

# SERMONS,

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## SERMON XI.

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### SINS REMEMBERED BY GOD.

PSALM XC. 8.—“Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.”

SOONER or later, brethren, we shall all understand these solemn words. Perhaps we think that we understand them already, but we deceive ourselves. There is a truth and a meaning in them, of which the greater part of mankind know little more than the walls around us. The day of judgment will make them plain. Before, however, that day arrives, their importance must, in some degree, be discovered by us. If we see it for the first time in an eternal world, we are lost.

The first step towards this discovery is to get as clear a notion as we can, of the objects which the great God is here said to place so very near him. And this we shall obtain, if we ask, in the first instance, what those things are of which the psalmist speaks; and then notice, secondly, the peculiar propriety with which he calls them ours.

I. The first of these enquiries brings before us nothing which, in itself, can give us one moment's pleasure. It forces on our attention subjects of painful, but yet of tremendous interest; things which make devils tremble, and angels wonder: evils which have cursed this once happy world, and will soon destroy it; enemies which, even if conquered, will turn us into dust, and which, if yielded to, will cast us into hell. And what are they? Nothing more than the things we so often regard as trifles—iniquities and sins.

1. “Thou hast set *our iniquities* before thee.” We all know what is meant by iniquity; it is another name for sin. And sin is not merely what we think wrong, nor what our neighbours think wrong, no, nor what ministers tell us is wrong—it is what the Lord of all thinks wrong. The scripture gives us this plain account of it; “Sin is the transgression of the law,” the law of the great God.

One thing then is already clear—we are all sinners. We have all broken God's holy law. The Bible tells us so. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” Isaiah says. “All have sinned,” says Paul. “In many things we offend all,” says James. “There is not a just man upon earth,” says Solomon, “that doeth good and sinneth not.” Our ignorance must be fearfully great, if our own consciences also do not tell us the same.

How many offences we may have crowded into our short lives, none but a heart-searching God can tell. The psalmist takes it for granted, that they are

more than our most suspicious neighbours, or than even our own hearts, suppose.

2. He goes on to speak of *secret sins*, and he speaks of them as though they were sins of which we are all guilty. And is he not right, brethren? Is there a man amongst us all, whose conscience does not accuse him of many such sins as these? Is there a man on the earth, whose hidden transgressions are not his heaviest and worst?

Many of our iniquities too are unknown even to ourselves. We are sunk very low. One sin is enough to ruin our souls. We often hear this; we profess to believe it; and yet we go on sinning every moment we breathe, without being conscious, perhaps for days or hours together, that we are sinning at all.

You know where this sad work is carried on—our own wicked hearts are the authors of it all. Within their dark recesses, all our secret sins are committed. They consist partly in the want of right feelings towards the Being who made us. But these are not the worst of them: we cherish wrong feelings towards God and towards men.

Their number is consequently past all conception. It is increasing while I am speaking, and you are hearing, of them. It increases every instant. “Who can tell how oft he offendeth?” We can number our pulses as they beat, we can number the moments as they fly, we might number even the hairs of our heads; but we cannot count the movements of our ever restless minds. And every movement is a crime. Such God regards it. “Every imagination of the thoughts of man’s heart,” he says, “is only evil continually.” It follows then that we cannot number our sins.

Their guilt too is unspeakably great. Perhaps, brethren, you have doubts on this point. You are ready to say, “What, can we be guilty, and yet not know it? Can there be guilt in an error of which we are unconscious?” If we put this question to our fellow-men, many of them will answer, “No:” but men have nothing to do with this matter. It lies only between us and our God. Let us however hear the testimony of some of the very best of our race. Turn to your prayer-books. Our church, in her Litany, calls these unknown transgressions “ignorances she connects them with sins; she teaches us to pray for the forgiveness of them. And she found the petition in the scripture; “Cleanse thou me,” says David, “from my secret faults.” But David was wrong perhaps; feeling might mislead him. No; in the fourth chapter of Leviticus, we find the great God himself appointing a special sacrifice for these sins. And how does the following chapter end? With the most express and repeated declarations of their guilt; “If a soul sin and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord, though he wist” or knew “it not, yet he is guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.” “He hath certainly trespassed against the Lord.”

Observe also how the psalmist brings home these iniquities to us all. There is no escaping from his language by saying, “I am pardoned and justified; my sins are blotted out:”—he himself was pardoned. He is styled in the title of this very psalm, “A man of God.” And yet he numbers himself among the transgressors; he includes his own sins among those which God so closely beholds. None then must say, “This text concerns not me.” The holiest man on the earth is as much concerned in this declaration, as the most abandoned sinner. It is as true of Moses, as of Pharaoh; of Peter, as of Judas. It comprehends us all, and all in an equal degree. And not only so, it comprehends all the iniquities of us all.

We have been applying it perhaps to some of our more heinous and daring sins, but it reaches farther. It includes not only “those things whereof our conscience is afraid,” but innumerable transgressions which we have long ago forgotten, and which perhaps never gave us one moment’s disquiet. The follies of our childhood, the iniquities of our youth, the misdeeds of our riper years; the sins of our hands, the sins of our lips, the sins of our hearts; our sins in company, our sins alone; our sins in our business, our sins in our pleasures; our sins at home, our sins abroad; our light-heartedness and pride in our prosperity, and our impatience, and murmuring, and rebellion, in our troubles; our stifled convictions, our forgotten resolutions, our broken vows; our contempt of the wrath of God, our abuse of his mercy; above all, the little value we have set on the great salvation of his dear Son;—it is of all these, in all their multitude and all their enormity, of which Moses here speaks. He calls them ours. Not satisfied with laying them on our heads, he bids us look on them as our property, as altogether our own.

II. Let us then go on to consider why we are to view them in this light—*the peculiar propriety with which we may regard the sins we have committed as our own.*

We are ready enough to use this language concerning other things. Our sins however are more our own than any thing else we possess. Indeed we possess nothing else.

Look over the earth. Not an atom of its dust is ours. We have no claim to it, no right in it. Bring forward what title to it we may, it will prove nothing in our favour. It may bar our fellow-men, but this is all it can do; it will not stand against God. “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof.”

If we look through eternity, the case is the same. Its riches are unsearchable. It is one immense storehouse of wealth. But then it is wealth which is not ours. On what there can fallen man write his proud name? On nothing. On nothing? O that it were so! There is one thing in eternity, which man has indeed made his own. And what is that? Those bitter wages which his sins have earned—hell and its pains.

But let us come to the point. Our sins are our own, for *we are their authors*.

No title can be better than that which creation gives; none so good. If then there is any thing which we may be said to have called out of nothing into existence, be it what it may, it is ours—ours by a better title than that with which our richest neighbour treads his fields, or the most lawful monarch wears his crown. The question is then, What have we thus created?

We need not say one word about any of the objects we behold around us. They all bear the stamp of another author, the great Creator of the heavens and the earth. The only things which can for one moment be thought the work of our creating power, must be found within us. And what are these? Learning, knowledge, wisdom. Some of us have laboured hard for these. Our minds at first were almost empty; we have filled them, and filled them too, as it might seem, by a new creation, by images, and thoughts, and feelings, which we can trace to no foreign source, and to which we conceive that we have a just and well earned claim. But no. Strip us of the knowledge which we have had imparted to us, leave us only the thoughts which we have created, the ideas which have had their origin altogether within our own breasts—what are we? We are sunk lower than the brutes which perish. We are idiots.

As for moral excellencies or spiritual graces, we are no more the authors of these, than we are of the holiness of the Lord of hosts, or the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are all “the fruits of the Spirit,” the work and gifts of the Holy Ghost. Could we give birth to a single holy thought, we should do more than Job deemed possible, or than Paul could accomplish.

But turn to our sins. Where shall we find their creator? You know how our fallen parents acted in paradise. Both acknowledged their transgression, but each disowned being the first author of it. One charged her crime on the tempting serpent, the other on his partner in rebellion, and even on his God. “The serpent beguiled me,” said one. “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me,” said the other, “she gave me of the tree.” Precisely thus have all their children acted. We are obliged to admit that we are sinners; the fact is too plain to be denied; but is sin our work? Is its first cause and spring to be discovered in our hearts? Every tongue says, “No.” We “all, with one consent, begin to make excuse.” We go out of ourselves to find its root. We lay the blame of it on our situation, on the frailty of our nature, on some fellow-sinner, on Satan; and when all these fail us, rather than take it to ourselves, we do as Adam did—we cast it on our God.

It is astonishing how soon, and how strongly, and how extensively, this principle of self-vindication works. The most stupid are quick when they have to clear themselves. The babe that can scarcely utter a word, is ready in an instant with an excuse for the fault in which it is detected. The man whose

pride has been broken, over whose conscience the Holy Spirit rules, who knows that his iniquity is from first to last his own, even the enlightened and humble Christian often feels it hard to say, "I am verily guilty. I am without excuse."

But our efforts are useless. As far as we are sinful, we are criminal. Whatever may have excited them, or whoever may have shared in them, our sins have taken their rise in ourselves. They are as much our own, as though there were not one unclean spirit to betray, one evil example to mislead, or one temptation to allure. The history of every sin is short and simple; "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man. But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin, and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." The testimony of St. Paul is the same. In his epistle to the Ephesians, he speaks of "the course of this world," and of "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience;" he admits their dreadful influence; but does he ascribe our trespasses and sins to them? In no wise. He goes within us. He tells us that in obeying them, we have only been "fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind." And what says our Lord—he who so well knows our hearts, and who loves those wretched hearts too well to bring against them any false charge? "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts," and every evil work.

We have now an answer to our enquiry. We are the authors of our iniquities and sins; they are therefore ours, exclusively and altogether our own.

If we have any spiritual thought or feeling within us, this truth will call them both into exercise: we shall not be able to treat it with indifference. It will give rise in us to many solemn reflections.

And this will be one of the first of them—*Of how much more than I ever imagined, am I possessed!* When I have estimated my property, I have thought only of my silver and gold, my houses and lands, my trade and my merchandize; but what are these in amount or in consequence, when compared with the things I have passed over, my iniquities and sins?

Perhaps, brethren, you have no earthly property to think of. You have wished and toiled for a share of this world's goods, but could never obtain it. But what a treasure of sin have you been storing up! The wealth of your richest neighbour is as nothing to it. He can count his wealth—a few thousands is the sum of it all—but which of us can count his iniquities? Number them by millions, and the half of them will not be told. Reckon up those sins only, which you can remember—the number is fearfully great. Let those which you once remembered and have now forgotten, be added—the mind shrinks from the accumulated mass. But bring your unknown, your secret

sins to the account; let every unholy thought, every wrong movement of the heart, let every offence and defect which the penetrating eye of a holy God has seen within you, be summed up—“who can understand his errors?” What numbers can express them? What mind can take in the vast amount? Well might we say one to another, as Eliphaz said to Job, “Is not thy wickedness great, and thine iniquities infinite?”

But there may be property which is not worthy of its possessor’s thoughts. It may be extensive, but worthless; great in amount, but yet insignificant in value. The owner of a forest, for instance, thinks but little of the myriads of leaves which drop in autumn from his trees. Were he ever so mindful of them, they could do him but little good, and, if neglected, they do him no harm. Our sins however are not property of this kind. There is something in them of such vast importance, that they rivet the attention, they are the objects of the close and constant inspection, of an infinite God. “Thou hast set our iniquities before thee,” says the psalmist, “our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.”

A second reflection then springs up here—*How thoughtful ought I to be of my sins!* To forget or neglect them is ruin to my soul. They are not like my silver or gold, which will lie harmless in my purse; they are like the torrent in my fields, which must occupy my care and labour, or it will lay every thing waste. They are like the disease in my veins, which will carry me to the grave, if I let it alone.

And then follows a third reflection—*How anxious ought I to be to dispose aright of my sins!* But what can I do with them? With their criminality, you can do nothing. It is inseparable from you; it will cleave to you for ever. May it for ever deeply abase you!

But there is resting on you guilt of another kind. Your sins not only render you deserving of Jehovah’s righteous displeasure, they subject you to it. They bring down on you the sentence, the curse, of his broken law. You are therefore in a state of legal, as well as of moral guilt; condemned, as well as sinful;—not like malefactors who are out of the reach of the law which they have violated, guilty but yet safe;—you are like criminals who have been apprehended, tried, and sentenced.

Now this is a guilt which is capable of being removed from you; from which too you must be delivered, or be undone. But where can you place it? Who can deliver you? There stands unseen, at your right hand, one who has long been waiting to release you from the heavy load. “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” He “bare our sins in his own body on the tree.” The Lord laid there on him “the iniquity of us all.” And now “all that believe, are justified from all things.” “They shall not come into condemnation, but have passed from death unto life.” There is, in fact, “no condemnation “for them.

Here then bring your sins, brethren. Come and cast them on the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as the guilty Jew confessed his transgressions, and put them upon the head of the scape-goat; so draw near in penitence to this far nobler sacrifice, and, by a simple faith in the efficacy of his blood, lay your sins on him. He will bear them all away, carry them into a land of oblivion, where they shall be remembered against you no more.

In this work the Redeemer delights. He is more willing to receive your iniquities, than you are to receive his mercies, than the neediest beggar would be to receive your gold. Nay, collect all the treasures which the earth contains, no miser would grasp them with half the joy, with which the blessed Jesus takes the load of a transgressor's sins. With him their bitterness is past. It was finished with his dying cry. They can wound him no more. But, brethren, they can wound you. Refuse to lay them on him, and they will pierce your inmost soul. They may sting you almost to madness before you die; but when you die, their work of misery will indeed begin. They will overwhelm you with an awe, a horror, and a despair, which will make you spectacles of tenor, monuments of wrath.