and is ever coming to Jesus as his Advocate; he that is acquainted with the sinfulness of sin and the devices of Satan, and the value of the means of grace and the necessity of using them if he would save his soul,—such a one will never show any want of reverence, any levity or carelessness of manner, when he has entered any place where prayer is wont to be made and the gospel preached, and Christ Himself is standing in the midst. But if a person comes to church with an air of indifference, as if he did the minister a favour by coming and cared not if he never came again, and does not join in the prayers, and looks as if he would be ashamed if any one thought he did, and does not listen to the word of God, and does not pay attention to the sermon; if he employs himself with looking at other people's dress, or deliberately goes to sleep, or talks to his neighbours, or makes plans for the next week—he may have his own reasons for coming here, but it is pretty clear to me that he does not come in the way that Jesus loves, as a miserable sinner who sees nothing but evil in himself, nor in the spirit that Jesus loves, that is in the spirit of the publican.

III. In the third place let us attend to the difference in the prayers of these two characters. Hear the Pharisee: "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all I possess." Mark these words: there is no expression of any want here; he seems perfectly self-satisfied; he recites complacently what he is not, and he proudly brings forward what he is. Remember, beloved, there is ground for much thankfulness if God enables us to resist gross sins, but then there is no excuse for boasting; none of us have anything which we did not receive, and we cannot do better than follow the example of St. Paul, who said, "By the grace of God I am what I am." But the Pharisee had none of this spirit. He was wrong on every point. He was wrong in supposing, as he evidently did, that his own power and strength had kept him from these vices; he

was wrong in believing that he could lay any claim to the title of a perfect observer of the law on these points. It is one thing to keep God's commandments in the letter, and another to keep them in the spirit; the one may think they do, like this Pharisee, but the other no man ever did but our Lord Jesus Christ. "In many things we offend all," says St. James. "Who can tell how oft he offendeth? O cleanse thou me from secret faults," is the language of the psalmist. Lastly, he was wrong in supposing that this literal fulfilment of the law would give him a title to justification in the sight of God. Salvation is all of grace, not of works, lest any man should boast. "By the deeds of the law shall no flesh living be justified."

But the Pharisee, besides this, was especially wrong in going out of his way to make unnecessary and uncharitable remarks upon the publican. He talks like one who had no account to settle about his own soul; he assumes as a matter of course that the publican was more vile in God's sight than himself, and he proves himself a child of the devil by usurping Satan's office—he becomes an accuser of his brethren. "I am not as other men are, or even as this publican." Beloved, I must call your particular attention to this language, for I declare unto you with grief that I have heard people say things, which in effect are very much the same about themselves, who yet profess and call them-selves Christians. Many say, if they are urged about their own sinfulness in God's sight, "Well, at any rate I am no worse than my neighbours: I am thankful I do not drink, like such a one next door; I am no fornicator, like such a one over the way; I do not miss church altogether, like such a one who lives down the road." Listen to me, I beseech you: is not this the very mind of the Pharisee? You are not to be judged by the standard of those around you; it will be no excuse before God to talk about your neighbours—sin is sin whether you live in it in company or alone; and be sure it will not diminish your misery in hell, to find that all your neighbours are there as well as yourself. Oh, beloved, beware of this delusion; not a few allow such thoughts to dwell within them, who never express them with their lips, and even in the presence of God they flatter themselves they are acceptable to Him, because they are free from open and gross vices, and perform certain known duties. All such are Pharisees; they use the Pharisee's prayer, and they will meet with the Pharisee's reception at the hand of God.

Hearken now to the publican. "He smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner." He does not say "Be merciful to all sinners," thus leaving it doubtful whether he means himself or not, but "Be merciful to me," a sinner in whom there is no health, in whom there is no good thing—a sinner in thought, word and deed; and he gives the ground of his hope too, not like some among you, who hope to be forgiven without exactly knowing how or why. The words translated "be merciful," go further. They mean, "make a propitiation for me, offer an atonement for me, be reconciled unto me, through the sacrifice Thou hast appointed." Do you think he would have been offended, as some are now, if he had been called a child of the devil, utterly corrupt, full of iniquity and worthy of nothing but wrath? Far from it: he knew he was a sinner, he felt his lost condition, he made no excuses, he offered no justification, he did not talk about his temptations, he did not make great professions of amendment, as if that could make up for the past; he presented himself at the throne of grace, as he was, weary and heavy laden, casting himself on the long-suffering of God with all his iniquities, and pleading the blood of the atonement: "God be merciful to me a sinner." Blessed indeed are all among you who have done likewise!

IV. Lastly, it remains to consider briefly the reception the worshippers respectively met with. "I tell you," says Jesus, "this man went down to his house justified

rather than the other.” The publican came poor in spirit, and he was filled; the Pharisee, rich in merits and self-esteem, went empty away. The penitent was not only pardoned, but justified; he had left his house heavy and afflicted by a sense of sin, he returned with joy and peace; he had asked mercy and received it, he had sought grace and found it, he had come hungering and thirsting after righteousness and he had been satisfied: “he went down to his house justified.” But the proud Pharisee, not feeling his own wants, not acquainted with his own sinfulness, had sought no mercy, and had found none, and he departed unblessed and unheard; and from the saying the “publican went down to his house justified rather than the other,” we may fairly suppose this man of self-righteousness and self-dependence had none of that sense of favour and acceptance which the repenting sinner enjoyed.

See now the general application which our Lord makes: “Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, but he that abaseth himself shall be exalted.” Mark these words—“every one that exalteth himself.” High or low, rich or poor, young or old, it matters not; for God is no respecter of persons, “every one that exalteth himself” and not free grace, that trusts either in whole or in part in his own righteousness and performance and not entirely in Jesus Christ—though he go to church twice a day, though he keep the letter of the Ten Commandments, though he pay everything he owes, though he be sober and moral and decently behaved—every one that exalteth himself shall be abased and condemned when Jesus Christ shall come to judgment.

But on the other hand remember, “he that humbleth himself” as a sinner before God and comes unto Christ, though he may have been the most wicked of transgressors, though he may have broken all the commandments, though he may have been a Sabbath-breaker, a drunkard, a thief, an adulterer, an extortioner—whatever his sin may have been, if he act as the publican did, “he shall be exalted,” he shall be pardoned, and washed and sanctified and justified for the sake of Jesus Christ, and shall have his place with David and Manasseh and Mary Magdalen and the thief upon the cross in the everlasting kingdom of our God and of the Lamb.

And now, beloved, in conclusion let me urge upon all the lesson conveyed in this parable. It is a picture of a very large portion of professing Christians; some, to be sure, are called by that name, but they never think at all about Christ or their own souls—it would make no difference if all the Bibles in the world were burned today—and of course they are going straight to destruction; but all others, rich or poor (there is no distinction), are either Pharisees or publicans. There is no half-way house: they either trust to themselves wholly, or in part, which is much the same, or else they are always self-condemned and have no confidence in anything they can do for justification.

You cannot search your heart too diligently, for this is the subtlest enemy of all. Beware of thinking, as the devil would have you, that the parable is a very good one for everybody else, but does not exactly touch your case. Be sure in this way you will lose your own souls. The faithful Church of England has provided you with an admirable Prayer-book, which you use, and using it call yourselves “miserable sinners” every Sunday of your lives. Do you really feel this? Know for a certainty, if you never groan under the burden of sin and never make the publican’s prayer your own, you cannot be saved. And if you feel this minute any doubt about your salvation, it were far better to give your soul the benefit of it, and re-lay the foundation of your faith. But let none forget the point of the parable: the Pharisee was not rejected because he was a moral man, but because he was proud and self-righteous; the publican was not accepted because he was a sinner, but because he was eminently penitent. True repen-

tance is necessary for all, whatever be their lives and outward conduct: it is not your morality and your virtues, O ye Pharisees, which hinder your salvation, but that proud feeling of something worthy in yourselves, which prevents you from clinging simply and entirely to the cross and blood of Jesus Christ.

Carry home, then, I entreat you, all of you, that as there is no way to salvation but Jesus Christ, so there is no character for entering that way but that of the publican, and no prayer so acceptable in the sight of your Redeemer and your Judge as “God be merciful to me a sinner.”