THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

*SERMONS*

BY THE

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OF L’ÉGLISE DE L’ÉTOILE, PARIS.

*WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR*

BY THE

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XXI.

*THE UNGRATEFUL.*

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.”—Ps. ciii. 2.

ONE day ten lepers, meeting Jesus in Galilee, exclaimed in their anguish, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” The Saviour sends them away cured, purified. One only returns to give Him thanks, and then these sorrowful words escape His lips: “Were there not ten cleansed? and where are the nine?” This is a distressing but faithful picture of our conduct towards God. If I required a decisive proof of the depth of our misery, I would find it in our inconceivable ingratitude towards Him who hath given us all things. Where are they, in the world, those who think of blessing God and of count­ing all His benefits? There are, whatever men may say to the contrary, very few atheists, very few who dare openly to deny the existence of God; but do I exaggerate when I affirm that the great majority of our fellow-men live as if God existed not?

I mistake. This God whom they ordinarily contemn, they are careful not to forget Him when fear or interest seizes their soul, and that is what gives to their habitual ingratitude a still more odious character. It has been a thousand times observed that these two sentiments which I have mentioned—interest and fear—are the dominant features in all heathen religions, those which are expressed in almost all the acts of their worship. Alas! in this re­spect the human heart is ever the same; and if you should divest the religion of the greater number of all that is inspired by these sentiments, what would remain for God? Here, for instance, is a man who today is stirred and fearful because he is threatened by some great misfortune, because death seems to hold one of his children in its grasp; he prays and weeps, but tomorrow where will be his fervour, his repentance, his short-lived piety?

To bless God, to feel one’s absolute dependence upon Him,—who thinks of this? Suppose our felicity were never disturbed, is it not almost certain that our ingrati­tude would last forever? It is not necessary, in order to develop this brutal unconcern in our souls, that we should occupy an intoxicating position, or possess a pro­digious fortune, or enjoy one of those unutterable prosperities which bewilder and confuse; no, alas! an unalloyed happiness, an undisturbed security, the assurance of find­ing the daily bread upon our table, is enough to make us forget that all we have is lent us. It would seem, from our conduct, that God owes us all that He is pleased to give. The very regularity of His benefits deprives them of all savour in our eyes; they must be withdrawn from us that we may understand that they were His gift.

Behold the spectacle which the world presents in this respect. In every sphere, you will find men who despise that which God gives them, who look beyond and above themselves, and who continually ask that which is denied them. See, for instance, this workman, to whom God, with his daily bread, gives health, strength, and affection which would suffice to make him joyful. Do you think he appreciates his happiness? No; his eyes are turned higher. He envies those to whom God has given a more elevated position, and the only blessings to be desired are, in his eyes, those which he cannot attain. Now the man who is the object of his envy—that more fortunate individual—do you think he esteems himself happy and satis­fied? Do you think he feels his heart overflow with gratitude at the thought of all he possesses? No; in his turn he looks up higher. Higher! that is towards the region of abundance and luxury; there only is happiness, and for him the only happy people in the world are those who occupy a position superior to his. Well, question these happy beings in their turn. They have all that can be desired—independence, wealth, and all possible means of gratifying the least of their fancies. You think they are happy. Alas! it is amongst such that we most often meet the contempt of happiness; it is amongst such that heart and mind are most easily sated. You would see them in their turn forming new and extravagant plans, and seeking happiness everywhere save where God has placed it. You would see this worldly woman, to whom God has hitherto spared all veritable trials, forget­ting that amongst thousands of beings she has an excep­tional position, that she possesses that which is denied to the great majority of women. You would see her calling forth imaginary woes, absorbing her thoughts in them, conversing about them, complaining continually in pre­sence of a world where real and heart-rending sorrows, which her selfishness veils from her sight, cross her path at every moment. You would see them—those elect of fortune—despising the thousand joys which God has scattered on their way, rushing with an insatiable ardour towards an ever-receding end; seeking, always seeking, that happiness which they will never attain.

At this view we are tempted to sneer at human nature. Let us rather pity it. In this latent discontent which everywhere pursues man, which corrodes his joys and withers his happiness, I see in reality a striking proof of the greatness of his destiny. Ah! you thought that man could be happy here below, you thought that happiness dwelt in all those envied joys. No, answers the experi­ence of ages as well as our own; no, happiness is not there. And why? Because our soul is made for God, and the infinite alone can satisfy it. “O God,” exclaims St. Augustine, “Thou hast made us for Thyself; therefore, our heart is restless so long as it has not found repose in Thee.” You call him foolish, that happy worldling who tramples under foot all his joys and seeks new and im­possible pleasures; you accuse him, the man who might enjoy everything, but who gives up his soul to the excite­ment of passions the very ardour of which consumes all delight, just as fire burns up dry leaves. Ah! recognise, nevertheless, in all these excesses the secret thirst which tortures the human soul, and by the immensity of his desires measure the greatness of the object which alone can satisfy it for evermore. As for me, I confess that I prefer this eternal research, however senseless it may appear, to the moderate and selfish wisdom of those who are satisfied; between the superficial optimism which the philosophy of the world preaches and the incurable sorrow which lies in the depths of the human soul, I would choose the latter. Yes, it was to be so. In this deep abyss of the heart from which God is absent, vainly have you cast blessings of earth, success, glory, affection, all that man sees, all that he loves, all that he envies . . . the gulf is yawning still, and all you have cast into it has only enlarged it more and more. What it wants, this unsatisfied heart, is more than the happiness of the world, more than the world itself,—the love of God alone can fill it.

However this be, ingratitude lies at the foundation of our nature; that is the sentiment of man towards God. But if, for the worldling, it explains itself, as it were by that bitter disenchantment which is so fatally attached to all his subjects of joy, how can its presence in the Christian’s heart be justified?

You are a Christian, my brother, that is to say, you have learned in the light of the Gospel to know yourself. You know all the misery and lust and sin which your life and heart shelter; you have fathomed those gloomy depths of your nature which the eye of man does not perceive; you are aware of all that mingles of pride and self-love with your works, even the best; you have measured the abyss which separates you from the love of God, and you know full well what would be your fate should He judge you according to His holy law.

You are a Christian, however; that is to say, you rejoice at having found in God a Father, and in Jesus Christ a Saviour; you believe that you have been the object of an immense love; you detect this love alike in the Divine Providence which sought you out in your wanderings; in those cries of your conscience which drew you towards the Cross of Calvary; in the heavenly joy which filled your heart at the glad news of pardon; in those multiplied deliverances of which you have been the object, and in the hope of the sublime felicity which eternity has in reserve for you.

You are a Christian; that is to say, you subsist before God only by grace; you have no other refuge than His mercy. Where are your titles, your virtues, your merits? What would you have become without the love which sought you out? What would you have become in the day when temptation invaded your soul, if, abandoned to yourself, you had been left alone to struggle? All that you are you owe it to God. Reduced to your own re­sources, you had been lost; to yourselves, least of all, can you ascribe your salvation. Everywhere throughout your past life you see the Divine footprints of the Good Shep­herd who sought you; everywhere you find His unwearied love. Well! if gratitude should dwell anywhere upon earth, should it not be in your heart; and if you are not the most grateful of men, will you not be the most thankless of beings?

This consequence is so natural that it seems as though now there were no more to be said, as though the soul, inflamed by the sight of the love of God, had simply to follow its impulse and to give itself to Him completely. But, strange to say, into this pardoned, sanctified soul, into this soul filled as it is with the love of God and the joy of angels, you will perhaps see ingratitude glide like a cold serpent. How, then, has it found entrance there? Is it only through our natural levity or the fearful facility with which we forget our liveliest and most serious impressions? No. There is something more than this; here we must search one of the most sorrowful sides of our heart. This heart is ungrateful because all obliga­tions lie heavily upon it, even that of the love of God. Yes, there still remains in our heart a spark of proud independence which will not accept the yoke of God; we feel that His benefits bind us, and we will not be fettered; we feel that if the work of redemption be true, our selfishness is criminal. Let us say it bravely. There are days when the love of God annoys us because it re­quires of us a reciprocal affection, a boundless gratitude, an unreserved sacrifice. That is why ingratitude reappears even in the soul of the believer; that is why that poisonous seed germinates and grows with such frightful rapidity in his heart. I find it in that truly brutal unconcern with which the Christian accustoms himself to be the object of the love of God, to consider his situation as most natural. I find it in the cold-hearted and profane manner in which he speaks of the most touching and sacred features in the work of redemption which has been accomplished for him. I find it in the murmurs which escape him as soon as the hand of God keeps back one of the blessings with which he had so soon become familiar. Alas! in that sanctified soul I find the old man, the old scorn, the old insensibility. That is also why God afflicts us, why He calls each of us in his turn to pass through the fiery furnace, thus pursuing that Divine education which pardon of itself could not have achieved; that is why God visits us, according to the striking ex­pression which Scripture applies not to the blessings but to the evils which God sends us, doubtless because it is especially in affliction that we learn to discover His pre­sence. Observe, in fact, that it is in the very hour when God strikes us that we reflect upon the truth that till then He had spared us. His wrath sets forth His love; the just God reveals the good God; and it is under the blows of His justice that we first understand the fulness of His mercy.

If we are naturally inclined towards ingratitude, we must infer from this that it is foolish to believe that gratitude will spontaneously gush from our hearts. No; here as elsewhere, as everywhere, discipline and obedience are required, new habits must be set against the old; with David we must *learn;* yes, learn to number the benefits of the Lord and not forget one. That is the thought I would impress today upon your hearts.

What! some will say, can one learn to be thankful? Yes, one can do so; everything can be learned at the school of the Gospel; but rather make the experiment for yourselves.

Have you ever tried to gather together, as in a bundle, all the mercies, all the blessings, of which you have been the objects? Recall to mind, for an instant, the first appeals of Divine goodness, those blessings of your child­hood, those pure and sweet memories which so many of your fellows know nothing of. Remember those prayers of home, those warnings, those emotions, those secret desires which came to you from God; then those disenchantments, those sorrows, those bitter griefs which taught you what the world is worth. Remember that path traced out and prepared for you by the hand of Providence, those deliverances, that unwearied patience, those protections; finally, those efforts, those appeals, those triumphs of grace by which your heart has been conquered. Make up that account and you will surely be seized with confusion, you will surely feel overpowered, as it were, by the weight of Divine goodness.

Then, to those past blessings, add your present mercies. Have you reflected upon this? Ah! too often, like those worldlings of whom I spoke just now, we have counted only that which we had not. Clear-sighted in discovering what failed us, we have remained blind to the benefits of God. And yet, why should we not number them? I exhort you to do so, and I dare tell you beforehand that you will be surprised at all you will discover of hidden benefits in your life, were it appa­rently the most empty and the most joyless. What would be required to make you understand that what I say is true? Some new trial which tomorrow would deprive you of one of your faculties, of one of those affections, of one of those joys which you do not so much as appreciate. In losing it, alas! you would understand its price, and your privations would reveal to you your riches. Have we not often made this sorrowful experi­ence? When sickness has come to you, then you have known the importance of health; when one of your faculties has grown weak, then you have understood that it had been a gift of God; when your home has become desolate, then you have felt the value of those affections which you had too imperfectly sanctified by gratitude while it was your privilege to enjoy them. You have remembered all there is of strength and encouragement in a sympathetic glance, in a friendly grasp of the hand, and all the infinite joy which the smiles of a little child can produce. Ah! what would you not give to have all these back again? But no, it is too late, and all your regrets cannot restore them to you. But what sorrow, what confusion, at having passed by all these joys with­out fully appreciating them, at having sought happiness where God had not placed it, and at having scorned the most delicate and touching proofs of His love? Why must such trials be sent to teach us gratitude? Why cannot happiness alone produce it in our hearts? It does so sometimes. I have seen happy beings touched and converted by their very happiness. The portion which God had allotted to them appeared to them so beautiful and undeserved that they have been, so to speak, overwhelmed by it, and His very goodness has called forth in their souls the first awakenings of repentance, and of a renewed life. Oh! you who are still young, you whom God has hitherto spared, why should you not be called, moved, converted by these multiplied evidences of Divine tenderness? Why do you allow it to spread, the fatal and gloomy idea that suffering alone can bring souls to God, and that none come to Him but those whom the world no longer cares for, and who fly to Him as to their only refuge? Why should this good and merciful God have but the refuse of the world, defiled sinners, mourning souls? and why should you give occasion to worldlings to sneer at those tardy con­versions, and to say that the love of God has no power save on those for whom the earth has ceased to have any attraction? Prove the contrary, brethren. Show the world that youth, life, hope, happiness, may bloom in all their beauty under the eye of God, that joy may blossom in the heart and bring forth fruits of devotion, charity, and sacrifice. Prove this to the world that needs to bear it, and to count all the benefits of the Lord, wait not until they are taken from you.

But you who groan beneath the weight of trial, shall I dare apply to you also the words of my text, shall I dare exhort you to say with the prophet: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits!”

Ah! God forbid that I should speak lightly of sorrow, or wound a heart under pretence of comforting it! No, let us be true; there are days when blessing seems an impossibility. Will you bid him bless God, this being who is crushed by an unutterable grief, and who needs to summon all the energy of his faith to avoid falling into despair? Will you bid them bless God, this father and mother whose heart God seems to tear from their breast by tearing their child from their arms? Will you dare do so? And in presence of such afflictions, is it not enough, is it not a great deal that no feelings of rebellion arise in the hearts of these afflicted ones? And yet, if God be love, if love be at the root of all His works, shall I have nothing to say to such? Why should I not draw near to those broken hearts, why should I not tell them, in the name of the Gospel, that in their unutterable sorrow there was a blessing? But if I dared not tell them so, it would seem as if I believed that we are in the iron hands of fatality! But no! there is no fatality.

I believe in a God who worketh ever, in trial as well as in benediction; I believe in His love even when He chastens. Ah! beware lest you misconceive His visita­tion, beware lest you pass blindly beside those stern but real marks of His intervention. I know what you will answer. You will tell me: “Where then is God in my life, where is His action, where is His love in the blows that have fallen upon me?” But unhesitatingly I reply, “Wait ere you judge.” You recollect that Gospel scene in which the apostles, far out on the sea in the dark hours of night, saw a phantom approaching their bark and uttered cries of terror. But from the midst of that fearful shadow a sweet and gentle voice was heard saying: “It is I, be not afraid;” it was the Master, it was Jesus. Ah! how often also, wandering like the apostles and like them tossed upon the stormy billows, you have seen standing out before you in the dark night of trial a phantom, the terrible phantom of fatality. Wait a while, your eyes will soon be opened, soon you will hear from the depths of the gloom your Saviour’s voice saying, “Weep not, it is I!” Yes, it is He who comes to you in that mysterious affliction, it is He who is approaching, it is He who seeks you, it is He you must bless, but at the same time you must humble yourself at having misjudged Him so long.

That is why I say to you: “Beware lest you under­estimate the benefits of God in trial.” Ah! when we do not detect His presence there, we have but to choose between despair and dissipation. Despair is the portion of the noblest souls, of those who would perhaps have sought their refuge in God had they known Him. Dissipation is the consolation of the greater number. Thus they forget what God wished to teach then in the solemn hour of sorrow; and how can we think without a fearful heart-sinking of all those useless afflictions which pass without leaving any fruitful result! What! God has smitten you, and you have not recognised His hand, and it is in vain that He has come to you? What! you whom God has stamped with the mysterious seal of suffering, you have succeeded in effacing that Divine impress, and in getting used to that world which seemed no longer fit for you? Do you not feel that even the worldly are astonished at your conduct, and that they see you with surprise share in their dissipation? No! you were not made for such a destiny. Everything tells you so, and that secret wound which reopens at my words speaks to your conscience more powerfully still. Ah! if it be not too late, seek the blessings of trial, and accept the instructions it is destined to impart.

For you, brother, the temptation is elsewhere. You surely cannot forget your trial. No, it is there, holy and respected; it is there in all its greatness, so vividly pre­sent, it may be, that you see nothing else, and thinking only of what God has taken from you, you forget all He has left you. That is your temptation, and why should I not tell you that it is also a peril and a snare, and that the sorrow which thus degenerates into bitterness or gloomy discouragement renders you unfit for the mission for which God has left you upon earth?

Nevertheless, understand me well. Too often, in the day of trial, the world in its way preaches forgetfulness. It tells us in the name of its philosophy to forget what we have lost, and think only of what is left us. It tells us so, but the heart which is faithful to its affection protests energetically. Yes, you are right. The living should not make us forget the dead. The dead, alas! the world so soon forgets them, their place is so soon filled up by others, the waves of life sweep so rapidly over the spot from which they have disappeared, that we must respect those hearts which guard with jealous care the shrine of memory. Understand me well, therefore; it is not of forgetfulness I would speak. I will tell you, on the contrary: “If you love those whom God has taken from you, would you not be happy to do what they them­selves would counsel? Think then of what they would say to you if they could reappear and speak! Ah! from the abode of eternal love where God has gathered them, they would bid you love those who are left you, they would bid you labour for their good, and employ for their benefit those powers of the soul which you are consuming in bitter regrets. Well! it is in their name, it is for the sake of their memory that I now tell you: “Beware lest you forget what God leaves you, beware lest you despise the task which He gives you to fill.”

Shall I give you an example which will show you how, even in the midst of sorrow, man may learn to bless God and carefully number His benefits? This example is that of St. Paul.

Do you know a man who suffered more than St. Paul, a man who, during thirty years, concentrated in his per­son more suffering of body, heart, and mind, a man whose life was more tormented by struggles and defections, by the hatred and scorn of the world? Well, have you observed how St. Paul begins all his epistles? By words of thanksgiving and praise. Read them all. There is not one of them in which, from the very first lines, you will not hear him bless God. Nevertheless St. Paul was not a man to be easily deceived, to be blinded by his enthu­siasm, or to view things through a delusive prism. He saw the miseries and shames which desolated the Church, and yet St. Paul, writing to those persecuted Churches, St. Paul, writing from his prison, St. Paul, on the eve of his execution, St. Paul gives thanks, and why? Because above all these causes of sorrow he sees causes of joy; because above that which is transitory he sees that which passeth not away; because in his eyes present suffering is swallowed up in the victory of love. Learn of him to see the all-surpassing goodness of God above all which saddens you.

Moreover, in recommending gratitude to the afflicted, can I forget that it is they who often give us the most touching examples of this virtue? It has been observed that accents of love oftener rise to the lips of the un­fortunate than to those of the happy; that misfortune, generally speaking, is more grateful than prosperity. From the table of the poor rather than from that of the rich does blessing rise to God for the daily bread. Ah! how beautiful is this instruction! How can we see with­out emotion, in poverty, on a bed of pain, and oft amid the pangs of disease, a believer count up carefully, with scrupulous attention, all the benefits of God without forgetting one! More than once have I beheld this beauti­ful spectacle; in more than one bitter trial in which it seemed that rebellion was the only feeling that might be awakened, I have seen Christian souls accept everything with angelic meekness, delight in pointing out all the tenderness and consolation which God mingled with their sufferings. How can I forget that the prayers in which thanksgiving has burst forth in the most sublime accents, have been uttered by martyrs on the burning pile, in the dungeons, or upon the rack? Grand spectacle, in presence of which the Church may well exclaim with the Apostle: “Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

I have exhorted you to gratitude, I have pointed out to you all the blessings which attend it. But there is one more feature in this subject which I cannot overlook.

We are living in a period of painful agitation, when the strongest convictions are called to pass through the crucible. The Church will come out of it victorious; the Gospel will come out of it justified. At all times attack has been easy; it is not difficult to raise multiplied objections against faith, and to triumph because they are not always met by a ready answer. But after this first attack, the wisdom of the age must, in its turn, justify its pretensions; it must show us how the Gospel came into existence, from what human source it sprang, and it is on this ground that we will meet it.

Nevertheless, the struggle is fierce, more than one soul is disquieted, more than one soul needs to be strengthened. Well, among all the means which you have at your dis­posal for stimulating your faith, have you never thought of what gratitude, yes, the mere habit of counting all the Lord’s benefits, can do? I do not hesitate to affirm that if in presence of certain specious objections which confuse your intellect, you could remember all you have found in the Gospel of strength, life, and light, you would assuredly feel yourselves strengthened.

Remember, for instance, what you would be without those beliefs of which men try to rob you. What has sustained you in the obscure and decisive struggles of the soul against the flesh and its seductions, but the thought that the eye of a living and holy God was upon you, of a God with whom men say that our reason might dispense today? What has given you those firm con­victions of conscience which have been your safeguard in the hour of temptation, but the Gospel at whose school your conscience and character have been formed? What, in your hours of anguish, has alone kept you from the dull resignation of the fatalist, or from the despair under which so many succumb, but those inspired and divine words which have brought life and immortality into evidence? Ah! ponder over all that past in which at every step you find the trace of a God of love; think of all those holy emotions which in bygone days have stirred your soul, of those sorrows and joys, of all that inward life which has been your true life. Think of all those regrets, of those many falls and restorations, of those tears poured out at the feet of God, of the heavenly joys of pardon. Were all these mere illusions, or were they not, on the contrary, the most certain of realities? Recall to mind all they have said to you, in the hour when delusions vanish, those deathbeds where you have seen heaven opened, where you have heard the last words, the last prayer of some cherished being, and where you have felt all the powerful consolations of eternity enter your soul. Those experiences have been yours, and it is all that past, all that wealth of mercies and blessings which the world would have you forget, because, on some particular point, modern criticism has shaken your faith. But no, that is impossible. You cannot forget your history, you cannot tear up the past, you cannot deny the best, the purest, the most sanctifying emotions which have filled your heart. Born blind like the man whom Jesus cured, you cannot be mistaken as regards the Saviour who has opened your eyes and restored true life to you; and when the world will bid you deny Him, you will recall to mind the reply of Polycarp, that grand martyr of the primitive Church. Before the tribunal of the Proconsul, in presence of the instruments of torture, his tormentors said to him, “Deny Jesus Christ!” but he, raising his venerable hand, answered: “Deny Him! but how could I do so, when for eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me nothing but good?”

What I say to each of you individually I say to the Church collectively. Oh! if the Church could but re­member! If the experience of the fathers could but be beneficial to the children! If all those dead lying in their graves could but rise again and tell us what for them were those beliefs which we now see vacillate! If in that arena where today, in the very bosom of the Church, are being discussed the most precious doctrines of the Gospel, all those grand witnesses of the past could but appear and speak, what strength, what encouragement for us!

Finally, if this world which surrounds us, if this light, frivolous, and indifferent world could but remember, if it could but remember all it owes to the God of the Gospel, all that it would be without Him! But no, it will not think of this, and ingratitude will seal its eyes. You will see modern society, which owes to Christianity all its best and most precious gifts, progress, liberty, respect for conscience, true equality, immortal hope and charity, which alone can cure all its moral and physical sufferings, you will see it forget all this, forget that in all countries where the Cross has not been preached, those mercies are utterly ignored, and consequently unregretted; you will see it welcome with senseless curiosity all the new-fangled doctrines which pretend to take the place of antiquated Christianity. You will see it, oh, sorrow! take posses­sion of all the progress, light and strength which it owes to the Gospel to turn them against its divinity and bring it down to their own level. Ah! if it could succeed, if for one and but for one day this rampart of Christian faith could be overthrown, if God in His justice left those ungrateful beings to themselves and withdrew His light from them, then they might appreciate the value of those beliefs which we defend with too much languor, and from the fearful obscurity which would invade the world, they would judge of the splendour of the extinguished sun. God will not do so! He who for sixty centuries sends His light and blessings upon this earth which forgets and contemns Him, He who, in the person of His Son, has, on the Cross, saved a world which crucified and cursed Him, He will still bless that ungrateful race, and His love, mightier still than all our rebellion, will shine in all its beauty long after those blaspheming voices will have been hushed in the silence of death.

Oh, power of Divine mercy, if others despise Thee, we bow before Thee, and seized with confusion at sight of our own ingratitude, henceforth we shall repeat with the Psalmist: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits!”