

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

BY THE

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OF L'ÉGLISE DE L'ÉTOILE, PARIS.

WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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XVIII.

REPENTANCE.

“Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight; that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when Thou judgest.”—Ps. li. 6.

HAD I no other reason to believe in the divinity of the Bible than the manner in which the heart of man is depicted there, this would be enough for me. Here, for instance, is the Book of Psalms, written three thousand years ago. Do you know of any other which expresses more faithfully the noblest aspirations of your soul, your struggles, your doubts, your sorrows? Where is the man who does not find in it his own history? You have perhaps perused the religious books of the nations to which Christianity was unknown—those poems in which the Grecian race expressed with so much grace and genius the bewitching influence of a worshipped nature; those lofty hymns in which the northern tribes extolled the vengeance of their deities, or those monotonous and despairing songs, by which the Hindoo stirred himself to commit the suicide which would enable him to enter into the rest of Nirvana. In order to understand them, you travel in spirit to those countries which have produced them. You seek, by dint of attention and study, to picture to yourselves the feelings of a Hindoo, of a Greek, of a barbarian. . . . But when you read the Psalms, it is your own heart you find there. True, the words are Jewish; true, Israel and Jerusalem are the themes of the inspired bard; but beneath the surface you see man himself appearing with the truest and most characteristic features of his nature. . . . That is why this book awakens the same emotions among all races of men. The miserable negro is comforted by it just as well as the most highly cultured mind in our civilised countries. I love thus to find the human soul in its simple and true expression, such as it was thirty centuries ago, such as it is still today, with its eternal yearnings for holiness, pardon, love which the sages of the day may misunderstand or despise, but which reappear with indomitable obstinacy. It is good thus to rise above one's epoch. In fact, each epoch presents to us an incomplete idea of man. One day he is deified, on the morrow he is lowered and degraded; one day the intellect is exalted at the expense of the heart, on the morrow a sickly sentimentality seems to be the true expression of the human soul. Education creates in us artificial needs; the fashion of the day alters or falsifies our nature. For each century is prejudiced and sectarian, and sees but one side of human nature. . . . The Bible alone is the book of humanity—it alone pictures man such as he has always been, with all his greatness, but also with all his wretchedness; it neither flatters nor debases him, but it judges him from a point of view which overlooks time and space—such, in a word, as he must appear in the

eyes of Him who embraces all things. Let a man perverted by the spirit of system open those Psalms, he will not recognise himself in them, but will perhaps cast an unintelligent and disdainful glance upon their sacred pages which so many tears have watered. . . . But stay! Here is trial approaching. Here is a great sorrow which causes the most deeply hidden chords that still exist in the depths of his soul to vibrate. . . . Hark! they will produce exactly the same sounds which strike us in those inspired lines. So true it is that the heart of man is always the same, and that, when stirred in its depths, it responds by a sublime instinct to the voice of the God who made it, and who alone can understand and comfort it.

I have chosen as the subject of our meditations today one of the most touching of these Psalms: it is the cry of a guilty soul; it is the bitter confession which escapes David when his conscience is roused by the voice of Nathan. I would show you by this example what is true repentance. We have arrived at the period of the year* at which men most willingly admit that a little time must be retrenched from the affairs of the world and devoted to meditation and serious thought. That is what, in the religion of the majority, is called the time for penitence. It is understood that Christians must prepare themselves in this way to celebrate the memory of the work of redemption and of the sufferings of the Lord. A touching custom would this be if formalism had not perverted it! But what is it in reality? The soul presents itself before God as a debtor before his creditor. It seems to say to Him, "I have robbed Thee of so many days, of so much affection, of so many thoughts, which I have given to the world and to sin, and which I mean to give them still. But here, in exchange, are so many days of contrition, so many good works, and so many penances." . . . What a miserable calculation! That is what people call performing one's religious duties. . . . One's religious duties indeed! Is this the reasoning of true love? Can it be satisfied with such a mercenary combination? Can it pretend to pay off its debt towards God by prayers or tears? This, however, is the most universal idea of repentance. . . . That is what men make of the most touching drama which can ever stir the human heart. That is how they pretend to conciliate the most complete worldliness with the most enthusiastic effusions of piety. That is also why I must remind you once more of what true repentance is, by studying with you this example through which it has pleased God to instruct His Church unto the end of time.

I need not here retrace all the details of David's fall. Everything, in his twofold crime, is calculated to amaze and appal us. To have been the object of so many mercies, and then so openly to violate the Divine law; to have known the most celestial joys, and then to have so deeply sullied his soul;

* Passion Week.

to have sung in presence of the assembled multitudes the praises of the Lord, and then to give to the entire nation the shameful spectacle of so crying a scandal—everything here combines to make of David a unique example of an unparalleled fall; and willingly would many a one in this assembly, comparing himself with the guilty king, exclaim, in the words of the Pharisee in the parable, “God, I thank Thee that I am not as this man.”

But the Christian who knows himself, the Christian who knows the history of his own life and of his secret temptations, pauses and reflects. He thinks of the position of David, of that sudden prosperity to which the youthful shepherd of Bethlehem had been raised, of the examples by which he was surrounded, of the manners and customs of the East, of the seductions of an unlimited power, and then he has only to humble himself, and to ask himself with terror what would have become of him in such a situation and under the attraction of similar temptations.

Do you know what strikes me most in this narrative? It is not the greatness of David’s fall. Yet it is odious, and no expression is too strong in which to picture it. No; it is the sincerity, the intensity of his repentance. Thus to fall, alas! is the common lot of man; but thus to rise again is the miracle of God.

There is in all deep falls I know not what fatal power which enslaves the soul and renders it well-nigh incapable of restoration. David innocent would surely have shuddered like you, like me, had this story been related to him. What, then, has lost him? A look. A look, and from that moment see how guilt follows guilt, how link after link is added to his chain of sin. An unlawful desire first of all, then the sin, then the lie, then the perfidy, then the murder, then the hardening. . . . Ah! if ever repentance seemed an impossibility, it surely was then; and yet, at the first words of Nathan, behold a soul so completely changed that we may take it as our model, behold a criminal who teaches us how we are to return to God!

The *sincerity* of David’s confession is the first lesson to be learned from our text. Do you know what it costs the human heart to speak these words: “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, that Thou mightest be clear when Thou judgest?” Do you know how difficult is an avowal such as this, especially when a man occupies an exalted position, when he is surrounded with flattery, when everything conspires to lessen, in his eyes, the gravity of his faults? Do you know how hard, how humiliating, how bitter is such an attitude? That is the first aspect of David’s confession. It is himself he condemns, it is upon himself he casts the entire weight of his guilt, and yet, excuses would certainly not have failed him. Might he not have alleged, as we have already said, the perils of his position, his exceptional temptations, the intoxication of prosperity, the silence of his friends, the encouragements of his flatterers? All these arguments probably presented themselves to his

mind, but he did not entertain them, and laden with the entire burden of his crime, he falls at the feet of God.

Is our repentance marked by the same sincerity, brethren? Scripture tells us of the incurable wickedness of our heart, but never does this heart appear to me more deceitful than when, being discovered in sin, we essay to shift the responsibility of our faults upon others and to excuse ourselves in our own eyes. All manner of sophisms, however wretched, serve our purpose then: excuses which we would never accept on the part of others reassure ourselves. Excuses! Man will sooner grow weary of sin than of seeking excuses for his faults. From the first of sinners, who lays the blame of his guilt on his companion and on God Himself, down to Pilate who casts the blame of his upon the Jews; from Pilate down to us never will you find a man who will not discover a way of dispensing with repentance by self-exculpation. One will plead his youth and the temptations of his age in excuse of his dissipation. Another, on the contrary, will plead the power of inveterate habits, and the fatal influence of a long life in which God had no part. One will comfort himself with the thought of the religious indifference in the midst of which he had been brought up, and will not fail to remark that none ever spoke to him of his soul. Another, on the contrary, will pretend that he has been saturated with religion and has grown disgusted with it. Here is one who will quote the examples of dissolute life which met him in his own family. How could his conscience live, says he, under such fatal influences? Here is another who will accuse the severity of those with whom he lived, their narrow-mindedness, and their inflexible rigour. The ignorant will say that his ignorance shields him from responsibility, and the learned critic will believe himself exempt from the necessity of repentance and conversion, because his studies will have shaken his faith. The poor will allege their condition of dependence and the oppression of material life which leaves them no time to think of their soul; the rich, the temptations of worldliness, and the concessions forced upon them by the rank which they must keep up. The man of cold and calm temperament will say that his honesty stands him in the stead of conversion; the man of ardent passions will plead his impetuous nature. Will excuses ever fail those who seek them? Rather than accuse ourselves we accuse others . . .; we would be Christians today, if Christians were not so narrow-minded, so uncharitable, so intolerant . . . , as if we were to “be converted to Christians and not to God. More, we shall accuse God Himself, for is it not accusing Him to allege, in self-justification, the position in which He has placed us, the character He has given us, the temptations by which He permits that we should be beset, our unanswered prayers, and our fruitless struggles? Deplorable resources of a deceitful heart, worthless excuses which all come to, casting at God these words of the unprofitable servant in the parable: “Thou hard

and cruel Master, Thou reapest where Thou hast not sown, and gatherest where Thou hast not strawed.”

What will become of us when, to this natural disposition of our hearts, will be added the influence of a fatalistic philosophy which excuses everything in the history and life of each individual as the effect of temperament, of inherent character, of circumstances, so that at most criminals will be diseased but never guilty beings!

But behold those sophists who thus rob man of his moral liberty; see them when they themselves are the victims of some injustice, of some perfidy, of some oppression. Do they accept all this with cool placidity? do they declare that those who thus trample under foot their rights, their honour, their liberty, are to be pitied rather than blamed, and simply yield to the force of circumstances, and to the fatal effect of their temperament? No! they grow irate, indignant; they thunder against oppression and iniquity, or, in other words, they belie their own theories. After having denied human accountability, they now recognise it; and by accusing others they lose for ever the right of excusing themselves. Thus conscience, stronger than all sophisms, overthrows those theories which, should they be permitted to triumph for a day, would eventually become all-justifying.

But of what avail would it be to acknowledge that man is accountable if we ourselves seek to cast off our own responsibility? Let us set aside all useless excuses. Let us recognise that, however great may have been the share of circumstances or the action of others in our falls, it is we who, all things considered, have caused the balance to incline on the side of evil, either by a decided act of the will or by a cowardly weakness. Let us not, therefore, seek to delude ourselves, for in the last day we shall not deceive Him who searcheth the heart, and before whom every mouth shall be stopped, but rather may we utter this confession—“Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned.”

Against Thee! This is the second feature which strikes me in David’s confession. The source of his bitterest sorrow is the thought that he has offended God. Not that he forgets those who, upon earth, have been the victims of his guilty conduct,—and the remainder of the psalm is sufficient proof of this,—but he goes further and reaches higher; he thinks of the God whose holy law he has violated, of the Father whom he has grieved.

Here let us examine ourselves. When we sin, is it the feeling that we have offended God which causes our deepest sorrow? I appeal on this point to the testimony of your conscience. You have erred, my brother. In an hour of temptation you have committed a shameful and guilty deed, and your conscience, wilfully blinded, has scarce uttered a reproachful word. But suddenly you learn that this action, which you had thought buried in oblivion, has had a witness, and that soon, perhaps, disclosed and com-

mented upon everywhere, it will draw upon you the judgments of the world and of your brethren. What anxiety then seizes upon you! What unbearable uneasiness! Ah! how you do curse your weakness! How anxiously you watch the looks of your fellows in order to discover in them what is their opinion of you! How you tremble at the prospect of the dishonour suspended above your head! For you there can be no more rest, no more security. You seem to hear an accusing voice following you everywhere. . . . At length, however, you learn that you have been mistaken, that your reputation is safe, that no voice will denounce you. How freely you now breathe, and how bright life once more appears to you! Truly, you are a new creature, and, nevertheless, God has seen all, God has known all, and God has not yet pardoned you!

Now what is this but sheer pharisaism? yes, this is the odious pharisaism which, in theory, you condemn as well as I, and which consists in cleansing the outside of the cup whilst the inward part is full of ravening and wickedness. In this lies the morality of the world. We sometimes hear of men who have committed suicide that they might not survive the dishonour which a sudden discovery would cast upon their name. So long as they have been permitted to practise evil with impunity, in secret, in silence, the thought of suicide never entered their minds. If success had crowned their actions, they would have walked the earth with lofty brow; it is the mere idea that their crimes are known which overpowers them and renders them desperate, and to escape the judgment of men: fools that they are! they rush headlong to meet the judgment of God. That is what becomes of conscience at the school of the world. The essential point is to save appearances, to keep one's honour untarnished. This is easy to conceive on the part of worldlings for whom God is an empty name, but what are we to think when we see Christians tranquil and undisturbed so long as God alone knows of their guilt? Ah! they must allow me to tell them that they have never known repentance. Repentance is not the humiliation which is produced in us by the thought of being judged by our fellow-men, and of seeing the entire edifice of our reputation crumble in the twinkling of an eye. No, no, all this is the world's method of reasoning; true repentance dwells only in the heart which, without any thought of men, but looking only to God and feeling that only against Him it has sinned, exclaims with David: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned."

Again, men call repentance what, in many cases, is a mere mortification of their pride. Two very different motives may lead us to accomplish the Divine law: the love of God—this is the Christian principle; the respect of our moral dignity—this is the selfish principle, elevated selfishness if you will, but selfishness, notwithstanding.

You have endeavoured, for instance, to obey the moral law; you have

applied all your powers and your honour to practise it scrupulously; your progress and the approbation of your conscience are a cause of joy for you, and you do not perceive that you are worshipping self; that what preoccupies you is less the glory of God than your personal esteem, and that in the innermost recesses of your heart there is an idol which you call virtue, but which is not God.

Well! it pleases God, O virtuous sinner, suddenly to overthrow that idol by an unexpected temptation which reveals to you your desperate weakness and your profound corruption. Where now are the lofty serenity, the proud satisfaction of an untainted conscience? All this has crumbled in an instant.

Then you grieve; but beware, this sorrow is not repentance yet . . . it is less to God than to yourselves that you are anxious to make amends; it is your pride that suffers, rather than your love; it is mortification far more than penitence which causes your tears to flow.

Happy are you at least, if, willing to learn the lessons which your very transgressions are destined to teach you, you give up the delusions of your pride, and if, shattering at the feet of God that idol which you had set up in His place, you tell Him with David: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned."

Therefore, true repentance lies neither in the shame which is the result of our guilt, nor in the mortification of our mistaken pride. Nor does it consist in the sorrows which our sins involve, but in which the thought of the offended God does not enter.

It has pleased God that suffering should be annexed to sin. We shall see this one day; we sometimes see it already here below. We read this terrible law in the history of nations from which it detaches itself with supreme evidence; we read it often in the history of individuals. We read it, for example, in the pale brow and dimmed eye of the profligate. And had we the discerning eye of God, we would detect it in many of those lives to which iniquity, artfully pursued, has given a false show of happiness. We cannot tell all that passes in the heart of those whom we call the elect of fortune; we ignore all that is felt by so many cadaverous souls which no longer believe or love, and which, having no hope for heaven, have seen all the illusions of earth wither away and vanish for ever.

Whoever has sinned must suffer. . . . But to suffer thus is not true repentance yet. Does he repent (this is an extreme example), the wretch who is about to suffer death for his crimes, and who, trembling, kisses the crucifix as he marches to the scaffold? Does he repent, the miserable man who, blinded by the fever of wealth, has lost everything, even his future, even his children's honour, and now casts a dull and heavy eye around his empty and desolate hearth? Does she repent, that prostitute whom a guilty passion has degraded, and who feels that the celestial joys of pure love are for ever

denied her? Do you repent, alas! when, keenly feeling how factitious, empty, and derisive is the world, you come hither to mourn over its vanity? No, let us dare to say it, all this may still be useless suffering. Sorrow alone has never saved a soul, and none can tell how many hearts it has hardened. . . . No; those disenchantments, that bitterness, that gloomy melancholy, those very tears are not repentance. . . . When you weep, you are perhaps only thinking of yourselves, and your sorrow is merely refined selfishness. . . . No; so long as your conscience will not have spoken, so long as your tears will not have flowed at the feet of God, so long as you will be unmindful of His despised holiness, of His slighted love, speak not of repentance, for you know not what it is.

Let us beware lest on this point we go further than Scripture and flatter man while humbling him. Does it not seem that true repentance should be absolutely disinterested, and that the sinner returning to God should forget himself and think only of his offended God? Yes, that is the ideal; but that is not what most generally takes place. . . . Alas! it must be acknowledged, it is often by wholly personal suffering that man is led to consider his ways and that his conscience is roused. . . . It was when the prodigal son felt the pangs of hunger that he remembered his father's house. . . . Ah! if we had written his history, we would doubtless have portrayed him in the midst of the luxury and enjoyments of life suddenly seized with a mysterious sorrow and yearning after the true happiness which he had lost. Jesus, who knows human nature better than we do, tells us simply that he grew hungry; his thoughts went back to the mercenaries who, in his father's house, had bread in abundance . . . then came the repentance which penetrated his soul. Let us accept this humiliating truth. Let us accept it, lest we look upon repentance as the privilege of noble souls, lest, decking ourselves out in our griefs, ay, even in our misery, we pretend thus to enter the kingdom in which mercy reigns and in which repentance itself is a Divine gift.

We have seen how the guilty king pours out his soul before the Lord. But it is not enough for him to mourn; what he desires, what he asks with importunity, is pardon, and a pardon full and free; it is salvation, and the joy of salvation. Hear the words he utters: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity;—cleanse me, and I shall be clean;—wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow;—make me to hear joy and gladness;— create in me a clean heart, O God;—restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation;—and uphold me with Thy free Spirit." What! some will perhaps say, it is David guilty—David still covered with his pollution—David scarce restored, who dares to claim such mercies as these! Would you then have him remain afar off, miserable, mourning, atoning with his tears for all his past iniquity?

Afar off! and why? and how long? Ah! I understand; you would have David appease the wrath of God by his sufferings. You would have a salva-

tion merited by the sinner's expiations; or, in other words, under pretence of humility, you overthrow the Gospel and annihilate mercy; for if it is man who atones for his sins, there is no more need of redemption, and the Cross is a vain symbol. Nothing henceforth for the sinner but the prospect of an endless expiation; for when will he dare believe that he has suffered enough? Ah, not thus did David understand the love of God. He, born under the old dispensation, under the covenant of works, here rises to salvation by grace so fully that we might suppose this psalm written by St. Paul. He the sinner, he the criminal, dares to ask the love of God anew, thus realising beforehand the admirable words of St. Augustine: "If thou wouldst flee the wrath of God, run and cast thyself into His arms! "

But here a serious voice anxiously asks if this view of salvation is not in contradiction with the moral order. How will David, thus pardoned, be capable of understanding Divine holiness and the greatness of his fall? What absolution once pronounced, the sorrow for sin will disappear, and his soul will, undisturbed, enjoy the delights of communion with God! How far will not such a doctrine lead, and who does not see that the moral levity so universal in the present day finds in it its support and its excuse?

I understand the objection, for more than once it has presented itself to my mind. And how could we avoid being struck with it when we see moral unconcern, frivolity, and worldliness growing so rapidly under shelter of the doctrine of pardon, when we see the most deplorable falls so easily forgotten, when we vainly seek in souls the profound traces which true repentance should leave behind it?

Here is my answer: If the doctrine of pardon favours moral unconcern, the fault lies with us who disfigure it, and not with God who gave it. The God of Scripture is a holy God. You fear lest, by pardoning David when he claims His mercy, He will allow the sinner to forget his crime. That is because you yourselves forget the path through which God is about to lead him. Wait a little ere you judge. You will soon understand how God sanctifies those He truly forgives. Behold, in that desolated palace, a father weeping beside the corpse of a little child; hear him repeating those words which so many broken hearts will re-echo throughout all ages: "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." That man is David, David pardoned, David saved, but David suffering, not in expiation of his sins, but that he may learn to hate them. Behold, later, on the hills of Judea, that aged and white-haired man, that wandering fugitive, forsaken by his family, betrayed by his friends, and fleeing, oh, sorrow! before his own son. Hear his bitter complaints. Alas! hear him, more sorrowful still, when, having conquered his foes, he must exclaim, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!" It is David! Ah! you thought forgiveness meant unconcern. Come and learn how God works out the education of the hearts which He would make par-

takers of his holiness. No; God forgets no one. Peter pardoned will bear with him everywhere the memory of his threefold denial; Paul pardoned will ever remember that he has persecuted the Church. God leaves to each of them a thorn, a painful thorn in the flesh, as if to remind them of what they were when it pleased Him to save them.

You seemed to look with mistrust upon a salvation without pain. Be comforted. The Lord has provided. Ask of those who surround you. Only the point in question is to know whether we are to suffer far from God in order to deserve forgiveness, or in His bosom because we have been forgiven. On this hangs everything. If it is to deserve pardon, then, as we have already said, there is no need of mercy; then the Cross of Calvary is overthrown; and it is your own, brethren—beware!—your own, that you are raising in its stead. But if it is with God, if salvation is a free grace, if even David in the day when he exclaims, “I have sinned,” may be purified and rendered white as snow, ah! let him believe in that fountain of mercy, let him plunge in it, and fear not for his soul. Never will this holy love lead him astray. Those who make of it a plea in favour of their sins calumniate it and lose themselves; for if there is anything calculated to sanctify a soul, it surely is pardon. Pardon is heaven. Dare to say that it is dangerous for the soul to breathe the air of heaven. Pardon is God found anew. How could God not transform the heart which finds him thus? Leave God to save the sinner. He will not be at a loss how to achieve His work.

Such was the repentance of David, such also must be ours. But how could I conclude without pointing out the feature which sums up everything in this psalm, and which alone suffices to prove the sincerity of the guilty king’s repentance. David wishes to be forgiven, and why? That he may walk with God, that he may be His witness upon earth: “I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto Thee.” Repentance, therefore, is, in reality, a change of life; anything short of this would fail to prove your sincerity. Is this your resolution? I expect to find you at work tomorrow, nay, today, walking with your Saviour, going only whither He can go with you, loving what He loves, fleeing what He condemns.

But if you are not sincere, if you do not wish to mend your life, I know what you will do. As your conscience speaks, as you cannot stifle its voice, you will endeavour to satisfy it by a show of penitence. You will urge your soul to sorrow, you will seek religious emotions which will bewilder you, you will shed bitter tears. You will comfort yourselves by these very emotions, and, without having made one step towards true conversion, you will return to the world tomorrow more frivolous, more unconcerned, more dissolute than ever.

Know, however, that the holiest thing in the world—the forgiveness of God—is not to be trifled with. Know that fruitless penitence at length

wears out the soul, that each of those factitious emotions deprives it of a portion of its frankness and of its energy. Know that the voice of conscience, if too often silenced, loses its power and becomes an insipid formula. Know that there are souls which nought can move, neither promises nor threats, neither the love of God nor His anger. Know, finally, that many a dying sinner has wished to repent, but for him repentance has been an impossibility, and ask yourselves if it is thus you wish to die.

O God, grant us a repentance which will transform us, and give us grace to walk in Thy presence henceforth, with the freedom of a son before his Father and the holy fear of a sinner before God