

FORGIVENESS

A Sermon

Delivered on Sabbath Morning, May 20, 1855, by the

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at exeter hall, strand.

“I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.”
—Isaiah 43:25.

There are some passages of sacred writ which have been more abundantly blessed to the conversion of souls than others. They may be called salvation texts. We may not be able to discover how it is, or why it is, but certainly it is the fact, that some chosen verses have been more used of God to bring men to the cross of Christ than any others in his Word. Certainly they are not more inspired, but I suppose they are more noticeable from their position, from their peculiar phraseology more adapted to catch the eye of the reader, and more suitable to a prevailing spiritual condition. All the stars in the heavens shine very brightly, but only a few attract the eye of the mariner, and direct his course; the reason is this, that those few stars from their peculiar grouping are more readily distinguished, and the eye easily fixes upon them. So I suppose it is with those passages of God’s Word which especially attract attention, and direct the sinner to the cross of Christ. It so happens that this text is one of the chief of them. I have found it, in my experience, to be a most useful one; for out of the hundreds of persons who have come to me to narrate their conversion and experience, I have found a very large proportion who have traced the divine change which has been wrought in their hearts to the hearing of this precious declaration of sovereign mercy read, and the application of it with power to their souls: “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” Hence I feel this morning somewhat pleased to have such a text, because I anticipate that my Master will give me souls; and I feel likewise somewhat afraid lest I should spoil the passage by my own imperfect handling thereof. I will, therefore, cast myself implicitly on the help of the Spirit, so that whatever I speak, may be suggested by him, and whatever he saith that may I speak, to the exclusion of my own thoughts as much as possible.

We shall notice first, this morning, *the recipients of mercy*—the persons of whom the Lord is here speaking; secondly, *the deed of mercy*,—“I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions;” thirdly, *the reason for mercy*—“for mine own sake;” and fourthly, *the promise of mercy*—“I will not remember thy sins.”

I. We are about to see who are the recipients of mercy; and I would have you all listen; peradventure there be some strayed in here who are the very chief of sinners—some who have sinned against light and knowledge, who have gone the full length of their powers for sin, so that they come here self-condemned, and fearing that for them there is neither mercy nor pardon. I am about to talk to you of the lovingkindness of our glorious Jehovah, and may some of you be led to read your own condition in those characters which I shall describe to you.

If you will turn to your Bibles, you will find who are the persons here spoken of. Look for example at the 22nd verse of the chapter from which our text is taken, and you will see, first, that they were *prayerless people*: “Thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob.” And are there not some prayerless ones sitting or standing here this morning? Might I not walk along these benches, and point my finger to one and another, and say, “Thou art not a praying one?” Or might I not reach out my hand to one and another upon this platform, and say, “Thou hast not been with God in secret, and held heart converse with him?” These prayerless ones may have repeated many a form of

prayer, but the breathing desire, the living words, have not come from their lips. Thou hast lived, sinner, up to this time without sincere prayer, and if an ejaculation has been forced from thy lips from a fear that took hold of thee; if a cry has gone forth from thee when in the sufferings of a sick bed, because the pains of death gat hold upon thee; if it has not been thy habit to pray, the impressions of that trying period have soon been forgotten. Is prayer your constant practice, my hearers? How many of you now before me, ay, and behind me too, must confess that you have not prayed, that it is not your habit to hold communion with God. Prayerless souls are Christless souls; for you can have no real fellowship with Christ, no communion with the Father, unless you approach his mercy-seat, and be often there; and yet if you are condemning yourselves, and lamenting that this has been your condition, you need not despair, for this mercy is for you: “Thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob;” yet, “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake.”

Next, these persons were *despisers of religion*, for observe the language of the same verse:—“Thou hast been weary of me, O Israel.” And may I not say to some here—thou despisest religion, thou hatest God; thou art weary of him, and lovest not his services. As for the Sabbath-day, do not too many of you find it the most tiresome day in the week, and do you not, in fact, look over your ledger on the Sabbath afternoon? If you were compelled to attend a place of worship twice on the Sabbath-day, would you not think it the greatest and most terrible hardship that could be inflicted upon you? You have to find some worldly amusement to make the hours of the Sabbath-day pass away with any comfort at all. So far from wishing that “congregations might ne’er break up.” and the Sabbath last for eternity, is it not to some of you the most tedious day of the week? You feel it to be a weariness, and are glad when it is gone. You do not understand the sentiment expressed by the poet:

“Sweet is the work, my God, my King,
To praise thy name, give thanks and sing.

You know nothing of the pain of banishment from the courts of Zion, whither the sacred tribes repair; and when there you do not hold communion with God, rejoicing that the hallowed place has become a Bethel—the house of God—the very gate of heaven. You can never say—

“My willing soul would stay
In such a frame as this,
And sit and sing herself away
To everlasting bliss.”

Ah, no! not only is religion unlovely to you, but it is a weariness. But if you are now convinced of this sin, and are repenting of it, and desire to be delivered from its power, then God speaks to you this morning, and says, “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake—return unto me, with unfeigned repentance, and I will have mercy upon you.”

Note, again, the character. They have been *thankless persons*: “Thou hast not brought me the small cattle of thy burnt offerings.” They have been unthankful. They had their cattle and their flocks all multiplied and increased many fold, but they did not bring even one of the small cattle to him in return. Thou never gavest him a kid for a burnt offering, but hast been like the swine, regardless of the oak which strews food upon the ground for thee; thou hast been a carnal worldly character, receiving a gift, but never thanking the Almighty who caused it to be bestowed; while the little chicken, after it has drunk of the stream, lifteth its head, as if to thank God who provided the water. Thou hast been fed, day by day, by an Almighty power, and yet thou hast never given in return even one of the small cattle of thy flock for a burnt offering. This is true of some who attend our houses of prayer; they very rarely give to any collection for the cause of God; they are like the

man in America, of whom some one has told us, who boasted that religion had been to him a very cheap thing, costing him only a few cents a year, of whom a good man said, "The Lord have mercy on your little stingy soul." If a man has no more religion than that, if he has not a religion that will make him generous, he has no religion at all. I thought of that passage last Thursday night, while I was preaching: "Thou hast bought me no sweet cane with money." God needeth nothing at your hands, but he likes little presents, he loves now and then to receive of your substance; for you know that little as it is in his eyes, comparatively speaking it is great, because it comes from a friend. But some of you have never bought him a sweet cane with your money—never sang a hymn to his praise; you have attributed everything to your good luck, and have boasted that you have obtained everything you have got by the labour of your own hands, and that you can say, I have need to thank nobody for what I have. That has been thy spirit; thou hast given no thanks to God,—the God of heaven and earth; thou hast not glorified *him*, but thyself, and yet the Most High is willing to pardon thy sin in this thing, if thou art but unfeignedly penitent, and dost sue for forgiveness, for he saith also to you, "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions."

Yet, again, these people were a *useless people*. "Neither hast thou filled me with the fat of thy sacrifices; but thou hast made me to serve with thy sins." It is well said, the chief end of man is to glorify God. For that purpose God made the sun, moon, and stars, and all his works, that they might honor him. And yet how many are there, even, perhaps among my hearers this morning, who have never honored God in their lives. Ask yourselves what have you done? If you were to write your own history, it would be little better than that of Belzoni's toad, which existed in the rock for three thousand years; you may have *lived* like it, but you have done nothing. What souls have you ever won to the Saviour? How has his name been magnified by you? Have you ever served him? How have you ever worked for him? What have you done for God? Have you not been cumberers of the ground; taking the nourishment of the earth where some better tree might have grown, and bearing no fruit to the great husbandman, or at least, only a few sorry crabs, that were not worth his acceptance. For all you have done, the world might as well have never known you. You have not been even so much use as the glowworm, which, at least, serves to light the steps of the traveller. The world may possibly be glad to get rid of some of you, and rejoice when you are gone. Perhaps you have assisted in destroying the souls of those with whom you have been connected in life. You can recollect the time when you led that young man first into the ale house. You can remember the hour when you swore a most horrible oath; your child was within hearing, and learned to be profane also. You may look upon some souls who are going even now to damnation through your example; and in hell you may see spirits starting up from their iron beds, and hear them shrieking in their woe: "Who is it that led me here, and caused my soul to be destroyed?—thou art the author of my damnation." Is the indictment true? Will you not be compelled to plead guilty to the charge? Do you not even now repent of your great transgressions? Even if it be so, my Master outhorises me to say again, "Thus saith the Lord, I, even I, am he that blotteth out my transgressions, and will not remember thy sins."

Again, there are some who may be termed *sanctuary sinners*—sinners in Zion—and these are the worst of sinners. I can usually tell whether inquirers have been the children of pious parents or no, if after a confession of great guilt they feel unable to proceed at the remembrance of what they once were. Groaning, and sobbing, and tears running down their cheeks, are the silent language of their woe. When I see this, I always know that the language that succeeds will be: "I have been the child of pious parents; and I feel that I am one of the worst of sinners, because I was brought up to religion; and yet I disregarded it, and turned aside from it." O yes, the worst of sinners are sinners in Zion, because they sin against light and knowledge; they force their way to hell, as John Bunyan says, over the Cross of Christ; and the worst way to hell is to go by the cross to it. Many of you now before me were consecrated to God by a beloved mother, and your father taught you to read and

love the Scriptures of truth. You were brought up like Timothy; you well understand the theory of the way of salvation, and yet you come here, young men, some of you enemies to God and without Christ, and despisers of his word; some of you are even scoffers, or if not actually scoffers, you say religion is nought to you, and by your actions, if not by your words, declare it is nothing to you that Jesus should die. Ah! when I speak to you, I would not forget myself. Should it ever be my lot to wake up in hell, I should be amongst the most horribly damned there, for I had a most pious training, and should be forced to take my place with the sanctuary sinners. And you that are such, whom I am addressing now, are you not afraid? Ask yourselves now, “Who among us shall dwell with devouring fire?” Do you tremble and shake for fear, and with a penitent heart desire forgiveness? If so, then I say again, in my Master’s name—who spake nothing but love and mercy to penitent sinners, who said, “Neither do I condemn thee”—Jehovah now declares “I, even I am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.”

Yet, once more, we have here *men who had wearied God*: “Thou hast made me to serve with thy sins, thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities.” You see the man who has been a professor of religion, and can look back twenty years ago, when he was a member of a Christian church; he was apparently walking in the fear of the Lord, and all men thought he had received the grace of God in truth; but he has turned aside into the paths of sin; sometimes his lips have been defiled with oaths, and his soul the bondslave of sin; but even now he is often found in God’s house; sometimes he is affected to tears, and says within himself. “Surely I will return unto the Lord, for then was it better with me than now.” Self-condemned, he stands and weeps in the bitterness of his heart; and mark you, it may be this morning he has stepped into this vast assembly, and that his knees are knocking one against the other, yet it may be that his goodness shall prove like the morning cloud and the early dew, that passeth away; or it may be that the turning point is now come; “Now or never,” as Baxter used to say; now God or Satan, now accepted or condemned. Poor backslider, return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon thee; he will blot out all thy sins, and so blot them out that he will not remember them against thee any more for ever.

These, then, are the characters who receive mercy. Some of you may say, “You seem to think us a bad lot”—and so I do. Others exclaim, “How can you talk to us in this way? We are a honest, moral, and upright people.” If so, then I have no gospel to preach to you. You may go elsewhere if you will, for you may get moral sermons in scores of chapels if you want them; but I am come in my Master’s name to preach to sinners, and so I will not say a word to you Pharisees except this—By so much as you think yourself righteous and holy, by so much shall ye be cast out of God’s presence at last. Your sentence will be eternal banishment from the presence of him who hath said to every repenting sinner, “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions, and will not remember thy sins.”

II. The second point is, the deed of mercy. We have found out the persons to whom God will give mercy; now what is mercy’s deed? It is a deed of forgiveness, and in speaking of it, I shall speak first of its being a *divine forgiveness*—“I, even I, am he.” Divine pardon is the only forgiveness possible; for no one can remit sin but God only, and it matters not whether a Roman Catholic Priest, or any other priest shall say in the name of God, “I absolve thee from thy transgressions,” it is abominable blasphemy. If a man has offended me I can forgive him, but if he has offended God I cannot forgive him. The only discharge possible is pardon by God; but then it is the only pardon necessary. Suppose I have so sinned that the king or the queen will not pardon me, that my brethren will not forgive me, and that I cannot pardon myself; if God absolves me, that is all the acquittal that will be necessary for my salvation. Perhaps I stand condemned by the law of my country: I am a murderer and must suffer on the scaffold; the queen refuses to pardon, and perhaps she does right in such a refusal; but I do not want her forgiveness in order to enter heaven; if God acquits me, that will be enough. Were I such a reprobate that all men hissed at me and

wished me gone from existence, if I knew that they would never forgive my crime—though I ought to desire my fellow-creatures' forgiveness—it would not be *necessary* that I should have it to enter heaven. If God says, I forgive thee, that is enough. It is only God that can forgive satisfactorily; because no human pardon can ease the troubled conscience. The self-righteous Pharisee may be content to give himself into the hands of a priest to be rocked to sleep in the cradle of delusion, but the poor convinced sinner wants something more than the arrogant dictum of a priest—ten thousand of them, with all their enchantments, he feels to be all in vain, unless Jehovah himself shall say, “I have blotted out thy sins for mine own sake.”

Again, it is *surprising forgiveness*; for the text speaks as if God himself were surprised that such sins should be remitted: “I, even I;” it is so surprising that it is repeated in this way, lest any of us should doubt it. And it is amazing to the poor sinner when first awakened to his sin and danger. It seems to be too good too! be true, and he “wonders to feel his own hardness depart,” the mercy offered is so overwhelming. It is said that Alexander, whenever he attacked a city, put a light before the gate of it; and if the inhabitants surrendered before the light was burnt out, he spared them; but if the light went out first, he put them all to death. But our Master is more merciful than this; for if he had manifested grace only while a small light would burn, where should we have been? There be some here seventy or eighty years of age, and God has mercy on you still; but there is a light you know which when once quenched, extinguishes all hope of pardon—the light of life. See then, grey-headed man, thy candle is burnt almost to the socket—it has but the snuff left. Seventy years thou hast been here living in sin, and yet mercy waits on thee; but thou shalt soon depart, and mark me, there is no hope for thee then. But surprising grace, mercy's message is still proclaiming—

For while the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return.”

Unutterable mercy! There is no sinner out of hell so black but that God can wash him white. There is not out of the pit one so guilty that God is not able and willing to forgive him; for he declares the wondrous fact—“I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions.”

Notice once more, that it is a *present forgiveness*. It does not say I am he that will blot out thy transgressions, but that blotteth them out *now*. There are some who believe, or at least seem to imagine, that it is not possible to know whether our sins are forgiven in this life. We may have hope, it is thought, that at last there will be a balance to strike on our side. But this will not satisfy the poor soul who is really seeking pardon, and is anxious to find it; and God has therefore blessedly told us, that he blotteth out our sin *now*; that he will do it at any moment the sinner believes. As soon as he trusts in his crucified God, all his sins are forgiven, whether past, present, or to come. Even supposing that he is yet to commit them, they are all pardoned. If I live eighty years after I receive pardon, doubtless I shall fall into many errors, but the one pardon will avail for them as well as for the past. Jesus Christ bore our punishment, and God will never require at my hands the fulfilment of that law which Christ has honored in my stead; for then would there be injustice in heaven: and that be far from God. It is no more possible for a pardoned man to be lost than for Christ to be lost, because Christ is the sinner's surety. Jehovah will never require my debt to be paid twice. Let none impute injustice to the God of the whole earth: let none suppose that he will twice exact the penalty of one sin. If you have been the chief of sinners, you may have the chief of sinner's forgiveness, and God can bestow it now.

I cannot help noticing the *completeness of this forgiveness*. Suppose you call on your creditor, and say to him, “I have nothing to pay with.” “Well,” says he, “I can issue a distress against you, and place you in prison and keep you there.” You still reply that you have nothing and he must do what he can. Suppose he should then say, “I will forgive all.” You now stand amazed and say, “Can it be possible that you will give me that great debt of a thousand pounds?” He replies, “Yes, I will.”

“But how am I to know it?” There is a bond: he takes it and crosses it all out and hands it back to you, and says, “There is a full discharge, I have blotted it all out.” So does the Lord deal with penitents. He has a book in which all your debts are written; but with the blood of Christ he crosses out the handwriting of ordinances which is there written against you. The bond is destroyed, and he will not demand payment for it again. The devil will sometimes insinuate to the contrary, as he did to Martin Luther. “Bring me the catalogue of my sins,” said Luther; and he brought a scroll black and long. “Is that all?” said Luther. “No,” said the devil; and he brought yet another. “And now,” said the heroic saint of God, “write at the foot of the scroll: “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth from all sin.” That is a full discharge.”

III. Now, very briefly, the third thing—the reason for mercy. Says one poor sinner, “Why should God forgive me? I am sure there is no reason why he should, for I have never done anything to deserve his mercy,” Hear what God says, “I am not about to forgive you for your own sake, but for my own sake.” “But, Lord, I shall not be thankful enough.” “I am not about to pardon you because of your gratitude, but for my name’s sake.” “But, Lord, if I am taken into thy church I can do very little for thy cause in future years, for I have spent my best days in the devil’s service, surely the impure dregs of my life cannot be sweet to thee, O God.” “I will not engage to forgive you for your sake, but for my own. I do not want you,” says God, “I can do as well without you as with you; the cattle upon a thousand hills are mine; and if I pleased I could create a whole race of men for my service, who should be as renowned as the greatest monarchs, or the most eloquent preachers, but I can do as well without them, as with them; and I forgive you therefore for my own sake.” Is there not hope for a guilty sinner here? It cannot be pleaded by any one that his sins are too great to be pardoned, for the amount of guilt is hereby put entirely out of consideration, seeing that God forgives not on account of the sinner, but for his own sake. Did you never hear of a physician visiting a man upon a sick bed, when the poor man said, “I have nothing to give you for your attention to me.” “But,” says the doctor, “I did not ask for anything; I attend you from pure benevolence; and moreover to prove my skill. It will make no difference to me how long you live, I love to try my skill, and let the world know that I have power to heal diseases. I want to get myself a name.” And so God says, I desire to have a name for mercy; so that the worse you are, the more God is honored in your salvation. Go then to Christ, poor sinner—naked, filthy, poor, wretched, vile, lost, dead, come as thou art, for there is nothing required in thee, except the need of him:

“This he gives you,
'Tis his Spirit’s rising beam.”

for mine own sake,” says God, “I will forgive.”

IV. Now to conclude—the promise of mercy. “And will not remember thy sins.” There are some things which even God cannot do. Though it is true he is Omnipotent, yet there are some things he cannot do. God cannot lie—he cannot forsake his people—he cannot disown his covenant; and this is one of the things it might be thought he could not do—that is, forget. Is it impossible for God to forget? We finite creatures suffer many things to slip, but can the Almighty ever do so? That God who counteth the stars and calleth them all by their names—who knoweth how many animalculæ there are in the mighty ocean—who notices every grain of dust that floats in the summer air, and is acquainted with every leaf of the forest, can he cease to remember? Perhaps we may answer “No.” Not as to the absolute fact of the committal of the deed; but there are senses in which the expression is entirely accurate. In what sense are we to understand God’s forgetfulness of our sins?

First of all, he will not exact *punishment for them when we come before his judgment bar at last*. The Christian will have many accusers. The devil will come and say “That man is a great sinner.” “I don’t remember it,” says God. “That man rebelled against thee, and cursed thee,” says the accuser. “I do not remember it,” says God, “for I have said I will not remember his sins.” Conscience says,

“Ah! but Lord, it is true, I did sin against thee, and that most grievously.” “I do not remember it,” says God—“I said, I will not remember his sins.” Let all the demons of the pit clamour in God’s ear, and let them vehemently shout out a list of our sins, we may stand boldly forth at that great day, and sing, “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect?” for God does not even *remember* their sin. The Judge does not remember it, and who then shall punish? Unrighteous as we were; wicked as we have been; yet he has forgotten it all. Who then can bring to remembrance what God has forgotten? He says, “I will cast thy sins into the depths of the sea,” not into the shallows where they might be fished up again, but into the depths of the sea, where Satan himself cannot find them. There are no such things as sins recorded against God’s people. Christ has so taken them away, that sin becomes a nonentity to Christians—it is all gone, and through Jesu’s blood they are clean.

The second meaning of this is, *I will not remember thy sins to suspect thee*. There is a father, and he has a wayward son who went away that he might live a life of looseness and profligacy; but after a while he comes home again in a state of penitence. The father says, “I will forgive thee.” But he says next day to his younger son, “There is business to be done at a distant town to-morrow, and here is the money for you to do it with.” He does not trust the returned prodigal with it. “I have trusted him before with money,” says the father to himself, “and he robbed me, and it makes me afraid to trust him again.” But our heavenly Father says, “I will not remember thy sins.” He not only forgives the past, but trusts his people with precious talents. He never suspects them. He has never one suspicious thought. He loves them just as much as if they had never gone astray. He will employ them to preach his gospel; he will put them into the Sunday-school, and make them servants of his Son: for he says, “I will not remember thy sins.”

Again: he will *not remember in his distribution of the recompense of the reward*. The earthly parent will kindly pass over the faults of the prodigal; but you know when that father comes to die, and is about to make his will, the lawyer sitting by his side, he says, “I shall give so much to William, who always behaved well, and my other son shall have so-and-so, and my daughter, she shall have so much; but there is that prodigal, I have spent a large sum upon him when he was young, but he wasted what he received, and though I have taken him again into favour, and for the present he is going on well; still I think I must make a little difference between him and the others. I think it would not be fair—though I have forgiven him—to treat him precisely as the rest;” and so the lawyer puts him down for a few hundred pounds, while the others, perhaps, get their thousands. But God will not remember your sins like that; he gives all an inheritance. He will give heaven to the chief of sinners as well as to the chief of saints. When he divides the portion to his children, it may be he will put Mary Magdalene as high as he does Peter, and the thief as high as he does John; yea, the malefactor who died on the cross is as much in the sight of God as the most moral person that ever lived. Here is a blessed forgetfulness. What sayest thou, poor sinner? Is thy heart drawn by a mysterious inspiration to the foot of the cross? Then I thank my Master; for I trust the one object of my life is to win souls for Christ, and if I may be blessed in that, my life shall be happy. Still do you say, “My sins are too great to be forgiven.” Nay, but O man, as high as the heaven is above the earth, so great is his mercy above thy sins, and so far does his grace exceed thy thoughts. Oh, but sayest thou, “He will not accept me.” What then is the meaning of this text—“He is able to save unto the uttermost;” or this—“Whosoever cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out;” and again—“Whosoever will, let him come and take of the water of life freely.” Do you still say, “This does not include me.” Oh be not so faithless, but rather believe. Oh! had I the power, God knows I would weep myself away in order to win your souls.

“But feeble our compassion proves,
And can but weep where most it loves.

I can do nothing but preach God's gospel; but since the moment Christ forgave me, I cannot help speaking of his love. I turned away from his gospel, and would have none of his reproofs. I cared not for his voice or his Word. That blessed Bible lay unread; these knees refused to bend in prayer, and my eyes looked on vanity. Has he not pardoned? Has he not forgiven? Yes. Then sooner may this tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, than cease to proclaim free-grace in all its mighty displays of electing, redeeming, pardoning, and saving mercy. Oh! how loud ought I to sing, seeing I am out of hell, and delivered from condemnation. And if I am out of hell, why should not you be? Why should I be saved and not another? It was for sinners, remember, that Jesus came. Mary Magdalene, Saul of Tarsus—the very chief of sinners, were accepted, and why do you foolishly conclude that you are cast out? Oh, poor penitent if you perish, you will be the first penitent who ever did so. God give you his blessing, my dear friends, for Christ's sake. Amen.