

CONFESSION OF SIN—A SERMON WITH SEVEN TEXTS NO. 113

A SERMON DELIVERED ON SABBATH MORNING, JANUARY 18, 1857,
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AT THE MUSIC HALL, ROYAL SURREY GARDENS.

“I have sinned.”
PHARAOH—Exodus 9:27.

MY sermon this morning will have seven texts and yet I pledge myself that there shall be but three different words in the whole of them. For it so happens that the seven texts are all alike, occurring in seven different portions of God’s holy Word. I shall require, however, to use the whole of them to exemplify different cases. And I must request those of you who have brought your Bibles with you to refer to the texts as I shall mention them.

The subject of this morning’s discourse will be this—CONFESSION OF SIN. We know that this is absolutely necessary to salvation. Unless there is a true and hearty confession of our sins to God we have no promise that we shall find mercy through the blood of the Redeemer. “Whosoever confesses his sins and forsakes them shall find mercy.” But there is no promise in the Bible to the man who will not confess his sins. As upon every point of Scripture there is a liability of being deceived, so more especially in the matter of confession of sin.

There are many who make a confession and a confession before God who, notwithstanding, receive no blessing because their confession has not in it certain marks which are required by God to prove it genuine and sincere and which demonstrate it to be the work of the Holy Spirit. My text this morning consists of three words, “I have sinned.” And you will see how these words, in the lips of different men, indicate very different feelings. While one says, “I have sinned,” and receives forgiveness—another we shall meet with says, “I have sinned,” and goes his way to blacken himself with worse crimes than before and dive into greater depths of sin than heretofore he had committed.

THE HARDENED SINNER *PHARAOH—“I have sinned.”—Exodus 9:27*

I. The first case I shall bring before you is that of the HARDENED SINNER, who, when under terror, says, “I have sinned.” And you will find the text in the book of Exodus, the 9th chapter and 27th verse—“And Pharaoh sent and called for Moses and Aaron and said unto them, I have sinned this time: the Lord is righteous and I and my people are wicked.”

But why this confession from the lips of the haughty tyrant? He was not often likely to humble himself before Jehovah. Why does the proud one bow himself? You will judge of the value of his confession when you hear the circumstances under which it was made. “And Moses stretched forth his rod toward Heaven. And the Lord sent thunder and hail and the fire ran along upon the ground. And the Lord rained hail upon the land of Egypt. So that there was hail and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.”

“Now,” says Pharaoh, while the thunder is rolling through the sky, while the lightning-flashes are setting the very ground on fire and while the hail is descending in big lumps of ice—“now,” says he, “I have sinned.” He is but a type and specimen of multitudes of the same class. How many a hardened rebel on shipboard, when the timbers are strained and creaking, when the mast is broken and the ship is drifting before the gale, when the hungry waves are opening their mouths to swallow the ship up alive and quick as those that go into the pit—how many a hardened sailor has then bowed his knee, with tears in his eyes and cried, “I have sinned”?

But of what avail and of what value was his confession? The repentance that was born in the storm died in the calm. That repentance of his that was begotten amidst the thunder and the lightning ceased as soon as all was hushed in quiet. And the man who was a pious mariner when on board ship became the most wicked and abominable of sailors when he placed his foot on *terra firma*. How often, too, have we seen this in a storm of thunder and lightning? Many a man’s cheek is blanched when he hears the thunder rolling. His eyes start to tear and he cries, “O God, I have sinned,” while the rafters of his house are shaking and the very ground beneath him reeling at the voice of God which is full of majesty.

But alas, for such a repentance! When the sun again shines and the black clouds are withdrawn, sin comes again upon the man and he becomes worse than before. How many of the same sort of confessions, too, have we seen in times of cholera and fever and pestilence? Then our churches have been crammed with hearers, who, because so many funerals have passed their doors, or so many have died in the street, could not refrain from going up to God's house to confess their sins. And under that visitation, when one, two and three have been lying dead in the house, or next door, how many have thought they would really turn to God? But, alas, when the pestilence had done its work, conviction ceased and when the bell had tolled the last time for a death caused by cholera, then their hearts ceased to beat with penitence and their tears did flow no more.

Have I any such here this morning? I doubt not I have hardened persons who would scorn the very idea of religion, who would count me a cant and hypocrite if I should endeavor to press it home upon them but who know right well that religion is true and who feel it in their times of terror! If I have such here this morning, let me solemnly say to them, "Sirs, you have forgotten the feelings you had in your hours of alarm. But, remember, God has not forgotten the vows you then made." Sailor, you said if God would spare you to see the land again, you would be His servant. You are not so, you have lied to God, you have made Him a false promise—you have never kept the vow which your lips did utter.

Many of you have said, on a bed of sickness, that if He would spare your life you would never again sin as you did before—but here you are and this week's sins shall speak for themselves. You are no better than you were before your sickness. Could you lie to your fellow man and yet go unreproved? And think you that you will lie against God and yet go unpunished? No. The vow, however rashly made, is registered in Heaven and though it is a vow which you cannot perform, yet, as it is a vow which you have made yourself and made voluntarily, too, you shall be punished for the non-keeping it. And God shall execute vengeance upon you at last because you said you would turn from your ways and then when the blow was removed you did not.

A great outcry has been raised of late against tickets-of-leave. I have no doubt there are some men here, who before high Heaven stand in the same position as the ticket-of-leave men stand to our government. They were about to die, as they thought. They promised good behavior if they might be spared and they are here today on ticket-of-leave in this world—and how have they fulfilled their promise? Justice might raise the same outcry against them as they do against the burglars so constantly let loose upon us. The avenging angel might say, "O God, these men said if they were spared they would be so much better. If anything they are worse. How have they violated their promise and how have they brought down Divine wrath upon their heads!"

This is the first style of penitence. And it is a style I hope none of you will imitate, for it is utterly worthless. It is of no use for you to say, "I have sinned," merely under the influence of terror and then to forget it afterwards.

THE DOUBLE-MINDED MAN

BALAAM—"I have sinned."—Numbers 22:34

II. Now for a second text. I beg to introduce you to another character—the *double-minded* man who says, "I have sinned," and feels that he has and feels it deeply, too, but who is so worldly-minded that he "loves the wages of unrighteousness." The character I have chosen to illustrate this is that of *Balaam*. Turn to the book of Numbers, the 22nd chapter and the 34th verse—"And Balaam said unto the angel of the Lord, I have sinned." But yet he went on with his sin afterwards. One of the strangest characters of the whole world is Balaam. I have often marveled at that man. He seems really in another sense to have come up to the lines of Ralph Erskine—

*"To good and evil equal bent
And both a devil and a saint."*

For he did seem to be so. At times no man could speak more eloquently and more truthfully and at other times he exhibited the most mean and sordid covetousness that could disgrace human nature. Think you see Balaam. He stands upon the brow of the hill and there lie the multitudes of Israel at his feet. He is bid to curse them and he cries, "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?" And God opening his eyes, he begins to tell even about the coming of Christ and he says, "I shall see Him but not now: I shall behold Him but not near."

And then he winds up his oration by saying—“Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like His!” And you will say of that man, he is a hopeful character. Wait till he has come off the brow of the hill and you will hear him give the most diabolical advice to the king of Moab which it was even possible for Satan himself to suggest. Said he to the king, “You cannot overthrow these people in battle, for God is with them. Try and entice them from their God.” And you know how with wanton lusts they of Moab tried to entice the children of Israel from allegiance to Jehovah, so that this man seemed to have the voice of an angel at one time and yet the very soul of a devil in his heart.

He was a terrible character. He was a man of two things, a man who went all the way with two things to a very great extent. I know the Scripture says, “No man can serve two masters.” Now this is often misunderstood. Some read it, “No man can *serve two* masters.” Yes he can, he can serve three or four. The way to read it is this—“No man can serve two *masters*.” They cannot both be masters. He can serve two but they cannot both be his master. A man can serve two who are not his masters, or twenty. He may live for twenty different purposes but he cannot live for more than one master purpose—there can only be one master purpose in his soul.

But Balaam labored to serve two—it was like the people of whom it was said, “They feared the Lord and served other gods.” Or like Rufus, who was a loaf of the same leaven. For you know our old king Rufus painted God on one side of his shield and the devil on the other and had underneath, the motto—“Ready for both, catch who can.” There are many such, who are ready for both. They meet a minister and how pious and holy they are! On the Sabbath they are the most respectable and upright people in the world, as you would think. Indeed they even effect a drawling in their speech, which they think to be eminently religious.

But on a week day, if you want to find the greatest rogues and cheats, they are some of those men who are so sanctimonious in their piety. Now, rest assured, my Hearers, that no confession of sin can be genuine unless it is a whole-hearted one. It is of no use for you to say, “I have sinned,” and then keep on sinning. “I have sinned,” say you and it is a fair, fair face you show. But, alas, alas, for the sin you will go away and commit. Some men seem to be born with two characters. I noticed when in the library at Trinity College, Cambridge, a very fine statue of Lord Byron. The librarian said to me, “Stand here, Sir.” I looked and I said, “What a fine intellectual countenance! What a grand genius he was!”

“Come here,” he said, “to the other side.” “Ah, what a demon! There stands the man that could defy the deity.” He seemed to have such a scowl and such a dreadful leer in his face even as Milton would have painted Satan when he said—“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” I turned away and said to the librarian, “Do you think the artist designed this?” “Yes,” he said, “he wished to picture the two characters—the great, the grand, the almost superhuman genius that he possessed and yet the enormous mass of sin that was in his soul.” There are some men here of the same sort. I dare say, like Balaam, they would overthrow everything in argument with their enchantments, they could work miracles.

And yet at the same time there is something about them which betrays a horrid character of sin, as great as that which would appear to be their character for righteousness. Balaam, you know, offered sacrifices to God upon the altar of Baal—that was just the type of his character. So many do. They offer sacrifices to God on the shrine of Mammon. And while they will give to the building of a church and distribute to the poor, they will at the other door of their counting-house grind the poor for bread and press the very blood out of the widow, that they may enrich themselves.

Ah, it is idle and useless for you to say, “I have sinned,” unless you mean it from your heart. That double-minded man’s confession is of no avail.

THE INSINCERE MAN

SAUL—“I have sinned.”—1 Samuel 15:24

III. And now a third character and a third text. In the first book of Samuel, the 15th chapter and 24th verse—“And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned”

Here is the *insincere man*—the man who is not like Balaam, to a certain extent sincere in two things. But the man who is just the opposite—who has no prominent point in his character at all but is molded everlastingly by the circumstances that are passing over his head. Such a man was *Saul*. Samuel reproved him and he said, “I have sinned.” But he did not mean what he said—for if you read the whole verse you will find him saying, “I have sinned: for I have transgressed the Commandment of the Lord and your words, *because I feared the people*,” which was a lying excuse. Saul never feared anybody. He was always ready enough to do his own will—he was the despot.

And just before this he had pleaded another excuse, that he had saved the bullocks and lambs to offer to Jehovah and therefore both excuses could not have been true. You remember, my Friends, that the most prominent feature in the character of Saul was his insincerity. One day he fetched David from his bed, as he thought, to put him to death in his house. Another time he declares, “God forbid that I should do anything against you, my son David.” One day, because David saved his life, he said, “You are more righteous than I. I will do so no more.” The day before he had gone out to fight against his own son-in-law, in order to slay him.

Sometimes Saul was among the Prophets, easily turned into a Prophet and then afterwards among the witches. Sometimes in one place and then another and insincere in everything. How many such we have in every Christian assembly! Men who are very easily molded! Say what you please to them, they always agree with you. They have affectionate dispositions, very likely a tender conscience. But then the conscience is so remarkably tender that when touched it seems to give and you are afraid to probe deeper—it heals as soon it is wounded.

I think I used the very singular comparison once before, which I must use again—there are some men who seem to have rubber hearts. If you do but touch them, there is an impression made at once. But then it is of no use—it soon restores itself to its original character. You may press them whatever way you wish, they are so elastic you can always effect your purpose. But then they are not fixed in their character and soon return to be what they were before. O Sirs, too many of you have done the same—you have bowed your heads in church and said, “We have erred and strayed from Your ways.” And you did not mean what you said.

You have come to your minister. You have said, “I repent of my sins.” You did not then feel you were a sinner. You only said it to please him. And now you attend the house of God—no one more impressible than you. The tear will run down your cheek in a moment but yet, notwithstanding all that, the tear is dried as quickly as it is brought forth and you remain to all intents and purposes the same as you were before. To say, “I have sinned,” in an unmeaning manner, is worse than worthless, for it is a mockery of God thus to confess with insincerity of heart.

I have been brief upon this character. For it seemed to touch upon that of Balaam—though any thinking man will at once see there was a real contrast between Saul and Balaam—even though there is an affinity between the two. Balaam was the great bad man, great in all he did. Saul was little in everything except in stature—little in his good and little in his vice and he was too much of a fool to be desperately bad, though too wicked to be at any time good. Balaam was great in both—the man who could at one time defy Jehovah and yet at another time could say, “If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the Word of the Lord my God, to do less or more.”

THE DOUBTFUL PENITENT

ACHAN—“I have sinned.”—Joshua 7:20

IV. And now I have to introduce to you a very interesting case. It is the case of the doubtful penitent, the case of *Achan*, in the book of Joshua, the 7th chapter and the 20th verse—“And Achan answered Joshua, indeed I have sinned.”

You know that Achan stole some of the prey from the city of Jericho—that he was discovered by lot and put to death. I have singled this case out as the representative of some whose characters are doubtful on their death beds. They do apparently repent but the most we can say of them is that we hope their souls are saved at last but indeed we cannot tell. Achan, you are aware, was stoned with stones for defiling Israel. But I find in the Mishna, an old Jewish exposition of the Bible, these words, “Joshua said to Achan, the Lord shall trouble you *this* day.” And the note upon it is—“He said *this* day, implying that he was only to be troubled in this life, by being stoned to death but that God would have mercy on his soul, seeing that he had made a full confession of his sin.”

And I, too, am inclined, from reading the chapter, to concur in the idea of my venerable and now glorified predecessor, Dr. Gill, in believing that Achan really was saved although he was put to death for the crime, as an example. For you will observe how kindly Joshua spoke to him. He said, “My son, give, I pray you, glory to the Lord God of Israel and make confession unto Him and tell me now what you have done, hide it not from me.” And you find Achan making a very full confession. He says, “Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel and thus and thus have I done. When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonian garment and two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight. Then I coveted them and took them and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent and the silver under it.”

It seems so full a confession that if I might be allowed to judge, I should say, “I hope to meet Achan the sinner, before the Throne of God.” But Matthew Henry has no such opinion. And many other expositors consider that as his body was destroyed, so was his soul. I have, therefore, selected his case, as being one of doubtful repentance. Ah, dear Friends, it has been my lot to stand by many a deathbed and to see many such a repentance as this. I have seen the man, when worn to a skeleton, sustained by pillows in his bed. And he has said, when I have talked to him of judgment to come, “Sir, I feel I have been guilty but Christ is good. I trust in Him.”

And I have said within myself, “I believe the man’s soul is safe.” But I have always come away with the melancholy reflection that I had no proof of it, beyond his own words, for it needs proof in acts and in future life in order to sustain any firm conviction of a man’s salvation. You know that great fact, that a physician once kept a record of a thousand persons who thought they were dying and whom he thought were penitents. He wrote their names down in a book as those, who, if they had died, would go to Heaven. They did not die, they lived. And he says that out of the whole thousand he had not three persons who turned out well afterwards but they returned to their sins again and were as bad as ever.

Ah, dear Friends, I hope none of you will have such a deathbed repentance as that. I hope your minister or your parents will not have to stand by your bedside and then go away and say, “Poor fellow, I hope he is saved. But alas, deathbed repentances are such flimsy things, such poor, such trivial grounds of hope that I am afraid, after all, his soul may be lost.” Oh, to die with a full assurance! Oh, to die with an abundant entrance, leaving a testimony behind that we have departed this life in peace! That is a far happier way than to die in a doubtful manner, lying sick, hovering between two worlds and neither ourselves nor our friends knowing to which of the two worlds we are going. May God grant us grace to give in our lives evidences of true conversion, that our case may not be doubtful!

THE REPENTANCE OF DESPAIR

JUDAS—“I have sinned.”—Matthew 27:4

V. I shall not detain you too long, I trust, but I must now give you another bad case—the worst of all. It is THE REPENTANCE OF DESPAIR. Will you turn to the 27th chapter of Matthew and the 4th verse? There you have a dreadful case of the repentance of despair. You will recognize the character the moment I read the verse—“And Judas said, I have sinned.” Yes, Judas the traitor, who had betrayed his Master. When he saw that his Master was condemned, he “repented and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned, in that I have betrayed innocent blood and he cast down the pieces in the temple and went”—and what?—“*and hanged himself.*”

Here is the worst kind of repentance of all—in fact, I know not that I am justified in calling it repentance. It must be called remorse of conscience. But Judas did confess his sin and then went and hanged himself. Oh, that dreadful, that terrible, that hideous confession of despair! Have you ever seen it? If you ever have, then bless God that you never were called to see such a sight. I have seen it once in my life. I pray God I may never see it again—the repentance of the man who sees death staring him in the face and who says, “I have sinned.” You tell him that Christ has died for sinners. And he answers, “There is no hope for me. I have cursed God to His face. I have defied him. My day of grace I know is past, my conscience is seared with a hot iron. I am dying and I know I shall be lost!”

Such a case as that happened long ago. You know it and it is on record—the case of Francis Spira—the most dreadful case, perhaps, except that of Judas, which is upon record in the memory of man. Oh, my Hearers, will any of you have such a repentance? If you do, it will be a beacon to all persons who sin in the future. If you have such a repentance as that, it will be a warning to generations yet to come. In the life of Benjamin Keach—and he also was one of my predecessors—I find the case of a man who had been a professor of religion but had departed from the profession and had gone into awful sin. When he came to die, Keach, with many other friends, went to see him but they could never stay with him above five minutes at a time, for he said, “Get you gone. It is of no use your coming to me. I have sinned away the Holy Spirit. I am like Esau, I have sold my birthright and though I seek it carefully with tears, I can never find it again.”

And then he would repeat dreadful words, like these—“My mouth is filled with gravel stones and I drink wormwood day and night. Tell me not, tell me not of Christ! I know He is a Savior but I hate Him and He hates me. I know I must die. I know I must perish!” And then followed doleful cries and hideous noises, such as none could bear. They re-

turned again in his placid moments only to stir him up once more and make him cry out in his despair, “I am lost! I am lost! It is of no use your telling me anything about it!”

Ah, there may be a man here who may have such a death as that. Let me warn him, before he comes to it. And may God the Holy Spirit grant that that man may be turned unto God and made a true Penitent. And then he need not have any more fear. For he who has had his sins washed away in a Savior’s blood need not have any remorse for his sins, for they are pardoned through the Redeemer.

THE REPENTANCE OF THE SAINT

Job—“I have sinned.”—Job 7:20

VI. And now I come into daylight. I have been taking you through dark and dreary confessions. I shall detain you there no longer but bring you out to the two good confessions which I have to read to you. The first is that of Job in the 7th chapter at the 20th verse—“I have sinned. What shall I do unto You, O You preserver of men?” This is the *repentance of the saint*. Job was a saint but he sinned. This is the repentance of the man who is a child of God already, an acceptable repentance before God. But as I intend to dwell upon this in the evening, I shall now leave it, for fear of wearying you. David was a specimen of this kind of repentance and I would have you carefully study his penitential Psalms, the language of which is ever full of weeping humility and earnest penitence.

THE BLESSED CONFESSION

THE PRODIGAL—“I have sinned.”—Luke 15:18

VII. I come now to the last instance which I shall mention. It is the case of the prodigal. In Luke 15:18, we find the prodigal says—“Father I have sinned.” Oh, here is a *blessed confession*! Here is that which proves a man to be a regenerate character—“Father, I have sinned.” Let me picture the scene. There is the prodigal. He has run away from a good home and a kind father and he has spent all his money with harlots. And now he has none left. He goes to his old companions and asks them for relief. They laugh him to scorn. “Oh,” says he, “you have drunk my wine many a day. I have always been paymaster to you in all our revelries. Will you not help me?” “Get you gone” they say. And he is turned out of doors. He goes to all his friends with whom he had associated but no man gives him anything.

At last a certain citizen of the country said—“You want something to do, do you? Well go and feed my swine.” The poor prodigal, the son of a rich landowner who had a great fortune of his own, has to go out to feed swine. And he a Jew, too!—the worst employment (to his mind) to which he could be put! See him there, in squalid rags, feeding swine. And what are his wages? Why, so little, that he “would fain have filled his belly with the husks the swine eat but no man gave to him.” Look, there he is, with the fellow commoners of the sty, in all his mire and filthiness. Suddenly a thought put there by the good Spirit, strikes his mind.

“How is it,” says he, “that in my father’s house there is bread enough and to spare and I perish with hunger? I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you and am no more worthy to be called your son—make me as one of your hired servants.” Off he goes. He begs his way from town to town. Sometimes he gets a lift on a coach, perhaps, but at other times he goes trudging his way up barren hills and down desolate vales, all alone. And now at last he comes to the hill outside the village and sees his father’s house down below. There it is. The old poplar tree. And there are the stacks round which he and his brother used to run and play.

And at the sight of the old homestead all the feelings and associations of his former life rush upon him and tears run down his cheeks and he is almost ready to run away again. He says “I wonder whether Father’s dead. I daresay I broke Mother’s heart when I went away. I always was her favorite. And if they are either of them alive, they will never see me again. They will shut the door in my face. What am I to do? I cannot go back—I am afraid to go forward.” And while he was thus deliberating, his father had been walking on the housetop, looking out for his son. And though he could not see his father, his father could see him.

Well, the father comes down stairs with all his might, runs up to him and while he is thinking of running away, his father’s arms are round his neck and he begins kissing him, like a loving father, indeed. And then the son begins—“Father, I have sinned against Heaven and in your sight and am no more worthy to be called your son,” and he was going to say, “Make me as one of your hired servants.” But his father puts his hand on his mouth. “No more of that,” says

he. “I forgive you all. You shall not say anything about being a hired servant—I will have none of that. Come along,” says he, “come in, poor prodigal.”

He says to the servants, “bring here the best robe and put it on him and put shoes on his poor bleeding feet. And bring here the fatted calf and kill it. And let us eat and be merry. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.” Oh, what a precious reception for one of the chief of sinners! Good Matthew Henry says—“His father saw him, there were eyes of mercy. He ran to meet him, there were legs of mercy. He put his arms round his neck, there were arms of mercy. He kissed him, there were kisses of mercy. He said to him, there were words of mercy—bring here the best robe, there were deeds of mercy, wonders of mercy—all mercy. Oh, what a God of mercy he is.”

Now, prodigal, you do the same. Has God put it into your heart? There are many who have been running away a long time now. Does God say “return”? Oh, I bid you return, then, for as surely as ever you do return He will take you in. There never was a poor sinner yet who came to Christ, whom Christ turned away. If He turns you away, you will be the first. Oh, if you could but try Him! “Ah, Sir, I am so black with sin, so filthy, so vile.” Well come along with you—you cannot be blacker than the prodigal. Come to your Father’s house and as surely as He is God He will keep His word—“Him that comes unto Me I will in no wise cast out.”

Oh, if I might hear that some had come to Christ this morning I would indeed bless God! I must tell here for the honor of God and Christ, one remarkable circumstance and then I have done. You will remember that one morning I mentioned the case of an infidel who had been a scorner and scoffer but who, through reading one of my printed sermons, had been brought to God’s house and then to God’s feet. Well, last Christmas day, the same infidel gathered together all his books and went into the market-place at Norwich and there made a public recantation of all his errors and a profession of Christ and then taking up all his books which he had written and had in his house, on evil subjects, burned them in the sight of the people.

I have blessed God for such a wonder of grace as that and pray that there may be many more such, who, though they are born prodigal, will yet return home, saying, “I have sinned.”

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