THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

*SERMONS*

BY THE

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*WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR*

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XV.

*THE SINS OF OTHERS.*

“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thy­self, lest thou also be tempted.”—GAL. vi. 1.

IN the judgments which he bears upon sin, man always oscillates between two extremes, excess of rigour, and excess of indulgence. In the fourth century, in the days of persecution, the Church was on the point of condemning without mercy those who, in an hour of weakness, had denied Jesus Christ; later came plenary indulgences and the unprecedented disorders which, at the close of the Middle Ages, dishonoured Christendom. In the sixteenth century Calvinism applied to the most trifling faults the severe penalties of a Draconian legislation; two hundred years later an insipid morality be­came the general substance of Protestant preaching. The same contrast strikes me in modern society. In certain countries I see austerity easily degenerating into a phari­saical despotism; in others, on the contrary, the mass of the people are indulgent towards moral levity, and even towards corruption, when it knows how to veil itself under graceful appearances. This is natural to an age in which men look upon crime as a disease, and seem to have lost the sense of holiness. We find these two extremes in our own method of judging of things. Today, severe and pitiless judgments fall from our lips in presence of a passion or a vice from which we in­stinctively recoil; tomorrow, when brought face to face with a fault or a disorder towards which our own heart inclines, we can only protest with hesitancy and effort.

Well, it is impossible to study the attitude of Christ with regard to sin without being struck with astonish­ment, and without acknowledging that with Him we enter a sphere which is superior to that in which humanity moves.

Jesus is holy; His life is a light which sets forth the thickness of the gloom which surrounds Him; it is the realisation of the prophetic words of Simeon, who said that the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed by Him. In His presence the Samaritan woman, frivolous and debauched as she was, understands all the impurity of her life and is alarmed; the young ruler, this type of the self-righteous man fully satisfied with himself, is troubled in his conscience and goes away sorrowful; the wretched demoniacs exclaim: “What have we to do with Thee, Jesus, Thou Son of God?” Peter himself, on one of the first occasions of his meeting with Christ, utters these words: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” That was the impression produced by an unparalleled holiness, beside which sin appears in all its hideous deformity and all human virtues pale, just as the lustre of glass trinkets grows dim beside the bright­ness of the pure diamond. None can say that Jesus was indulgent towards evil; on the contrary, to use the words of Pascal, He was “Holy, holy, holy to God, terrible to devils, wholly without sin.” None can say that He lowered the moral ideal, for He set down as His only rule perfection itself: “Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

And yet, to whom have sinners ever obtained easier access than to Jesus Christ? with whom have they ever found a safer refuge than with Him? See how the most contemptible, the most vicious, the most degraded beings, see how all men, save hypocrites, come to Him attracted by an irresistible charm. In general, a sullied life dreads the sight of a holy; it shrinks from it just as the diseased eye shrinks from the light which hurts and annoys it. Speak of the moral ideal to the fallen being. Even supposing he will listen to you, what effect will you produce? Nothing but a dull and profound discourage­ment such as that which a man feels when, in his night­mare, he sees standing out before him a straight wall of a prodigious height over which he must climb if he would save his life. And this effect will be produced only upon the natures in which all moral nobility is not completely extinct; thoroughly debased sinners will, on the contrary, be annoyed; they will reject your words which condemn them; they will exclaim against your pharisaism; they will stifle your voice with the loud bursts of a cynical mirth, and will leave you without hope. . . . Oh! you who have made these sorrowful experiences, is not that incomparable attraction which Jesus exercised upon the vilest beings a thing most strange to you? Whilst everywhere else we meet either with a repulsive severity or with a complaisant indulgence, whence comes it that in Christ we find that other marvellous contrast of per­fect holiness joined to the most powerful art of drawing to Himself all the most guilty and most vicious souls? Fathom this mystery, and you will see that its secret is love. Yes, if they come to Him, those publicans, those sinners, those gluttonous men and those wine-bibbers, it is because they have never before felt a love like His; it is because there is something in His accent, in His eye, that does not deceive them; it is because in Jesus Christ as in God Himself love and holiness blend in an admirable harmony, whilst in us, alas! they are almost always separate.

I have thought it right to bring before you the example of the Master before studying the exhortation of the apostle who bids us raise those who may have fallen. “If a man be overtaken in a fault,” says St. Paul, “restore him in the spirit of meekness.” Let us, first of all, con­sider the effect produced upon us by the falls of our brethren, then we shall see what we are to do in order to raise them.

Here before us is a worldly company. Those who compose it are not coarse, untaught beings who from their childhood have been deprived of all moral influence; they are men formed by a brilliant education, capable of understanding, of admiring the beautiful, susceptible even at times of the most generous emotions. In this choice circle suddenly something new is heard. . . . It is a secret which every one must keep for himself. . . . What is it then? A failing, a fall, a scandal which has just come to light. . .. Do you see the effect immediately produced? . . . Do you see those eyes shine with a malignant joy? Do you hear conversation, hitherto lan­guid, flow on anew, free and sparkling as a flame which a breath of wind fans and stirs into a blaze? Do you hear those multiplied questions? Do you note that ardent curiosity which is eager to feed upon the slightest details of the sin in question? Do you see those expres­sions of the countenance which betray that one knows a great deal more than one wishes to say? Do you hear those perfidious insinuations which veil themselves under a false show of commiseration? . . . Is all this true? Do I exaggerate when I affirm that the follies and the misconduct of others are the choice subjects of conversa­tion in every stage of society (but more particularly, perhaps, in what we call the upper classes), and that if we should take slander out of these conversations, we would rob them of their keenest fascination? And people tell us that man is good! . . . Oh! I know that they are clever at saving appearances. They will not awkwardly exhibit a gross calumny, this they leave to ill-bred folk; but who does not know that the tongue may learn the art of fencing, and soon acquire in it an astonishing skill? Who does not know that there is a delicate art of gracefully shooting a poisoned arrow, of mortally wounding with a smile, of insinuating all manner of evil without affirming aught? . . .

But, some will doubtless say, you speak to us of a worldly company, and you forget that you are preaching to a Christian congregation. True, I was on the point of forgetting it; true, I had well-nigh forgotten that amongst us nothing of the sort ever happens, that the faults of others never cause us any joy, that when we hear of them our sorrowful hearts are filled with profound com-passion, that we never comment upon them, that we never magnify them, that we never exaggerate them, and that this hateful pleasure of slander is as foreign to us as the joy of demons is unknown to the angels. ... Ah! let us set aside that cruel irony. Those worldlings of whom I speak are often those who call themselves the disciples of Christ; those men who rejoice at the evil they hear are often believers who profess that the whole of religion is summed up in charity.... Those worldlings, they are perhaps ourselves. Let others excuse themselves if they will; as for me, I have felt it, that fearful joy which the discovery of others’ faults produces; and then I found nothing at all extravagant in the strongest expres­sions by which the Scriptures depict the depth of our fall and the depravity of our heart.

And what shall we say when we find that detestable joy lurking under a false appearance of charity and disguising itself under sanctimonious phrases? Ah! I prefer a thousand times the light, scornful, and biting slander of the unbeliever and of the avowed worldling. . . . As he cares not for holiness himself, nor pretends ever to attain it, he is at least consistent with himself when he refuses to admit it in others. I understand that each of the faults which he discovers in his fellow-men causes him to rejoice, and that the falls of austere people are for him as so many subjects of personal triumph. . . . I understand that he takes a singular delight in pointing out the errors of those lives whose holiness annoys him. That is the sentiment of fallen beings who, when they see others lapse, parody the words of Scripture, and say, “Lo, he hath become as one of us.”

But how shall I express what a Christian feels when in a religious circle he hears the faults of others eagerly criticised, exaggerated, magnified; when he sees pious slander dealing its deadly blows in the shade under cover of the glory of God and of a brother’s interest, and men who call themselves Christians hasten to set up a tribunal and to pronounce with cruel rashness sentences which in many cases will be irrevocable? . . . Now, such things have occurred. . . . There are churches which have perished in this way. . . . There are men who, having seen all this, have taken a dislike to religion and have become the most determined infidels.

If you should ask me why, in the circles where religious life is most intense, this pitiless severity often attains its most fearful proportions, I would answer that religion itself has its perils, and that when holiness is separated from love, it is altered and perverted, just as, when we eliminate from the air we breathe one of the elements of which it is composed, nothing is left us but poison.

The Christian, for example, by the very fact that his conscience, rendered clear-sighted by the Gospel, easily detects evil under the most delusive appearances—the Christian, I say, may, if he does not take care, find in this very search a secret pleasure of which he does not suspect the danger; he may, in support of his belief, delight in pointing out everywhere the cankerworm of selfishness which destroys all the human virtues; and if he does not keep a careful watch over himself, he may rejoice at finding it; it may appear to him as a justifica­tion of his faith and as an argument in favour of the remedy of which he is the bearer. This is a first motive which will develop in him the spirit of judgment.

To this motive is added another. The Christian struggles for what he rightly calls the truth; he is sur­rounded by adversaries of his faith. . . . How great is the temptation to find them in fault, and to point out their inconsistencies, and, if possible, their falls. I appeal to your experience on this matter. In this age of ardent conflict and controversy, where are our scruples? where is our charity when we hear reports of the lapses of our foes? Where is that respect that St. Paul recommends us to bear even to our enemies? Is it not most sure, that if we should hear that one of them has erred, and that a scandal has been the result of his misconduct, this news would be relished and repeated everywhere with an over­flowing joy? Verily we know not what spirit we are of. Where, then, is that charity which rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth?

But we must go further in this sorrowful research. . . . It is not only the faults of our foes which make us glad, but often—and this we say with amazement—often it is those of our brethren themselves. What, then, dwells in our heart? and what gloomy passions ferment in its depths? What! the fall of one of our brethren may be­come for us a cause of secret joy! . . . Are we then so anxious to believe in anything but good? . . . Do we think to exalt ourselves by lowering others? . . . Do we believe that their errors will set forth our own excel­lence? . . . Do we pretend to purify ourselves by the sins of our fellows, as a man who would wash himself with mud? Oh, inconceivable misery! to rejoice because a soul has erred! because the Holy Spirit has been grieved! because the sanctuary of a heart in which God was worshipped is threatened with ruin! because the Church has been weakened and scandalised! To rejoice at all this, and call oneself a Christian! . . . To rejoice at all this, and follow Jesus Christ! When we have dis­covered in ourselves or in others a spark of that sinister joy, we are appalled at all that a human heart shelters, and we understand those terrible words which St. Paul uttered when speaking of human nature: “Hateful, and hating one another! “

One of our brethren has lapsed! Well, if you are truly animated by the Spirit of Christ, let me tell you what impression this fall will produce upon your soul.

He has lapsed; but you who condemn him, have you never erred? Would it give you pleasure if some im­portunate voice should here retrace all your past life? Are you not happy, on the contrary, at the thought that oblivion may have swallowed it up for ever?

You say that your life has been free from all crying sins. Granted; but is this due to yourselves alone? If the occasions for sin have failed you, has not your heart a thousand times provoked them? has it not called for and solicited them? Trace out, if you dare, the history of your inner life. Relate to us all those secret thoughts which no one has ever suspected; those idolatrous affections so fondly cherished and deeply enjoyed; those shameful lusts, those latent passions, those mean feelings of envy; those successes of self-love dreamed of at the expense of the humiliation and sorrow of others. . . .All this, no human eye has seen it. And whilst this world of iniquity was fermenting in your soul, your outward life was orderly, honoured, admired. But suppose that in one of those hours when passion inflamed your heart and fascinated your conscience, temptation had come to you, real, living, with all its seductions and enchantments, what would have become of you? Where would now be that pride of a spotless life and of an honourable past? Suppose this first fault had drawn upon you the malignant eye of a man who would have judged you as you now judge your brother, once again I ask, where would you be? God in His mercy has spared you. A thousand circumstances have prevented your fall. But be sincere: abandoned to your desires, you had been lost, and to yourselves, least of all, can you ascribe your salvation.

Your brother has lapsed! But do you know his history? Do you know the illusions which surrounded him, the seductions which assailed him, the temptations which the world scattered on his path? Do you know if, in the fatal hour, he did not look for a brother’s hand to seize and save him, and can you tell if that hand which he sought in vain was not your own?

Your brother has lapsed! But did he know what you know yourself? Had he, like you, a preserving past of blessings and pure influences? Had he, like you, from his very cradle known the prayers, the tears, the warn­ings of a Christian mother? Had the Gospel been laid before him from his youth? Had he seen the Cross standing out before him as a faithful guide? Had he heard those multiplied warnings which have not failed you? Ah! which is the most guilty before the God who weighs all things in His just balance—which is the most guilty, he or you? To whom has most been given? Of whom shall most be required?

Such is the first impression which the fall of one of our brethren should produce upon us. It should call forth a painful self-examination, and a sincere humilia­tion before God.

This first feeling produces another; real and profound compassion for the brother whom sin has overtaken.

When you read the beautiful chapters in which the Gospels recount the birth of the Saviour, and in par­ticular the sublime hymn which the angels sang in the plains of Bethlehem, are you never struck by the touch­ing fact that it is angels, that is, beings that have remained pure, who rejoice and bless God the first on account of the salvation of fallen humanity? From this we infer that the nearer a being lives to God, the holier is the love it bears Him, the more deeply also it feels compassion and mercy. And why speak of angels when He whom angels worship, He whom Scripture calls the Holy One and the Just, is everywhere represented to us as moved with infinite tenderness towards all His fallen creatures? . . .

Well, if those who have remained pure, if He who is holiness itself, feels compassion for our guilty brethren, what should we not feel for them, we who, more or less guilty also, are therefore to a certain extent responsible for their wanderings? They have fallen! This simple word recalls their present misery and the more terrible wretchedness which they are preparing for themselves in the future. Nevertheless, if, in this very hour, it were possible for them to return to God, our anger would certainly not help to make this return easy, it would simply harden them. And what! can we tell if, in the anguish by which they are tortured, their heart does not seek another heart that will understand them and gladly receive their first avowals of repentance? What will they do if they find it nowhere, and if they see, rising all around them, the icy walls of our inflexible severity?

We reject the institution of the confessional such as it exists in Roman Catholicism. But it is not enough to reject it, we must meet whatever may be true and legiti­mate in the instincts which have created and main­tained it.

Man must needs unburden his heart to man. “Con­fess your faults one to another,” says St. James. How do we obey this commandment? Men tell us that it is enough to confess our sins to God. That we may be pardoned, yes, doubtless, and yet this confession would not suffice if our silence were likely to be hurtful to anyone. But go to the depths of the human heart; you will find that in it there is a secret but imperious desire to be true towards the world. Men see but the outward and superficial side of our life, and this side is its bright side. Well! there are times when reality must come to light, when the truth must appear, when one of our fellow­men at least must be told of all the misery and tempta­tion which dwells in our soul. It is not only the desire to be true that leads us thus to unburden our hearts to another, it is also the profound yearning to be under­stood, aided, counselled; ah! do we not all know how comforting and salutary are such avowals? Do we not know that certain temptations which mercilessly assail us so long as they are permitted to float vaguely and dimly before our eyes, lose their power and attraction as soon as they are expressed in words? Do we not know how precious is the strength and consolation which a sympathetic heart may impart to us? This is, therefore, a blessing; but it does not follow that the confessional is necessary. “Bear ye one another’s burdens,” says St. Paul, addressing, as St. James had done, all the members of the Church. Now, if anyone has need of this sympathy, it is evidently the man who has erred; shall he obtain it from us, brethren? Shall he find in us a charity that will condescend to hear him and to respect him sufficiently to keep his confession a secret? Shall he find in us that serious interest which can never deceive and which alone inspires confidence? Let us beware. A first fall often has the most decisive conse­quences. The humiliation which follows it may be turned into benediction, or it may degenerate into bitter­ness and soon into rebellion, and upon us, perhaps, often depends this momentous choice.

Thus to receive the erring soul with sympathy is, doubtless, much; but that is not enough. Our mission lays upon us the duty of its full restoration.

Sympathy alone will not suffice. There is even a sympathy which is mere weakness. There is a soft and effeminate manner of pitying the sinner which is but an unworthy counterfeit of the charity of the Gospel. Now, if we cannot accept holiness without love, by the same reason we cannot accept love without holi­ness. There are men today who affect to consider criminals as the wretched victims of an unfortunate nature, of some hereditary fatality, or of circumstances which have all conspired against them. Guilty and cowardly complaisance, well worthy of an epoch which delights in giving to the prostitute the place of honour in the play or in the novel, and which pretends to explain the triumphs of the Gospel, at its birth, by its indulgence towards all human failings! Lying sentimentality which is a mere parody of true love! Men exclaim against our pharisaism, they shatter the pedestal on which the Christian virtues were enthroned, and then hasten to erect on its ruins an altar to rehabilitated vice. Ah! let us never cease to protest with all our might against this blasphemous corruption of the holiest doctrine which ever was preached; let us remember that, if Jesus par­dons, He says also: “Sin no more.” Let us remember that He transforms and restores all those whom He pardons, and that the charity which leads not to complete restoration is unworthy of Him.

“If a man be overtaken in a fault, restore him,” says the apostle. The soul which sin has overtaken is like the bruised reed of which Scripture tells. It must be raised up gently that it may once more aspire heaven­ward.

This is a delicate and sublime work, for it is the work of God; yes, but the work of God destined to be accom­plished by men, for it has pleased Him to use our instru­mentality. Will you ask me to trace out a plan for you? How could I do so? Everything must depend upon character, and each individual requires to be studied and understood. This only will I say: “Do the work of Jesus Christ, in the spirit of Jesus Christ.” You must have for your fallen brethren a love without weakness and a holiness without pride. Do not flatter; Jesus Christ never did so; point out to those who have erred the straight and narrow way; tell them, if needs be, of the cross to be borne, of the sacrifices which God demands of them. An easy religion will never take full possession of the heart; a low-toned morality will never save the soul; only those who ask much can expect to obtain much.

But, at the same time, never grow weary of placing before them that Divine mercy which always anticipates the sinner’s return, that ever-faithful kindness, that pro­found love which meets their every want, and which, having once begun a work of salvation, pursues and achieves it. Be yourselves, not only its preachers, but its living examples . . . , and, whilst loving the soul which is entrusted to you, labour to make yourselves useful, substitute the intervention of Jesus for your own, and take as your motto the grand saying of the Fore­runner: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Here a thought strikes me. We speak of raising the fallen. Well! in our epoch, men seem to have set their hearts upon an analogous and admirable work which has but too long been forgotten, namely, the material and moral restoration of those lower classes among which Jesus lived, and which have been so cruelly neglected in the past ages. Alas! why must we have learned to fear ere we learned to love them? At length, however, the day of reparation seems to have dawned for them. Many of those whom fortune and instruction have raised to an elevated rank, are beginning to understand that their position lays them under the most imperious and sacred obligations towards their humble brethren. I do not here refer to those cowardly adulators who court and flatter the masses by stirring their passions and in the mere hope of self-advancement. No, in spite of such men who are capable of injuring and destroying the grandest causes, the elevation of the working population is every­where advocated in the present day. Everywhere it is acknowledged that their mind needs food, light, and health as well as their body. Noble preoccupation this, which cannot but call forth our deepest sympathy! Well! when I read the writings of the generous men who have devoted themselves most ardently to this task, I am surprised to hear them, mere philosophers as they are, come to the conclusion that, all things considered, the sovereign remedy is in the hands of the workman himself, and that every progress, every amelioration, every alteration, will be of no avail whatever without the moral will of the indivi­dual.

Grand conclusion! Truly Christian thought! for it proves that in reality the soul governs the body, and that the masses are not mere flocks whose condition may be ameliorated by changing their pasture-land. You aim at raising the working classes. Well, make their conditions of life easier, open healthy workshops and lodging-houses for them, assure them a legitimate time for rest, build schools for their children; . . . all this is doing much, but listen, you will have done nothing if the moral will of individuals, that is, if the soul has not taken a higher direction. It is upon the soul, therefore, that we must act in the first place. From this I, in my turn, infer that the Church has greater reason than ever to pursue her sublime mission, that is, spiritual restoration, and the salvation of souls. Let the positivists of our times sneer at what they call our useless dogmas and our fruitless faith, . . . let discouraged believers repeat that, in order to be accepted by and to exert any influence upon modern society, the Church must become utilitarian and servilely follow in the train of philanthropy. No, no; now, as eighteen centuries ago, in the life of the soul will be the salvation of nations; it was by acting upon the soul that Jesus changed the world and transformed societies and empires; only by raising souls as He did shall we obtain similar results. The hour of Christianity always strikes sooner or later, and the Cross, which so many affect to disdain as useless, at length saves even those who have despised it. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all things shall be added unto you.”

Our duty, therefore, is to raise fallen souls, but let us not forget this, however; we cannot raise them *en masse,* if I may so speak, and by I know not what a collective action which would exempt us from individual love and sacrifice. Vainly would you form for yourselves the ideal of a Church system, of a special organisation which would save the whole of humanity at one stroke. Vainly would you cast heaps of gold into what we call Christian works. All this will be of no avail unless each of us, in the post where God has placed him, acts upon those who surround him, and brings them all individually under that influence of love which nothing can either equal or replace. Labour then in the humble sphere in which God has placed you, work upon the souls with which He entrusts you, and if, your faith growing feeble, you should feel crushed by the thought of the insignificance of your efforts in that enormous mass of humanity, behold Jesus saving first John, then Simon, then Mary Magdalene, then Zacchaeus, or, in other words, unknown beings, beings for whom none before Him had ever felt the least concern, but loving them, bearing with them, raising them, and, through them, raising the human conscience and saving the world.

To raise a fallen soul! . . . Do you know what this signifies? Ask it not of the world, which would pay no heed to you; but hear the angels of heaven rejoicing over a sinner saved. Ah! in all the actions of His life and ministry Christ attracts and ravishes me. Yet, shall I say, . . . Never does He stir me more deeply than when He presents Himself under the image of the Good Shep­herd bringing back His wandering sheep, and though weary and foot-sore, yet never resting until He has deposited it safely in the fold. Ah! were I a painter, thus would I represent His adorable figure; but—like that monk and painter of the Middle Ages who prayed and painted in turns in his cell—only on my knees would I picture Him thus.

Discuss His life if you will. . . . Tell us, if you can, that He was not sent of God. As far as I am concerned, I believe what my heart tells me, and in that love which bends towards fallen humanity, I recognise the presence and intervention of God. Where, I pray you, would He be, if He be not there?

Well, He calls you to accomplish this sublime work in your turn. Oh! brethren, those fallen souls are there, close by your side. They suffer, they weep, they groan, or, sadder still to say, they have become hardened and blaspheme. Will you remain inactive when, by your love, you might save some and bring them back with you to the Father’s house; when already, here below, you might participate in the joy of the angels, until the day when, surrounded by those whom you would have saved, you would enter the everlasting habitations?

One word more. Have you never asked yourselves with terror if you have not lost some soul? Do you know what may have been the eternal consequences of your former levity; do you know whether, through you, many a sinner may not have been precipitated into the broad way? What have you done for those whom God had confided to your care? What have you done for them in the days of your unbelief, of your scepticism, of your sins? Alas! what have you done for them since you have called yourselves Christians? Do you know what may have been the result of a harsh and scornful word uttered on some fatal day, of a judgment lightly pronounced, of a lustful glance, of an example of world­liness? Do you know where the wind may have borne those seeds of death, and by what mysterious influence some soul may have been the victim of your own errors? Do you know if, among all those unfortunate beings whom God will cast from His presence at the last day, more than one will not sorrowfully turn towards you, and say: “It is thou, it is thou that hast lost me!” I cannot tell, neither can you, perhaps, God only knows.

But if your conscience reproves you, if these words sound in your ears as the reproachful cry of an inexorable past, listen to them, for still it is time. Still it is time to act and to save some soul, the Divine Word still says to you today: “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”