

"The Religion of the Pharisee, the Religion of Mankind"
Sermons Preached on Various Occasions, sermon 2
St. John Henry Newman
July 20, 1856

1 "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Luke xviii. 13.

2 THESE words set before us what may be called the characteristic mark of the Christian
3 Religion, as contrasted with the various forms of worship and schools of belief, which in
4 early or in later times have spread over the earth. They are a confession of sin and a
5 prayer for mercy. Not indeed that the notion of transgression and of forgiveness was
6 introduced by Christianity, and is unknown beyond its pale; on the contrary, most
7 observable it is, the symbols of guilt and pollution, and rites of deprecation and
8 expiation, are more or less common to them all; but what is peculiar to our divine faith,
9 as to Judaism before it, is this, that confession of sin enters into the idea of its highest
10 saintliness, and that its pattern worshippers and the very heroes of its history are only,
11 and can only be, and cherish in their hearts the everlasting memory that they are, and
12 carry with them into heaven the rapturous avowal of their being, redeemed, restored
13 transgressors. Such an avowal is not simply wrung from the lips of the neophyte, or of
14 the lapsed; it is not the cry of the common run of men alone, who are buffeting with the
15 surge of temptation in the wide world; it is the hymn of saints, it is the triumphant ode
16 sounding from the heavenly harps of the Blessed before the Throne, who sing to their
17 Divine Redeemer, "Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God in Thy blood, out of
18 every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation."

19 And what is to the Saints above a theme of never-ending thankfulness, is, while they
20 are yet on earth, the matter of their perpetual humiliation. Whatever be their advance in
21 the spiritual life, they never rise from their knees, they never cease to beat their breasts,
22 as if sin could possibly be strange to them while they were in the flesh. Even our Lord
23 Himself, the very Son of God in human nature, and infinitely separate from sin,—even
24 His Immaculate Mother, encompassed by His grace from the first beginnings of her
25 existence, and without any part of the original stain,—even they, as descended from
26 Adam, were subjected at least to death, the direct, emphatic punishment of sin. And
27 much more, even the most favoured of that glorious company, whom He has washed
28 clean in His Blood; they never forget what they were by birth; they confess, one and all,
29 that they are children of Adam, and of the same nature as their brethren, and
30 compassed with infirmities while in the flesh, whatever may be the grace given them
31 and their own improvement of it. Others may look up to them, but they ever look up to
32 God; others may speak of their merits, but they only speak of their defects. The young
33 and unspotted, the aged and most mature, he who has sinned least, he who has
34 repented most, the fresh innocent brow, and the hoary head, they unite in this one
35 litany, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." So it was with St. Aloysius; so, on the other
36 hand, was it with St. Ignatius; so was it with St. Rose, the youngest of the saints, who,
37 as a child, submitted her tender frame to the most amazing penances; so was it with St.
38 Philip Neri, one of the most aged, who, when some one praised him, cried out, "Begone!
39 I am a devil, and not a saint;" and when going to communicate, would protest before his

40 Lord, that he "was good for nothing, but to do evil." Such utter self-prostration, I say, is
41 the very badge and token of the servant of Christ;—and this indeed is conveyed in His
42 own words, when He says, "I am not come to call the just, but sinners;" and it is
43 solemnly recognized and inculcated by Him, in the words which follow the text, "Every
44 one that exalteth himself, shall be humbled, and he that humbleth himself, shall be
45 exalted."

46 This, you see, my Brethren, is very different from that merely general acknowledgment
47 of human guilt, and of the need of expiation, contained in those old and popular
48 religions, which have before now occupied, or still occupy, the world. In them, guilt is an
49 attribute of individuals, or of particular places, or of particular acts of nations, of bodies
50 politic or their rulers, for whom, in consequence, purification is necessary. Or it is the
51 purification of the worshipper, not so much personal as ritual, before he makes his
52 offering, and an act of introduction to his religious service. All such practices indeed are
53 remnants of true religion, and tokens and witnesses of it, useful both in themselves and
54 in their import; but they do not rise to the explicitness and the fulness of the Christian
55 doctrine. "There is not any man just." "All have sinned, and do need the glory of God."
56 "Not by the works of justice, which we have done, but according to His mercy." The
57 disciples of other worships and other philosophies thought and think, that the many
58 indeed are bad, but the few are good. As their thoughts passed on from the ignorant
59 and erring multitude to the select specimens of mankind, they left the notion of guilt
60 behind, and they pictured for themselves an idea of truth and wisdom, perfect,
61 indefectible, and self-sufficient. It was a sort of virtue without imperfection, which took
62 pleasure in contemplating itself, which needed nothing, and which was, from its own
63 internal excellence, sure of a reward. Their descriptions, their stories of good and
64 religious men, are often beautiful, and admit of an instructive interpretation; but in
65 themselves they have this great blot, that they make no mention of sin, and that they
66 speak as if shame and humiliation were no properties of the virtuous. I will remind you,
67 my Brethren, of a very beautiful story, which you have read in a writer of antiquity; and
68 the more beautiful it is, the more it is fitted for my present purpose, for the defect in it will
69 come out the more strongly by the very contrast, viz., the defect that, though in some
70 sense it teaches piety, humility it does not teach. I say, when the Psalmist would
71 describe the happy man, he says, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and
72 whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin."
73 Such is the blessedness of the Gospel; but what is the blessedness of the religions of
74 the world? A celebrated Greek sage once paid a visit to a prosperous king of Lydia,
75 who, after showing him all his greatness and his glory, asked him whom he considered
76 to have the happiest lot, of all men whom he had known. On this, the philosopher,
77 passing by the monarch himself, named a countryman of his own, as fulfilling his typical
78 idea of human perfection. The most blessed of men, he said, was Tellus of Athens, for
79 he lived in a flourishing city, and was prospered in his children, and in their families; and
80 then at length when war ensued with a border state, he took his place in the battle,
81 repelled the enemy, and died gloriously, being buried at the public expense where he
82 fell, and receiving public honours. When the king asked who came next to him in
83 Solon's judgment, the sage went on to name two brothers, conquerors at the games,
84 who, when the oxen were not forthcoming, drew their mother, who was priestess, to the

85 temple, to the great admiration of the assembled multitude; and who, on her praying for
86 them the best of possible rewards, after sacrificing and feasting, lay down to sleep in the
87 temple, and never rose again. No one can deny the beauty of these pictures; but it is for
88 that reason I select them; they are the pictures of men who were not supposed to have
89 any grave account to settle with heaven, who had easy duties, as they thought, and who
90 fulfilled them.

91 Now perhaps you will ask me, my Brethren, whether this heathen idea of religion be not
92 really higher than that which I have called pre-eminently Christian; for surely to obey in
93 simple tranquillity and unsolicitous confidence, is the noblest conceivable state of the
94 creature, and the most acceptable worship he can pay to the Creator. Doubtless it is the
95 noblest and most acceptable worship; such has ever been the worship of the angels;
96 such is the worship now of the spirits of the just made perfect; such will be the worship
97 of the whole company of the glorified after the general resurrection. But we are engaged
98 in considering the actual state of man, as found in this world; and I say, considering
99 what he is, any standard of duty, which does not convict him of real and multiplied sins,
100 and of incapacity to please God of his own strength, is untrue; and any rule of life, which
101 leaves him contented with himself, without fear, without anxiety, without humiliation, is
102 deceptive; it is the blind leading the blind: yet such, in one shape or other, is the religion
103 of the whole earth, beyond the pale of the Church.

104 The natural conscience of man, if cultivated from within, if enlightened by those external
105 aids which in varying degrees are given him in every place and time, would teach him
106 much of his duty to God and man, and would lead him on, by the guidance both of
107 Providence and grace, into the fulness of religious knowledge; but, generally speaking,
108 he is contented that it should tell him very little, and he makes no efforts to gain any
109 juster views than he has at first, of his relations to the world around him and to his
110 Creator. Thus he apprehends part, and part only, of the moral law; has scarcely any
111 idea at all of sanctity; and, instead of tracing actions to their source, which is the motive,
112 and judging them thereby, he measures them for the most part by their effects and their
113 outward aspect. Such is the way with the multitude of men everywhere and at all times;
114 they do not see the Image of Almighty God before them, and ask themselves what He
115 wishes: if once they did this, they would begin to see how much He requires, and they
116 would earnestly come to Him, both to be pardoned for what they do wrong, and for the
117 power to do better. And, for the same reason that they do not please Him, they succeed
118 in pleasing themselves. For that contracted, defective range of duties, which falls so
119 short of God's law, is just what they can fulfil; or rather they choose it, and keep to
120 it, *because* they can fulfil it. Hence, they become both self-satisfied and self-sufficient;—
121 they think they know just what they ought to do, and that they do it all; and in
122 consequence they are very well content with themselves, and rate their merit very high,
123 and have no fear at all of any future scrutiny into their conduct, which may befall them,
124 though their religion mainly lies in certain outward observances, and not a great number
125 even of them.

126 So it was with the Pharisee in this day's gospel. He looked upon himself with great
127 complacency, for the very reason that the standard was so low, and the range so

128 narrow, which he assigned to his duties towards God and man. He used, or misused,
129 the traditions in which he had been brought up, to the purpose of persuading himself
130 that perfection lay in merely answering the demands of society. He professed, indeed,
131 to pay thanks to God, but he hardly apprehended the existence of any direct duties on
132 his part towards his Maker. He thought he did all that God required, if he satisfied public
133 opinion. To be religious, in the Pharisee's sense, was to keep the peace towards others,
134 to take his share in the burdens of the poor, to abstain from gross vice, and to set a
135 good example. His alms and fastings were not done in penance, but because the world
136 asked for them; penance would have implied the consciousness of sin; whereas it was
137 only Publicans, and such as they, who had anything to be forgiven. And these indeed
138 were the outcasts of society, and despicable; but no account lay against men of well-
139 regulated minds such as his: men who were well-behaved, decorous, consistent, and
140 respectable. He thanked God he was a Pharisee, and not a penitent.

141 Such was the Jew in our Lord's day; and such the heathen was, and had been. Alas! I
142 do not mean to affirm that it was common for the poor heathen to observe even any
143 religious rule at all; but I am speaking of the few and of the better sort: and these, I say,
144 commonly took up with a religion like the Pharisee's, more beautiful perhaps and more
145 poetical, but not at all deeper or truer than his. They did not indeed fast, or give alms, or
146 observe the ordinances of Judaism; they threw over their meagre observances a
147 philosophical garb, and embellished them with the refinements of a cultivated intellect;
148 still their notion of moral and religious duty was as shallow as that of the Pharisee, and
149 the sense of sin, the habit of self-abasement, and the desire of contrition, just as absent
150 from their minds as from his. They framed a code of morals which they could without
151 trouble obey; and then they were content with it and with themselves. Virtue, according
152 to Xenophon, one of the best principled and most religious of their writers, and one who
153 had seen a great deal of the world, and had the opportunity of bringing together in one
154 the highest thoughts of many schools and countries,—virtue, according to him, consists
155 mainly in command of the appetites and passions, and in serving others in order that
156 they may serve us. He says, in the well known Fable, called the choice of Hercules, that
157 Vice has no real enjoyment even of those pleasures which it aims at; that it eats before
158 it is hungry, and drinks before it is thirsty, and slumbers before it is wearied. It never
159 hears, he says, that sweetest of voices, its own praise; it never sees that greatest luxury
160 among sights, its own good deeds. It enfeebles the bodily frame of the young, and the
161 intellect of the old. Virtue, on the other hand, rewards young men with the praise of their
162 elders, and it rewards the aged with the reverence of youth; it supplies them pleasant
163 memories and present peace; it secures the favour of heaven, the love of friends, a
164 country's thanks, and, when death comes, an everlasting renown. In all such
165 descriptions, virtue is something external; it is not concerned with motives or intentions;
166 it is occupied in deeds which bear upon society, and which gain the praise of men; it
167 has little to do with conscience and the Lord of conscience; and knows nothing of
168 shame, humiliation, and penance. It is in substance the Pharisee's religion, though it be
169 more graceful and more interesting.

170 Now this age is as removed in distance, as in character, from that of the Greek
171 philosopher; yet who will say that the religion which it acts upon is very different from

172 the religion of the heathen? Of course I understand well, that it might know, and that it
173 will say, a great many things foreign and contrary to heathenism. I am well aware that
174 the theology of this age is very different from what it was two thousand years ago. I
175 know men profess a great deal, and boast that they are Christians, and speak of
176 Christianity as being a religion of the heart; but, when we put aside words and
177 professions, and try to discover what their religion is, we shall find, I fear, that the great
178 mass of men in fact get rid of all religion that is inward; that they lay no stress on acts of
179 faith, hope, and charity, on simplicity of intention, purity of motive, or mortification of the
180 thoughts; that they confine themselves to two or three virtues, superficially practised;
181 that they know not the words contrition, penance, and pardon; and that they think and
182 argue that, after all, if a man does his duty in the world, according to his vocation, he
183 cannot fail to go to heaven, however little he may do besides, nay, however much, in
184 other matters, he may do that is undeniably unlawful. Thus a soldier's duty is loyalty,
185 obedience, and valour, and he may let other matters take their chance; a trader's duty is
186 honesty; an artisan's duty is industry and contentment; of a gentleman are required
187 veracity, courteousness, and self-respect; of a public man, high-principled ambition; of a
188 woman, the domestic virtues; of a minister of religion, decorum, benevolence, and some
189 activity. Now, all these are instances of mere Pharisaical excellence; because there is
190 no apprehension of Almighty God, no insight into His claims on us, no sense of the
191 creature's shortcomings, no self-condemnation, confession, and deprecation, nothing of
192 those deep and sacred feelings which ever characterize the religion of a Christian, and
193 more and more, not less and less, as he mounts up from mere ordinary obedience to
194 the perfection of a saint.

195 And such, I say, is the religion of the natural man in every age and place;—often very
196 beautiful on the surface, but worthless in God's sight; good, as far as it goes, but
197 worthless and hopeless, because it does not go further, because it is based on self-
198 sufficiency, and results in self-satisfaction. I grant, it may be beautiful to look at, as in
199 the instance of the young ruler whom our Lord looked at and loved, yet sent away sad; it
200 may have all the delicacy, the amiableness, the tenderness, the religious sentiment, the
201 kindness, which is actually seen in many a father of a family, many a mother, many a
202 daughter, in the length and breadth of these kingdoms, in a refined and polished age
203 like this; but still it is rejected by the heart-searching God, because all such persons
204 walk by their own light, not by the True Light of men, because self is their supreme
205 teacher, and because they pace round and round in the small circle of their own
206 thoughts and of their own judgments, careless to know what God says to them, and
207 fearless of being condemned by Him, if only they stand approved in their own sight. And
208 thus they incur the force of those terrible words, spoken not to a Jewish Ruler, nor to a
209 heathen philosopher, but to a fallen Christian community, to the Christian Pharisees of
210 Laodicea,—"Because thou sayest I am rich, and made wealthy, and have need of
211 nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind,
212 and naked; I counsel thee to buy of Me gold fire-tried, that thou mayest be made rich,
213 and be clothed in white garments, that thy shame may not appear, and anoint thine
214 eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see. Such as I love, I rebuke and chastise; be
215 zealous, therefore, and do penance."

216 Yes, my Brethren, it is the ignorance of our understanding, it is our spiritual blindness, it
217 is our banishment from the presence of Him who is the source and the standard of all
218 Truth, which is the cause of this meagre, heartless religion of which men are commonly
219 so proud. Had we any proper insight into things as they are, had we any real
220 apprehension of God as He is, of ourselves as we are, we should never dare to serve
221 Him without fear, or to rejoice unto Him without trembling. And it is the removal of this
222 veil which is spread between our eyes and heaven, it is the pouring in upon the soul of
223 the illuminating grace of the New Covenant, which makes the religion of the Christian so
224 different from that of the various human rites and philosophies, which are spread over
225 the earth. The Catholic saints alone confess sin, because the Catholic saints alone see
226 God. That awful Creator Spirit, of whom the Epistle of this day speaks so much, He it is
227 who brings into religion the true devotion, the true worship, and changes the self-
228 satisfied Pharisee into the broken-hearted, self-abased Publican. It is the sight of God,
229 revealed to the eye of faith, that makes us hideous to ourselves, from the contrast which
230 we find ourselves to present to that great God at whom we look. It is the vision of Him in
231 His infinite gloriousness, the All-holy, the All-beautiful, the All-perfect, which makes us
232 sink into the earth with self-contempt and self-abhorrence. We are contented with
233 ourselves till we contemplate Him. Why is it, I say, that the moral code of the world is so
234 precise and well-defined? Why is the worship of reason so calm? Why was the religion
235 of classic heathenism so joyous? Why is the framework of civilized society all so
236 graceful and so correct? Why, on the other hand, is there so much of emotion, so much
237 of conflicting and alternating feeling, so much that is high, so much that is abased, in the
238 devotion of Christianity? It is because the Christian, and the Christian alone, has a
239 revelation of God; it is because he has upon his mind, in his heart, on his conscience,
240 the idea of one who is Self-dependent, who is from Everlasting, who is Incommunicable.
241 He knows that One alone is holy, and that His own creatures are so frail in comparison
242 of Him, that they would dwindle and melt away in His presence, did He not uphold them
243 by His power. He knows that there is One whose greatness and whose blessedness are
244 not affected, the centre of whose stability is not moved, by the presence or the absence
245 of the whole creation with its innumerable beings and portions; whom nothing can
246 touch, nothing can increase or diminish; who was as mighty before He made the worlds
247 as since, and as serene and blissful since He made them as before. He knows that
248 there is just One Being, in whose hand lies his own happiness, his own sanctity, his own
249 life, and hope, and salvation. He knows that there is One to whom he owes every thing,
250 and against whom he can have no plea or remedy. All things are nothing before Him;
251 the highest beings do but worship Him the more; the holiest beings are such, only
252 because they have a greater portion of Him.

253 Ah! what has he to pride in now, when he looks back upon himself? Where has fled all
254 that comeliness which heretofore he thought embellished him? What is he but some vile
255 reptile, which ought to shrink aside out of the light of day? This was the feeling of St.
256 Peter, when he first gained a glimpse of the greatness of his Master, and cried out,
257 almost beside himself, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" It was the
258 feeling of holy Job, though he had served God for so many years, and had been so
259 perfected in virtue, when the Almighty answered him from the whirlwind: "With the
260 hearing of the ear I have heard Thee," he said; "but now my eye seeth Thee; therefore I

261 reprove myself, and do penance in dust and ashes." So was it with Isaias, when he saw
262 the vision of the Seraphim, and said, "Woe is me ... I am a man of unclean lips, and I
263 dwell in the midst of a people that hath unclean lips, and I have seen with my eyes the
264 King, the Lord of Hosts." So was it with Daniel, when, even at the sight of an Angel, sent
265 from God, "there remained no strength in him, but the appearance of his countenance
266 was changed in him, and he fainted away, and retained no strength." This then, my
267 Brethren, is the reason why every son of man, whatever be his degree of holiness,
268 whether a returning prodigal or a matured saint, says with the Publican, "O God, be
269 merciful to me;" it is because created natures, high and low, are all on a level in the
270 sight and in comparison of the Creator, and so all of them have one speech, and one
271 only, whether it be the thief on the cross, Magdalen at the feast, or St. Paul before his
272 martyrdom:—not that one of them may not have, what another has not, but that one and
273 all have nothing but what comes from Him, and are as nothing before Him, who is all in
274 all.

275 For us, my dear Brethren, whose duties lie in this seat of learning and science, may we
276 never be carried away by any undue fondness for any human branch of study, so as to
277 be forgetful that our true wisdom, and nobility, and strength, consist in the knowledge of
278 Almighty God. Nature and man are our studies, but God is higher than all. It is easy to
279 lose Him in His works. It is easy to become over-attached to our own pursuit, to
280 substitute it for religion, and to make it the fuel of pride. Our secular attainments will
281 avail us nothing, if they be not subordinate to religion. The knowledge of the sun, moon,
282 and stars, of the earth and its three kingdoms, of the classics, or of history, will never
283 bring us to heaven. We may "thank God," that we are not as the illiterate and the dull;
284 and those whom we despise, if they do but know how to ask mercy of Him, know what
285 is very much more to the purpose of getting to heaven, than all our letters and all our
286 science. Let this be the spirit in which we end our session. Let us thank Him for all that
287 He has done for us, for what He is doing by us; but let nothing that we know or that we
288 can do, keep us from a personal, individual adoption of the great Apostle's words,
289 "Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief."

290 (10th Sunday after Pentecost, 1856. Preached in the University Church, Dublin.)