

"Christian Repentance"

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"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants." Luke xv. 18, 19.

1 THE very best that can be said of the fallen and redeemed race of Adam is, that they
2 confess their fall, and condemn themselves for it, and try to recover themselves. And
3 this state of mind, which is in fact the only possible religion left to sinners, is represented
4 to us in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who is described as receiving, then abusing,
5 and then losing God's blessings, suffering from their loss, and brought to himself by the
6 experience of suffering. A poor service indeed to offer, but the best we can offer, to
7 make obedience our second choice when the world deserts us, when that is dead and
8 lost to us wherein we were held!

9 Let it not be supposed, because I say this, that I think that in the life-time of each one of
10 us there is some clearly marked date at which he began to seek God, and from which
11 he has served Him faithfully. This may be so in the case of this person or that, but it is
12 far from being the rule. We may not so limit the mysterious work of the Holy Ghost. He
13 condescends to plead with us continually, and what He cannot gain from us at one time,
14 He gains at another. Repentance is a work carried on at diverse times, and but
15 gradually and with many reverses perfected. Or rather, and without any change in the
16 meaning of the word repentance, it is a work never complete, never entire—unfinished
17 both in its inherent imperfection, and on account of the fresh and fresh occasions which
18 arise for exercising it. We are ever sinning, we must ever be renewing our sorrow and
19 our purpose of obedience, repeating our confessions and our prayers for pardon. No
20 need to look back to the first beginnings of our repentance, should we be able to trace
21 these, as something solitary and peculiar in our religious course; we are ever but
22 beginning; the most perfect Christian is to himself but a beginner, a penitent prodigal,
23 who has squandered God's gifts, and comes to Him to be tried over again, not as a son,
24 but as a hired servant.

25 In this parable, then, we need not understand the description of the returning prodigal to
26 imply that there is a state of disobedience and subsequent state of conversion definitely
27 marked in the life of Christians generally. It describes the state of all Christians at all
28 times, and is fulfilled more or less, according to circumstances, in this case or that;
29 fulfilled in one way and measure at the beginning of our Christian course, and in another
30 at the end. So I shall now consider it, viz. as describing the *nature* of all true
31 repentance.

32 1. First, observe, the prodigal son said, "I am no more worthy to be called Thy son,
33 make me as one of Thy hired servants." We know that God's service is perfect freedom,
34 not a servitude; but this it is in the case of those who have long served Him; at first
35 it is a kind of servitude, it is a task till our likings and tastes come to be in unison with

36 those which God has sanctioned. It is the happiness of Saints and Angels in heaven to
37 take pleasure in their duty, and nothing but their duty; for their mind goes that one way,
38 and pours itself out in obedience to God, spontaneously and without thought or
39 deliberation, just as man *sins* naturally. This is the state to which we are tending if we
40 give ourselves up to religion; but in its commencement, religion is necessarily almost a
41 task and a formal service. When a man begins to see his wickedness, and resolves on
42 leading a new life, he asks, *What must I do?* he has a wide field before him, and he
43 does not know how to enter it. He must be bid to do some particular plain acts of
44 obedience, to fix him. He must be told to go to Church regularly, to say his prayers
45 morning and evening, and stately to read the Scriptures. This will limit his efforts to a
46 certain end, and relieve him of the perplexity and indecision which the greatness of his
47 work at first causes. But who does not see that this going to Church, praying in private,
48 and reading Scripture, must in his case be, in great measure, what is called a form and
49 a task? Having been used to do as he would, and indulge himself, and having very little
50 understanding or liking for religion, he cannot take pleasure in these religious duties;
51 they will necessarily be a weariness to him; nay, he will not be able even to give his
52 attention to them. Nor will he see the use of them; he will not be able to find they make
53 him better though he repeat them again and again. Thus his obedience at first is
54 altogether that of a hired servant, "The servant knoweth not what his lord doeth." [John
55 xv. 15.] This is Christ's account of him. The servant is not in his lord's confidence, does
56 not understand what he is aiming at, or why he commands this and forbids that. He
57 executes the commands given him, he goes hither and thither, punctually, but by the
58 mere letter of the command. Such is the state of those who *begin* religious obedience.
59 They do not see anything come of their devotional or penitential services, nor do they
60 take pleasure in them; they are obliged to defer to God's word simply because it is His
61 word; to do which implies faith indeed, but also shows they are in that condition of a
62 servant which the prodigal felt himself to be in at best.

63 Now, I insist upon this, because the conscience of a repentant sinner is often uneasy at
64 finding religion a task to him. He thinks he ought to rejoice in the Lord at once, and it is
65 true he is often told to do so; he is often taught to begin by cultivating high affections.
66 Perhaps he is even warned against offering to God what is termed a *formal service*.
67 Now this is reversing the course of a Christian's life. The prodigal son judged better,
68 when he begged to be made one of his father's servants—he knew his place. We *must*
69 *begin* religion with what looks like a form. Our fault will be, not in beginning it as a form,
70 but in continuing it as a form. For it is our duty to be ever striving and praying
71 to *enter* into the real spirit of our services, and in proportion as we understand them and
72 love them, they will cease to be a form and a task, and will be the real expressions of
73 our minds. Thus shall we gradually be changed in heart from servants into sons of
74 Almighty God. And though from the very first, we must be taught to look to Christ as the
75 Saviour of sinners, still His very love will frighten, while it encourages us, from the
76 thought of our ingratitude. It will fill us with remorse and dread of judgment, for we are
77 not as the heathen, we have received privileges, and have abused them.

78 2. So much, then, on the condition of the repentant sinner; next, let us consider the
79 motives which actuate him in his endeavours to serve God. One of the most natural,

80 and among the first that arise in the mind, is that of *propitiating* Him. When we are
81 conscious to ourselves of having offended another, and wish to be forgiven, of course
82 we look about for some *means* of setting ourselves right with him. If it be a slight
83 offence, our overtures are in themselves enough, the mere expression that we wish our
84 fault forgotten. But if we have committed some serious injury, or behaved with any
85 special ingratitude, we, for a time, keep at a distance, from a doubt how we shall be
86 received. If we can get a common friend to mediate in our behalf, our purpose is best
87 answered. But even in that case we are not satisfied with leaving our interests to
88 another; we try to do something for ourselves; and on perceiving any signs of
89 compassion or placability in the person offended, we attempt to approach him with
90 propitiations of our own, either very humble confession, or some acceptable service. It
91 was under this feeling that Jacob attempted to conciliate the governor of Egypt (whom
92 he knew not to be his son Joseph), with a present of "the best fruits in the land, a little
93 balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds." And this holds good
94 when applied to the case of sinners desiring forgiveness from God. The marks of His
95 mercy all around us are strong enough to inspire us with some general hope. The very
96 fact that He still continues our life, and has not at once cast us into hell, shows that He
97 is waiting awhile before the wrath comes upon us to the uttermost. Under these
98 circumstances it is *natural* that the conscience-stricken sinner should look round him for
99 some atonement with which to meet his God. And this in fact has been the usual course
100 of religion in all ages. Whether "with burnt-offerings and calves of a year old, with
101 thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil, with the offering of a man's first-
102 born for his transgression, the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul;" or, in a higher
103 way, "by doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God;" [Micah vi. 6-8.]
104 by some means or other, repentant sinners have attempted to win God's attention and
105 engage His favour. And this mode has, before now, been graciously accepted by God,
106 though He generally chose the gift which He would accept. Thus Jacob was instructed
107 to sacrifice on the altar at Bethel, after his return from Padan-aram. David, on the other
108 hand, speaks of the more spiritual sacrifice in the fifty-first Psalm: "The sacrifices of God
109 are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." Such
110 are the services of the penitent, as suggested by nature, and approved by God Himself
111 in the Old Testament.

112 But now, turning to the parable of the prodigal son, we find nothing of this kind in it.
113 There is no mention made here of any offering on his part to his father, any propitiatory
114 work. This should be well observed. The truth is, that our Saviour has shown us in all
115 things a more perfect way than was ever before shown to man. As He promises us a
116 more exalted holiness, an exacter self-command, a more generous self-denial, and a
117 fuller knowledge of truth, so He gives us a more true and noble repentance. The most
118 noble repentance (if a fallen being can be noble in his fall), the most decorous conduct
119 in a conscious sinner, is an *unconditional surrender* of himself to God—not a bargaining
120 about terms, not a scheming (so to call it) to be received back again, but an
121 instant *surrender* of himself in the first instance. Without knowing what will become of
122 him, whether God will spare or not, merely with so much hope in his heart as not utterly
123 to despair of pardon, still not looking merely to *pardon* as an *end*, but rather looking to
124 the claims of the Benefactor whom he has offended, and smitten with shame, and the

125 sense of his ingratitude, he must *surrender himself* to his lawful Sovereign. He is a
126 runaway offender; he must come back, as a very first step, before anything can be
127 determined about him, bad or good; he is a rebel, and must lay down his arms. Self-
128 devised offerings might do in a less serious matter; as an atonement for sin, they imply
129 a defective view of the evil and extent of sin in his own case. Such is that perfect way
130 which nature shrinks from, but which our Lord enjoins in the parable—a surrender. The
131 prodigal son waited not for his father to show signs of placability. He did not merely
132 approach a space, and then stand as a coward, curiously inquiring, and dreading how
133 his father felt towards him. He made up his mind at once to degradation at the best,
134 perhaps to rejection. He arose and went straight on towards his father, with a collected
135 mind; and though his relenting father saw him from a distance, and went out to meet
136 him, still his purpose was that of an instant frank submission. Such must be Christian
137 repentance: First we must put aside the idea of finding a remedy for our sin; then,
138 though we feel the guilt of it, yet we must set out firmly towards God, not knowing for
139 certain that we shall be forgiven. He, indeed, meets us on our way with the tokens of
140 His favour, and so He bears up human faith, which else would sink under the
141 apprehension of meeting the Most High God; still, for our repentance to be Christian,
142 there must be in it that generous temper of self-surrender, the acknowledgment that we
143 are unworthy to be called any more His sons, the abstinence from all ambitious hopes
144 of sitting on His right hand or His left, and the willingness to bear the heavy yoke of
145 bond-servants, if He should put it upon us.

146 This, I say, is Christian repentance. Will it be said, "It is too hard for a beginner?" true:
147 but I have not been describing the case of a beginner. The parable teaches us what the
148 character of the true penitent is, not how men actually *at first* come to God. The longer
149 we live, the more we may hope to *attain* this higher kind of repentance, viz., in
150 proportion as we advance in the other graces of the perfect Christian character. The
151 truest kind of repentance as little comes at first, as perfect conformity to any other part
152 of God's Law. It is gained by long practice—it will come at length. The dying Christian
153 will fulfil the part of the returning prodigal more exactly than he ever did in his former
154 years. When first we turn to God in the actual history of our lives, our repentance is
155 mixed with all kinds of imperfect views and feelings. Doubtless there is in it something of
156 the true temper of simple submission; but the wish of appeasing God on the one hand,
157 or a hard-hearted insensibility about our sins on the other, mere selfish dread of
158 punishment, or the expectation of a sudden easy pardon, these, and such like
159 principles, influence us, whatever we may say or may think we feel. It is, indeed, easy
160 enough to have good words put into our mouths, and our feelings roused, and to
161 profess the union of utter self-abandonment and enlightened sense of sin; but to claim
162 is not really to possess these excellent tempers. Really to gain these is a work of time. It
163 is when the Christian has long fought the good fight of faith, and by experience knows
164 how few and how imperfect are his best services; then it is that he is able to acquiesce,
165 and most gladly acquiesces in the statement, that we are accepted by faith only in the
166 merits of our Lord and Saviour. When he surveys his life at the close of it, what is there
167 he can trust in? what act of it will stand the scrutiny of the Holy God? of course no part
168 of it, so much is plain without saying a word. But further, what part of it even is a
169 sufficient evidence to himself of his own sincerity and faithfulness? This is the point

170 which I urge. How shall he know that he is still in a state of grace after all his sins?
171 Doubtless he may have some humble hope of his acceptance. St. Paul speaks of the
172 testimony of his conscience as consoling him; but his conscience also tells him of
173 numberless actual sins, and numberless omissions of duty; and with the awful prospect
174 of eternity before him, and in the weakness of declining health, how shall he collect
175 himself to appear before God? Thus he is after all, in the very condition of the returning
176 prodigal, and cannot go beyond him, though he has served God ever so long. He can
177 but *surrender* himself to God, as after all, a worse than unprofitable servant, resigned to
178 God's will, whatever it is, with more or less hope of pardon, as the case may be;
179 doubting not that Christ is the sole meritorious Author of all grace, resting simply on Him
180 who, "if He will, can make him clean," but not without fears about himself, because
181 unable, as he well knows, to read his own heart in that clear unerring way in which God
182 reads it. Under these circumstances, how vain it is to tell him of his own good deeds,
183 and to bid him look back on his past consistent life! This reflection will rarely comfort
184 him; and when it does, it will be the recollection of the instances of God's mercy towards
185 him in former years which will be the chief ground of encouragement in it. No, his true
186 stay is, that Christ came "to call sinners to repentance," that "He died for the ungodly."
187 He acknowledges and adopts, as far as he can, St. Paul's words, and nothing beyond
188 them, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came
189 into the world to save *sinners*, of whom I am chief." [Matt. ix. 13. Rom. v. 6. 1 Tim. i. 15.]

190 Who shall dare approach Christ at the dreadful Day of Judgment, who has rejected the
191 calling of His Spirit here? Who shall then dare to surrender himself to the great God,
192 when hell is opened ready to receive him? Alas! it is only because *some* hope is left to
193 us that we dare give ourselves up to Him *here*; *despair* ever keeps away. But then,
194 when He takes His seat as the severe Judge of sinners, who, among His slothful
195 disobedient servants, will willingly present himself? Surely the time of *submission* will
196 then be over; resignation has no place among fallen spirits; they are swept away by the
197 uncontrollable power of God. "Bind him *hand and foot*, and take him away;" [Matt. xxii.
198 13.] such will be the dreadful command. They *would* struggle if they *could*.

199 And in hell they will be still tormented by the worm of proud rebellious hatred of God!
200 Not even ages will reconcile them to a hard endurance of their fate; not even the dry
201 apathy in which unbelievers on earth take refuge, will be allowed them. There is no
202 fatalism in the place of torment. The devils see their doom was their own fault, yet they
203 are unable to be sorry for it. It is their *will* that is in direct energetic variance with the will
204 of God, and they know it.

205 Consider this, my brethren, and lay it to heart. Doubtless you must render yourselves to
206 God's mercy here, or else be forced away before His anger hereafter.

207 "Today, while it is called today, harden not your hearts." [Heb. iii. 7-15.]