THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

*SERMONS*

BY THE

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*WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR*

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LONDON:

JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.

MDCCCLXXXIII.

XXII.

*HIDDEN GUILT.*

“There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel!”—JOSHUA vii. 13.

THE God of the Old Testament is most often surrounded with a terrible glory; He is the mighty God of vengeance, He is a consuming fire. Here and there, however, that majesty is softened; traits of infinite compassion allow us to anticipate the day when He will reveal Himself in the plenitude of His nature. An incomparable tender­ness and mercy mingle with the prescriptions of the Mosaic law and permeate the revelations of the prophets and the Psalms; in them we already see the God of the Gospel; Him whom Jesus revealed in all the fulness of His love, and whom Moses had but imperfectly known, for, according to the expression of St. John, if the law was given by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. Jehovah, during the period of the theocracy, reveals Himself especially by His justice and holiness. He is the great justiciary of the nations. Just as He chastises the infamy of Sodom by fire from heaven, so He punishes the abominations of the Canaanites by the sword of Israel. True, Israel often joins to this awful mission its own vindictive passions and national animo­sities; thence in its history more than one bloody page which troubles our conscience and our heart. But let us not trace these acts of vengeance back to Jehovah Himself! Jehovah proclaims His holy law, and if Israel violates it, Israel will be chastised as severely as its enemies. That which arms the hand of the theocracy is justice still unmitigated by mercy, but for all this justice is the same, and it is often upon Israel that the most terrible blows fall. I find a proof of this in the narrative before us.

The Israelites had just entered the Promised Land. Hitherto victorious in every encounter, they unexpectedly suffer the most shameful defeat before the little city of Ai; Joshua, baffled in his hopes, troubled in his faith, casts himself at the feet of the Lord and pours out his complaints and murmurs with bitterness: “Alas! O Lord God!” said he, “wherefore hast Thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! . . . The Canaanites shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth, and what wilt Thou do unto Thy great name?” But the Lord answered Joshua: “There is an accursed thing among you; up, and sanctify the people.” Then Joshua assembled all Israel, the trumpets sounded through the camp and the whole people passed in order before him, and the tribe of Judah was taken, and in this tribe the family of the Zarhites was taken, and in this family the household of Zabdi was taken, and in this household Achan was taken; then Achan, terrified by this awful inquest, confessed all. He had stolen a portion of the booty and hidden it in his tent. In the midst of that holy war, when all manner of rapine was forbidden, he had thought only of self. By his sacrile­gious theft he had brought the punishment of God upon all Israel, and therefore he was put to death without mercy.

We must here recall to mind the solemn significance which this expression, “the accursed thing,” had for the Jews. Israel had been chosen for a grand mission, to preserve the knowledge of the true God, the moral law and the hope of a Redeemer in the midst of the heathen world. It bore in its bosom the destinies of humanity. For such a mission it was necessary that it should keep aloof from the other nations; all the more so that, as we learn from the Old Testament itself, the natural character of the Jews led them, as well as the other inhabitants of the land, to idolatry, to the infamous passions which ancient Asia had enthroned, and, to say the least, to the hope of an enlargement of territory and of a military glory. Accordingly, the Israelites were prohibited from holding any intercourse whatever with the stranger; in war especially, the booty taken by them was to be nobody’s property (admirable prescription which was destined to repress the cupidity of this avari­cious people, and to remind it that it did not wage all these fearful wars for the mere purpose of enriching itself). All that had been taken from the Canaanites was to be devoted or sacrificed to the Lord. Conse­quently, Achan, in committing his crime, in burying in his tent the gold, the silver, and the goodly garments which he had stolen from the foe, had added sacrilege to his theft, and that is what explains the severity of his condemnation.

Times are changed, brethren; the people of God is no longer confined within national limits; the judgments of Jehovah are no longer executed in an immediate or visible manner by the hand of man; in a word, the theocracy is no more. But the instruction contained in my text is as true, as necessary amongst us as when, three thousand years ago, Joshua set it forth in the eyes of all Israel, by the punishment of a guilty man.

As Christians we are placed in a world against which we must continually struggle; like Israel of old, we must be in its midst the witnesses of God by our words as well as by our life; we must renounce all guilty habits, all criminal attachments; in a word, every accursed thing. Oh! I know full well that so long as we walk here below we shall drag after us the remains of a sinful nature, and that we shall often be surprised by the sin which easily besets us; but these errors, these falls, how­ever sad they may be, are not the accursed thing; in my opinion, it is simply some evil habit, some guilty affec­tion, some hidden sin which our conscience condemns, but which we are unwilling to give up. That is the danger to which I would draw your attention today.

“There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel,” Ezekiel relates a striking vision: In order to reveal to him the true condition of His people, God pierces before his eyes the walls of the houses of Jerusa­lem. Then the whole nation appears to him with its idolatry, with its odious ceremonies, with its vices and its corruption, which ordinarily were covered with the veil of a hypocritical formalism, and the prophet is seized with horror at the sight. He knew much already, but what he now sees surpasses all his former conceptions. Well, if the walls of our dwellings were transparent, do you think they would not reveal the most sorrow­ful and heart-rending realities? If the stones of our houses could speak, would they not have strange things to tell? What a contrast, it may be, between our atti­tude here, in public, under the eye of our brethren, and our ordinary life! What a derisive contradiction between the aspirations, the desires, the hopes expressed in our prayers and in our hymns, and our most habitual conversations! Some, ruthlessly pulling to pieces the absent, take a detestable pleasure in calumny; others, allowing the shameful chains of ease, luxury, and sen­suality to surround them, become incapable of responding to the most pressing appeals of misery, that is, to the voice of God Himself, and easily make up their mind to be useless servants. Others, feeding their imagination upon sins which they would not dare to practise openly, wander in the most unwholesome dreams, and sate their curiosity with a literature their acquaintance with which they would be unwilling to avow. Others, again, by their example, their levity, and their worldly language, encourage in those who surround them dispositions which will perhaps lose their souls. Is that all? Are you sure that God detects no other disorders in your lives? Are your actions always utterly unquestionable? Does no unholy connection keep you under its yoke? Can all your business transactions bear the examination of the Divine Scrutator [Observer]? I cannot tell; but I can hardly be­lieve that such questions are out of place in so numerous an assembly as this. Some years ago a minister was preaching in a large town and before a select audience on the absolute necessity of restoring ill-gotten property. Judging from the cultured and Christian aspect of his congregation, one might have supposed that his sermon was a singular mistake, and that his words would touch none of his hearers; but on the following days many a considerable sum, spontaneously restored to the State or to private individuals, proved that he had hit the mark. Let us, however, admit that our private life harbours no crime, no accursed thing, is it so with our heart too? and if God should pierce its walls, would not men dis­cover in it affections, habits, passions which are in accord­ance neither with our faith, nor with our name of Christians, nor even with our ordinary language?

Would you dare confess, I do not say the temptations which often cross your heart, for these may be but sudden seductions which are not the sincere expression of your nature, and which you will soon look upon with disgust—but would you not be ashamed to avow that which lies at the very basis of your life, the affections which most deeply stir your hearts, the thoughts upon which you most ordinarily delight to dwell, the habits which you have not yet renounced? Now, that is what is most to be dreaded; for if evil when it becomes a habit is always awful, what then will be guilt tolerated, accepted, preserved, nay, growing beneath the very shadow of the Cross and under the eye of the holy God?

I hasten to acknowledge that at the outset of a Chris­tian life, in the fervour of first love, such a condition of soul is an impossibility. At such times the temptation is rather to look upon sin with pity and to treat it as a con­quered enemy. When the Prince of Life has descended into our heart and transformed it into a sanctuary; when we have heard the Divine harmonies of holiness and mercy there reconciled, when the assurance of pardon has filled our soul with a felicity which even angels know not, when our broken wills and subdued affections have exhaled a sweeter fragrance than the perfume which Mary poured at the feet of the Lord, how then could we believe that the soul honoured with such a love can ever become possessed by frivolous, mean, wicked, or vulgar passions? And yet, what has often happened?

When we offered our soul to God, an accursed thing was preserved there, or perhaps it entered it afterwards; it was an idolatrous attachment, an inveterate habit, which for a moment had seemed dead; placed on the extreme limit of our soul, that enemy appeared quite harmless; and yet, even then, we could not justify ourselves by pleading our ignorance, for the voice of the faithful God warned us of our peril, but we were already seeking ex­cuses and alleging that God could not expect so many sacrifices at once, and perceiving not that when love begins to calculate, it ceases instantly to be true love. Nevertheless, days glided on, and in our soul, now become Christian, the accursed thing still remained; sheltered in its innermost recesses, it occupied a very insignificant place there; but like those weeds which grow rapidly and absorb the vivifying substance of the soil, it spread its roots everywhere, so that they soon mingled with the most tenuous fibres of our heart; the danger increased, and God redoubled His warnings. Sermons which seemed meant only for us, and in which we found the exact repre­sentation of our moral state, impressive and unexpected words, passages of Scripture upon which our eyes fell as if by chance, all these shed in the deeps of our heart a terrific light, and revealed to our horrified gaze the enemy seated at the very centre of our life. But who is not aware of the fact that we possess the alarming faculty of closing our eyes to what we do not wish to see? You have doubtless seen some of those invalids who persist in averting their eyes from the danger by which they are threatened; they reject the warnings of sincere friend­ship, they cling desperately to life, and find marks of health even in the febrile paroxysms of the disease which is consuming them. Alas! so it is likewise in spiritual life; we will not confess that our soul is diseased, we endeavour to deny the secret distemper with which it is affected; and, as if to delude ourselves completely, we carefully note all the signs of life and health which it still manifests. We look to our religious habits, to our good works, to our alms, to our emotions, to the tears we have shed at the foot of the Cross, and we do not reflect that the more real these emotions have been the greater is our responsibility, the more reprehensible is our in­fidelity. We count all the sacrifices which we have made for God, willingly would we add to them new and extraordinary ones which God does not require of us, and all this simply to obtain the right of refusing Him those He claims, those which we should have offered first of all, those without which all others are vain. We may even seek to shake off our remorse by the effusions of a noisy, active, eager piety. Nay, in the very hour when the guilt is at its height, we may appear doubly zealous in the service of God. Thus, little by little, we take the habit of deceiving others and of deceiving ourselves. Hence­forth, there are in us two existences: the outward ex­istence which is apparently moral, religious, and correct, admired of men, it may even be; then, below, our true life where lurks and grows the guilty passion which we have refused to sacrifice! Oh! how rapidly has it developed itself! It seemed to us a mere nothing, and now, behold! it exerts upon us an extraordinary power. And no wonder indeed, for it occupied the most intimate place in our heart; like a fondly cherished idol it had taken its stand in the sanctuary where God alone should have dwelt. To it we referred all our thoughts and affec­tions, in it we concentrated our life. Now, the game is up, it is so firmly settled on its pedestal that it holds us under its bondage, and we have become Pharisees far more guilty than those of the Gospel, for we have known from our childhood that Jesus Christ hates Pharisaism; we have become Christians in appearance and language, living a life whose front is that of a sanctuary, but whose inner parts are full of corruption and uncleanness.

I have endeavoured to tell you how, almost unawares, we may be led to harbour an accursed thing in our heart. I cannot tell if any recognise in this their own history; but if this disease has never attained its last stage in any of your souls, I believe I may affirm that we have all felt its attacks, or if not, that we may feel them tomorrow. Consequently, I have thought it my duty to point out to you its winding and treacherous course. I have now to indicate the undeniable symptoms by which it betrays its presence.

In the first place, when a soul harbours an accursed thing, it is sorrowful, and the peace of God forsakes it; for, in the deplorable state in which it has fallen, it can know and taste neither the heavenly joys of Divine com­munion, nor the unholy joys of the world. It can no longer know the former, for how can Christian joy be associated with sin? Will you place a song of praise and thanksgiving on the lips of David after his adultery; will you suffer Peter to tell you of the joyful assurance of forgiveness in the very hour when he has denied his Lord? Ah! Divine peace in the midst of a guilty life would be so monstrous an inconsistency that the con­science of the most degraded of beings would shudder with horror at the sight. But if the soul that preserves an accursed thing can no longer taste the Divine joys, it cannot either taste the joys of sin; it had looked for happiness in its guilty passion, but this happiness is envenomed by shame and remorse; so great a bitterness mingles with it that the most severe trial would be more acceptable than such a felicity. Vainly does the Chris­tian endeavour to yield to the seductions of evil. He knows too much to be easily deluded. His eye, en­lightened by the radiance of the Gospel, sees through the charms of a guilty passion; he sees all that it con­ceals of selfishness, shame, and degradation. He once has known the pure joys of holiness, he has walked under a bright and cloudless sky which poured floods of light and peace across his path, and now that shameful life on which he has entered is but a stormy night, illumined at intervals by the dismal flashes of sin. He once has known the delights of Divine love, he has felt his heart burn with its sacred flame; and now, how could he join in the happiness of worldlings, how could he share in their enjoyments and once more fall a victim to those seductions whose nothingness and vanity he knows so well? He knows too much to participate in those delusions, too much to be worldly without shame or remorse. Henceforth, what will he do? An unutter­able sorrow overpowers him. We sometimes see persons who labour under what doctors call marasmus [wasting away]. An inexplicable languor takes possession of their entire being, every effort is painful to them, their face grows pale, their body droops and decays without any apparent cause; but after death it is stated that one of the vital organs was seriously diseased. Well! there is spiritual as well as physical marasmus, and its secret source is always some moral disorder which causes the inner life to die away. Of what avail then are all the blessings from above? When a worm has found its way to the root of a tree, in vain do the cool showers water it, in vain does the sun warm it with its rays; its leaves grow yellow, its branches wither, and in the very season when all is life and beauty, it dies smitten without remedy. Let each of us examine himself, let him seek out the cause of his languor and melancholy, let him ask himself why the Gospel brings him no joy. Happy will he be if he does not discover in the innermost depths of his soul some accursed thing which would suffice to explain all!

Not only does this secret guilt deprive us of all our joy, but it paralyses all our powers. It was on the day when Achan hid the accursed thing in his tent that Israel was beaten by the foe. Up to this time the Lord’s people had always been victorious. So it is in the Chris­tian life. There is no real or lasting strength but in sincerity. Ah! I understand that in other domains success does not always depend upon conviction; I understand that, in politics, men may inflame the multi­tudes by the charm of their words, and raise the edifice of their popularity on the profession of principles which are not sincere. I understand, likewise, that skilful leaders may inspire crowds with fanaticism; that has been seen at all times. But to the honour of Christianity it must be said that it can never be preached efficaciously by those whose inward life gives the lie to their profes­sion. A church, for instance, in which spiritual life has ceased to flow, may abound in first-rate talents; its acti­vity will nevertheless be without the least influence. Now, what may be rightly said of a church, may with greater reason still be affirmed of individuals. Whoever harbours an accursed thing in his heart and life is, from that very cause, struck with impotence. How, in truth, could he act when he hears within himself an invisible witness reproaching him with assuming an attitude and a language which his life most deplorably belies? His conscience is there before him like a phantom whose piercing eye penetrates to the innermost depths of his life. In mysterious accents, which however he is forced to hear, it tells him that he is acting an unworthy part. If he tries to speak, it shuts his mouth; if he tries to act, it paralyses his arm, so that, weary of resistance, he at length remains silent and inactive, sacrificing to sin the cause of God which he should have served. Oh! who will tell us how many souls have thus been lost—lost to all that is true, holy, eternal; lost by a secret disorder, by a guilty attachment, by an idolatrous craving for human glory. We had seen them set out on the ocean of Christian life like vessels sailing rapidly over the waves; the wind filled their sails, a firm hand was at the helm, a brilliant future awaited them, . . . but in the hold of the ship, by an almost imperceptible opening, the water penetrated, drop by drop, day and night unceasingly. Then the progress of the bark grew slower, and none knew why until the day when it went down, and when nothing was left us but the gloomy recollection of a vanished faith and of an eternal hope which has given place to nothingness!

But of all the consequences of keeping an accursed thing in the heart, there is one which is more fearful still than those I have mentioned: it is the hardening of the heart. Tell us if you know of anything more terrible than this hardening; as for me, I can conceive of nothing which should alarm us more, and what is the most appalling of all is that men often reach it by a gradual and insensible slope. Suppose you have preserved an accursed thing in your heart. At first you are not quiet; on the contrary, there are hours when your heart, attracted on the one hand by God. and on the other by the world, seems to be rent; but lust and passion gain the mastery and bring you under their subjection. From that moment there is in your heart a dull irritation against God, against His Word, against all that speaks to you of holiness and salvation; a strange uneasiness takes possession of you when you read the Gospel, you pass with feverish haste over certain passages whose meaning is too plain for you. The faith of others annoys and their holiness condemns you. You feel an exquisite joy when you can detect a flaw in their Christian life; you count up their inconsis­tencies with secret delight; you find a strange pleasure in the discovery that, after all, everybody resembles you, and that there is no Christian life that can bear a very close examination. Instinctively you seek an easy and accommodating doctrine; you want sermons that will quiet your conscience and lull it into a false security; but you cannot endure those which unveil your secret miseries; you shrink from the contact of the friendly hand which would lay itself upon your wound to show you that the mischief is there. Thus you judge your brethren with bitterness, and you willingly keep aloof from them. But though they are no longer beside you, your conscience is still there, and how is it to be lulled to sleep, how is it to be bought over? Prisoners have a slang word to denote the conscience; they call it *the mute.* The mute! ah! right glad would they be indeed if it were so. Can it ever become mute? I cannot tell. That is one of the secrets which God alone knows; but I know that if anything could stifle its voice, it would be an accursed thing fondly cherished and not renounced. When a man perseveres in a criminal life which he hides under appearances of piety, all the springs of his moral existence eventually break; scarce is there room left in his soul for fear and despair. He finds no attraction, no delight whatever in spiritual things; he has lost the sense by which they are to be perceived; “everything,” says Vinet, “becomes languid and insipid in his being; he feels this; he understands that it should be for him a cause of sorrow; he foresees his doom, and he has not even the energy to be appalled at it.” The most solemn and terrible realities strike upon his heart with a dull sound such as that produced by a hammer upon a leaden bell. Yes, in presence of such a spiritual condition, we may well be alarmed, for final hardening of heart, alas! is perdition begun here below, in anticipation of the eternal judgment.

Do you now understand all that is implied by the words of the text: “There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel?” If you have taken in their full import, let each of you examine him­self, let each search his dwelling and his heart, let each bring to God the sacrifice which he expects of him. Here, no illusion, no equivocation, let us fully persuade ourselves that we shall not escape the all-searching eye of God.

Ah! when the trumpets of the Levites summoned all Israel together at the tabernacle of the congregation that all the people might be brought before Joshua, Achan, no doubt, said to himself: “Who will know me in this vast multitude? Who will discover the silver and the gold which I have hid in my tent?” And yet, have you observed how solemnly brief is the manner in which Scripture recounts his judgment: “And Joshua brought Israel by their tribes, and the tribe of Judah was taken; and he brought the tribe of Judah, and the family of the Zarhites was taken; and he brought the family of the Zarhites, and Zabdi was taken; and he brought his house­hold man by man, and Achan was taken.” See how surely Divine justice reaches the guilty one, just as the eagle, descending from the heights of heaven, whirls round in ever-narrowing circles until at length it swoops down upon its prey. Think not you will be able to escape God. However secret be your guilt, at whatever depth you may have buried it, the day will come when you will have to give account of it. Alone among the multitude of your fellow-men you will have to appear, and the voice of Him whom none can deceive will force you to confess your crime. Ah! what would you not give then to have renounced that passion, that habit, that ill-gotten gain, that sin, in a word, to which your soul has attached itself, and which has finally lost you!

I conclude this long and painful review. I know that my words will have seemed harsh to many, and I expect to be reproached with having troubled many souls. Troubled souls! Ah! would to God we might trouble them! but what I fear, will you know it? is rather not to have succeeded. Point them out to me those souls troubled by a holy fear, trembling at the thought of the accursed thing which they still cherish, desirous of glo­rifying their Saviour by a perfect obedience. With bitter sorrow I affirm that nothing is more uncommon in our ministry than to meet with those who tremble at the thought of the judgment of God. Some come to us for instruction, others for consolation, the greater number for help, but the words which I have most rarely heard are these, “What shall I do to be saved?” Souls easily led astray, souls easily reassured is what we see today, but the holy love that trembles at the thought of grieving God, alas! I seek it in vain.

Here also do you know what will take place? The most upright, the most sanctified, the purest souls will precisely be those who will anxiously question whether they are not cherishing some accursed thing in their life, whilst guilty Achan, having made sure that this discourse is not meant for him, has already named in his heart those of his brethren to whom he intends to apply it. Oh, the craftiness, oh, the inconceivable levity of the human heart! Was I not right when I said: “Would to God we might trouble souls!”

But if we would trouble you, it is that you may be saved. And what immense and profound joy would fill your heart if, in this very hour, without further delay, you brought at the feet of the Lord all that which you have so long refused Him! if, like the sinner in the Gospel, you broke at His feet that which is most precious to you! Ah! it were a happiness greater than that of angels, it were indeed the felicity of heaven! So far, you have seen in this sacrifice only what it cost you; see to­day what it will give you; see that conscience calmed, that heart pacified, that inward dignity regained, that life freed from the most shameful bondage and devoted to the noblest of causes; above all, see the delightful assurance of Divine approbation, the possession of that joy which will be your life throughout eternity. That is what God has in reserve for you today. Ah! refuse it not; come to Him, and in silence perfect the sacrifice which He expects of you! Amen.