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CHRIST'S TENDERNESS TOWARDS THE FALLEN.

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A Sermon

PREACHED IN S. PAUL'S CHURCH, KNIGHTSBRIDGE,

FOR

The Church Penitentiary Association,

ON

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BY

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JOHN viii. 11.

*'And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee : go, and sin no more.'*

HOLY SCRIPTURE is a record, from its beginning to its end, of the goodness of God on the one hand, and of His severity on the other. Fruitless attempts have been made, in different ages of the Church, to dissociate those two essential characteristics of the Godhead, and to represent the view of that severity exhibited to us in the Bible as incompatible with His attribute of mercy; to deduce from His paternal tenderness and affection the conclusion that the vehement denunciations of wrath therein recorded, and the actual infliction of desolating judgments, are but the outbreaks of human passion, and not the expression of the deliberate will and counsel of the Almighty. This style of criticism has hitherto been confined principally to the manifestation of the Divine attributes as exhibited in the Old Testament history. But if there be any just foundation for such strictures, they will be equally applicable to much of the language familiar to us under that covenant which may be most justly styled the Covenant of Mercy and of Love. How stern and unrelenting would seem to be the threatening anticipations of future woe and destruction to the doomed inhabitants of the Land of Promise from the lips of the meek and merciful Saviour! Famine, pestilence, earthquake, are but the beginning of their sorrows; for upon these scourges was to follow such great tribulation as was not since the beginning of the world

to that time, no, nor ever shall be—such carnage that, except those days were shortened, no flesh could be saved. It is the loving Saviour—it is the merciful High Priest who forewarns those that will not part with their cherished sin, that in another world their worm will never die—their fire never be quenched; that their whole body shall be cast into hell, with its everlasting flames. He it was who, though full of compassion for man's infirmity, could, nevertheless, address to the hypocritical Pharisees the withering question, 'Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?' Such is the tone in which He who was meek and lowly of heart could threaten the impenitent sinner; such are the terrors with which He would alarm all who harden themselves against His word, and resist the movements of His Holy Spirit. And yet, from those same lips could proceed assurances of the most tender compassion, promises of comfort and support—the offspring of a loving heart—ever ready to welcome the first tokens of contrition and self-abasement, and to pour the balm of consolation on the wounded spirit. Such, then, is the God, and such the Saviour, whom the Word of Inspiration has revealed to us!—that God, unknown to the most civilised nations of the old world, who were ever seeking if haply they might find Him, but never could find, by the aid of their unenlightened conscience—that God whom modern enlightenment would invite us to picture to ourselves, from our own conscience, no matter what the portrait may be which the Holy Scripture presents to us of Him, thus throwing us back upon natural religion, and bidding us refuse all such illustrations of His own character as Jehovah Himself has given us in His heaven-sent mission to man.

It is our privilege this morning, dear brethren, to dwell on the brighter and more engaging aspect of our blessed Lord's character, consistent, nevertheless, as we see it to be, with those solemn and more austere warnings of a future judg-

ment, whose consequences will be fraught with endless woe to the impenitent and unbelieving. It is His compassion for the fallen which now invites our admiration and our love. It is His yearning tenderness towards the sinner, in order to draw him by the cords of love to a confession of guilt, and submission to the holy law of God and the gentle yoke of Christ; it was this which moved Him to engage in the primæval covenant with the Father before the foundation of the world; by which He undertook to abase Himself to the rank of a servant, and be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, as the ground of reconciliation between heaven and earth. This it was that bore Him upwards as He ascended to take His seat at the right hand of God, that thence, by the power of His intercession, and by the strength of His grace, He might rescue perishing souls from the doom to which they were destined.

The passage in our blessed Lord's history to which the words of my text point, is a touching illustration of this characteristic of His life. The inveterate malice of the Scribes and Pharisees prompted them to lay a snare for Him, by inviting His condemnation of a guilty woman, in the hope of being able to represent Him, if He took a merciful view of the offender's case, as an abettor of sin and a protector of offenders; whereas His purpose then, as ever, was to prove Himself a friend of sinners, though an enemy to sin; bent upon saving souls from the snares of the devil, while He destroyed the works of the devil and crushed the serpent's head.

From the marked contrast which we thus observe between the mode of dealing with this offender against the holy law of God, by the Pharisees on the one hand, and by the gentleness and forbearance of the Saviour on the other, we may draw a very profitable lesson as to our own conduct in like cases. We sometimes see instances of an impetuous zeal, like

that of Jehu, who flattered himself with the notion that his was a true zeal for the Lord; or that of the Sons of Thunder, who would have called down fire from heaven to destroy those who would not receive Jesus: each of them actuated by a spirit which savoured more of human passion than of the mind which was in Christ Jesus. To these, and to all such as are not careful to discriminate between the impulses of their natural temper and the movements of the Holy Spirit within them, the rebuke of the Lord may be most justly applied—‘Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.’ They have much need to sit at the feet of Jesus, and learn those lessons of meekness, patience, and forbearance which His example so forcibly teach us. We fear that by many in the present day that most necessary work of progressive sanctification is not looked upon as of that grave import which really attaches to it. They rest satisfied with the consciousness that their justification is accomplished (and a blessed conviction this is), without being careful to enquire whether they are gradually growing in grace and increasing in holiness. This is the very error which St. Paul combats when he bids the Hebrew converts leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ—the elements of Gospel religion, such as repentance from dead works and faith towards God—and to go on unto perfection; that is to say, farther advancement in the Christian life: a duty enforced in different language by St. Peter, in his Epistle, to those who had obtained the like precious faith with himself, but whom he, nevertheless, bids to give all diligence to add to that faith virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, and charity: thus leading us to believe that it is possible to have faith without a fully enlightened knowledge—a zeal as yet untempered by patience—a belief too little savouring either of godliness or charity. And these imperfections, permitted to exist without earnest and persevering efforts to remedy them, are the result of an error which not unfre-

quently tends to sully the brightness of the Christian character. There is a not unnatural eagerness on the part of those who have realised the peace which a living faith imparts, through thankfulness for this unspeakable blessing, to rush with the fervour of the novice into the all-absorbing engagements of active charity, leaving themselves little time for the cultivation of the inward life, and for fostering those nascent graces which will be stunted in the never-ending round of busy and bustling occupation. The one ought to be done, while the other is not left undone. We should never forget that our Heavenly Father has a twofold object in commending works of mercy to us—not only that their object may be benefited thereby, but also, and perhaps principally, that they may help us in our approach towards the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. As regards the inner life of the Christian, faith should not be deemed an end, but a means towards further ends. A faith which does not produce as its fruits love, joy, and peace, the graces of longsuffering, gentleness, and goodness, together with meekness and moderation in all things, is but a very imperfect and lacking faith. A faith which does not lead gradually onwards to a more complete conformity with the mind and spirit that was in Christ Jesus, surely is not duly discharging one, at least, of its most important functions. Faith is not exclusively exercised in an implicit reliance on the willingness of Christ to pardon the guilt of sin through His atoning merits, but also in trusting to His power, in concert with our own earnest efforts, to control the workings of sin within; to impregnate the soul with holiness; to restore the lost image of God, and make us partakers of the Divine nature; while it inspires us with the desire to seek, by earnest prayer, for the fulfilment of these ends.

Studying, then, the instructive pattern of a holy life which the Son of Man hath set us, we should endeavour, like Him,

to combine the active with the contemplative life, that so, while we are about our Father's business, in striving to relieve every form of distress to which our flesh is heir, we may still find time to sit at the feet of our Divine Master—may listen to His heavenly teaching, and, contemplating the beauty and perfection of His character, may become more and more conformed to His image, and more deeply penetrated with His spirit. This is our twofold mission; but that branch of it with which we are chiefly concerned this day is that which relates to the exercise of the spirit of benevolence in outward works of mercy. And has not each of us, dear brethren, some such Christian mission to fulfil—some work of mercy to accomplish, independent of the worldly calling in which we may be engaged, or the family and social ties which bind us together? Only let us look within, and see what are our own capabilities and opportunities, too much, perhaps, neglected hitherto; only let us look without, and see the vast amount of suffering, of body or of mind, there is abroad; and then consider how large a portion of our mission may be destined to consist in adapting our special faculties and our means to the relief of the sufferers, and in mitigating the severity of their condition. We cannot all do what the first friend of the prisoner in modern times did. We cannot all, like him, journey to distant lands, 'fathom the dungeon's depths, brave the most fatal forms of infection, to assuage, with a brother's love, the sorrows of the captive.' We cannot all leave home and kindred, and the comforts and charities of domestic life, content to watch by the bedside of the sick, the wounded, and the dying soldier; minister, with a sister's tenderness, to their wants, and soothe their agonising pains. Such high enterprises as these are reserved for a gifted few. But we may each of us, in our own sphere (albeit a narrower and more humble walk)—we may each of us study and try to emulate that holy Pattern which set them to work in their career of

love. Christ does not measure our efforts by the magnitude of the undertaking, but the spirit that actuates it. The cup of cold water given in His name and for His sake—if that be the extent of our ability—is as precious in His sight as the most costly sacrifices of the wealthy. We shall each of us seek to cultivate in ourselves a spirit of active benevolence, which not only feels for the sufferers, but works for them; which does not only weep with them that weep, but also ministers to their sorrows and sufferings in every way in which God has given us the ability so to do; a benevolence welling out of the depths of a heart that is ever overflowing with a stream of loving-kindness and mercy, in memory of the mercy it has itself received.

Now, in the support of the Church Penitentiary Association, whose cause I have been requested to advocate this morning, there is a work of Christian love, in the following out of which we cannot doubt but that we are treading in the footsteps of the holy Jesus, because He has given us so signal and decisive a proof of His tenderness to the fallen. As He bade her whom we may believe to have been the conscience-stricken penitent, ‘Go, and sin no more,’ so may we surely find ways enough of helping to convey the like charge, in the Saviour’s name, to her companions in sin, who would fain kneel at the feet of the Saviour, and, as wanderers from the fold, return to the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls.

The aim and object of the Church Penitentiary Association, in whose cause I am most anxious to enlist your lasting sympathy, is to promote the establishment and maintenance of Penitentiaries and Reformatories throughout the country; to aid them by its counsel, and support them by pecuniary grants at the time of their foundation. An impulse and encouragement is thus given to such efforts, without which, perhaps, the first movement towards their establishment might have flagged, and failed of any profitable issue. It is a subject of

much gratitude to God that new Houses of Refuge are year by year received into union with the Association ; and at the close of the thirteenth year of its existence, its friends and supporters have great reason to thank Him that the principles on which it was founded have ‘indeed taken deep root in the land, and are already bearing a rich harvest to the glory of God and the good of His holy Church.’ For there are now 17 Penitentiaries and 12 Houses of Refuge in union with the Association ; and there is at the present time accommodation for 634 Penitents—a number exceeding by 63 that of the previous year. The reports from the various Houses are of a very cheering character, as far, at least, as regards the discipline and conduct of the Penitents ; but there are many wards, empty for lack of funds to support fresh inmates ; and it appears there are nearly 400 unhappy applicants who have been rejected for want of means.

For such success, however, as it has pleased God to vouchsafe to the efforts of His people in behalf of the fallen, let us offer to Him the expression of our deep and devout thankfulness ; and the deeper and more devout will it be, when we reflect upon the interests that are involved in the successful prosecution of these works. There are the temporal and eternal interests of the fallen herself. Beguiled to forsake the paths of innocence and purity, she stifles for a while the importunate voice of a reproaching conscience, and dreams that happiness may be enjoyed apart from God and away from Christ ; until at length, by His great mercy, the veil is drawn from her eyes, she sees the gulph which is yawning at her feet, hears the terrors of the law, remembers the blessed privileges she has forfeited, and sighs for the peace once enjoyed in the bosom of a family where the sunshine of happiness had not yet been clouded by the memory of the dark stain with which she had blotted its fair fame. There is a gleam of hope that her sins are not past forgiveness ; for

she remembers there is a Saviour whose blood can cleanse from all sin; and to Him who invites the weary and heavy-laden to come and find rest under His sheltering protection, she resolves to turn. But whither shall she fly to escape from that labyrinth of evil in which she is entangled? Where shall she find the hand of mercy to drag her from the depths into which she is plunged? Who is there within reach that cares for her soul? Where is the messenger of peace to speak the word of comfort to her wounded spirit, to place her beyond the reach of temptation, and bid her go, in a spirit of true penitence and living faith, and sin no more? In vain, perhaps, does she look for this longed-for succour; and meanwhile the smoking flax is quenched, the bruised spirit is broken. These rising emotions for good are stifled by the cry of despair; for though, thanks be to God, these Homes and Houses of Refuge for the destitute Penitent have marvellously multiplied during the present generation, yet we fear has the demand for them multiplied in a still greater degree. At any rate it is certain, that from several of these Asylums and Refuges the cry is, that the work is starved for want of funds: and what this really means we too well know. It means that those who, in their agony, are struggling for deliverance, can find no avenue to the shelter for which their souls are longing, and must be left to perish in their sins: it means that there are those who loathe a life of sin, and yet find not the way to leave it: it means that the cry of misery is rife throughout the cities and towns of our land, but that too many of those who should lend a willing ear are heedless of this call upon their sympathy and effectual aid. What, then, is the one thing needful in the present instance? Is it not 'the mind that was in Christ Jesus?' If that love for souls which was fervent in His holy breast, moving Him to endure the cross and despise the shame, reigned in the bosom of all those who call

themselves Christians, this great work of Christian charity could never languish for want of means. If every one who was in easy circumstances would devote one-tenth of their yearly income to acts of piety, for the relief of the temporal or spiritual necessities of their fellow-men, how different would be the aspect of our country! How few could there then be who would say, ‘There is no one who cares for our souls—none who feel for our straits and necessities!’ And yet, this proportion of their annual revenue was the very least amount which Jewish charity allowed to be enough to satisfy such calls. If those who stint the measure of their benevolence, with the view of amassing a fortune, and accumulating wealth to aggrandise their family, could but feel what a drag this weight of wealth, thus gotten, must prove to their heavenward ascent—in the path of godliness here, as well as in the path to glory hereafter—they would be fain, before it was too late, to lay up their treasure in heaven, and to make themselves an everlasting Friend, by a righteous use of the mammon of unrighteousness. But there is another sacrifice besides that many may offer, and which many, we rejoice to know, are willing to offer—and that is, the chastening influence, and the fostering care of sisterly love, which may cherish the good seed implanted in the penitent heart, so that it shall bring forth fruit unto everlasting life. May such gentle and winning guidance ever be found to conspire with the movements of the Holy Spirit from above, in enabling the returning wanderer to be steadfast and unmovable in her Christian profession; that, having escaped from the sore bondage of sin, she may rejoice evermore in that liberty which is the privilege of the children of God, and may be among those who shall chaunt the new hymn of praise to Him who hath redeemed us by His blood!











