

SERMONS,
PREACHED
IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF
HIGH WYCOMBE.

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SERMON VIII.

THE COMPASSION OF THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE CHURCH.

HEBREWS iv. 15.

We have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

THIS is one of the most gracious and encouraging declarations in the word of God. It has cheered many a fainting heart, and restored many a wandering soul to peace and hope. In the verse preceding it, the apostle speaks of Jesus, the great High Priest of the church, as the Son of God; as having passed into the far distant heavens, and entered into his glory. He speaks of him here as the Son of man; as being still the same compassionate Jesus that he was on earth, with a heart as tender, and a love as strong.

That we may draw scriptural comfort from his words, let us enquire, first, of what infirmities he is here speaking; secondly, what is implied in Christ's being touched with the feeling of them; and, thirdly, what reasons we have to believe that he really exercises this strong compassion.

I. We are to enquire, first, *what infirmities are spoken of in the text.*

The apostle calls them "our infirmities," the infirmities of himself and of the Hebrew Christians to whom he was writing. His words must consequently be applied, in their full sense, to the true Christian only, to the man who, like Saint Paul, has been "washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." In one sense indeed the ascended Jesus is touched with the infirmities of all mankind; he pities and often relieves them, when suffering under them. But it is the sorrow of his beloved church, which affects his heart the most, and calls into exercise its deepest tenderness.

Still however the question recurs, With which of the many infirmities of his servants is Jesus touched? And to this we may answer with confidence, that he is touched with all of them. All outward infirmities are the subjects of his compassion—poverty and want, hunger and thirst, weariness and pain, sickness and death; and not only these natural evils, but all the calamities which a persecuting world can heap on the church—contempt and disgrace, hatred and injustice, "cruel mockings and scourgings," "bonds and imprisonment." All our inward infirmities also, are comprehended in the apostle's words—perplexity and trouble, fear and terror, grief and anguish, the temptations of the world and of Satan, a sense of the wrath of God. With all these sources of suffering, Christ himself was exercised or tempted, and the misery that flows from them, he doubtless

can still commiserate.

II. Let us go on to enquire *what is meant by his being touched with the feeling of them.*

The double negative which the apostle has employed in the text, is much stronger and more expressive, than a direct affirmative would have been, and seems to imply a livelier assurance, a deeper conviction, of the fact. Here also it must be observed that the word which is rendered “touched with the feeling of,” signifies to suffer with another, to share his sorrows, to sympathize with him under them. We are taught then by this expression, that Christ sympathizes with his people, just as one man sympathizes with another; that he still retains all the affections of the human heart, and still delights to exercise them. We do not indeed attempt to say how these affections are exercised in a Being who is God as well as man; but though we may not always be able fully to explain the declarations of God, yet if we have humble and simple hearts, we can believe them, and rejoice in the gracious truths they contain, and adore the goodness of that Father of mercies, who has caused them to be written in his word for our comfort and salvation. But let us take a closer view of this divine compassion.

1. It evidently implies *a knowledge of our infirmities.* The expression used by the apostle intimates that Christ sees, and notices, and remembers them.

And his knowledge of them is an *accurate*, a perfect knowledge. Our infirmities may be as numerous as the sands on the sea-shore; but none of them escape his notice. They may be more than we can number, but he numbers them all, and has the account of them ever before him. There is not one of them so small, as to be deemed unworthy of his regard; not one so great, as to make him unwilling to concern himself in it.

His knowledge too is *experimental*, as well as accurate. He knows by experience what our trials are, for he has borne and carried them. He has felt their weight, and pressure, and smart, and still remembers every painful feeling with which they wrung his soul.

2. This accurate and experimental knowledge produces another effect implied in Christ’s being touched with a feeling of our infirmities—*sympathy*, a tender compassion for us while suffering under our trials. We often know and see the afflictions of one another, without our knowledge producing any effect upon our minds; but it is not so with Christ. Our infirmities interest and touch him. And this not in a slight degree. His sympathy is a *strong* sympathy. When a good man sees another in distress or misery, though he be a stranger, he is moved with compassion towards him; but if the sufferer, instead of being a stranger, be a beloved relative or friend, he feels a much livelier interest in his sorrow, and is more deeply affected with his condition. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ feels for us, not merely as we are objects of pity, but as the objects of his

tenderest love. He feels for us as his own beloved people, as those whom he has purchased with his blood, and whom he regards as the choicest treasures he possesses. He feels for his people, as a brother feels for his brethren, as a father for his child, as a husband for the wife of his bosom.

The sympathy of Christ is as *abiding* too, as it is strong. It is a constant, never failing sympathy. He does not have pity on us one hour, and neglect us the next; he does not weep with us in this trial, and turn away from us in that; no; he shares every sorrow with us; and as long as we are encompassed with infirmities, so long will his compassion be exercised towards us. Nay more; he will sympathize with us, when all our infirmities shall have passed away; he will share in our joys in heaven, as well as in our sorrows upon earth. Even in his kingdom above, whatever affects us will affect him. He now mourns with us in our sorrow, and he will there sing with us in our joy.

3. To be touched with a feeling of our infirmities, implies, further, *a readiness in Christ to succour us under them.*

The sympathy of Christ is not a merely sentimental thing. It is not that fashionable and much applauded sensibility, which can weep over misery, and yet not stretch out a hand to relieve it. It is an active principle. It leads the Saviour to do for us all that, consistently with our welfare and his glory, he can do; to give us all the help, and support, and comfort, which we need under our afflictions, and, as soon as possible, a happy issue out of them. He is indeed a wise, as well as a tender Friend; and he will not remove any infirmity from us one moment before it will be well for us to have it removed; but then as long as we are afflicted, he is afflicted. While we are suffering, he is suffering also. Let this satisfy us. Let it bring comfort to our souls under affliction, and convince us that help and deliverance will come in their proper season.

III. We may now proceed to enquire, thirdly, *what reasons we have to believe that Jesus is still exercising this love and compassion towards the infirmities of his saints.* It is so great and wonderful an act of condescension, that many a faithless heart may be ready to doubt its reality, or at best be slow to believe it. We seem to want something to encourage us to the belief of a fact so strange to reason, so far above all expectation, so much beyond all we could hope for or even think of. The apostle however has given us in this epistle abundant confirmation of the truth of his assertion.

1. He tells us, first, that *this was one of the ends for which Christ took our nature upon him, that he might be touched with its infirmities.*

We read in the beginning of the chapter which follows the text, that every high priest taken from among men, must “have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity.” It was necessary for Jesus therefore to be made such a high priest as

this. Wherefore,” says the apostle in the second chapter of this epistle, “in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people; for in that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.” His assuming our nature did not indeed increase his mercifulness as God, for that, before his incarnation, was infinite; but it enabled him, as man, to pity from experience. He submitted to our infirmities, that he might not only be merciful to us as a God of mercy, but tender-hearted and compassionate towards us as a Brother and a Friend. Now this being one of the ends for which he became man, the constant exercise of his sympathy is no more to be doubted, than his incarnation itself. He was made man not only that he might suffer for us, but that he might suffer with us; and as long as he remains the great High Priest of the church, our sorrows will be his sorrows, our trials his trials, and our joys his joys.

2. The same truth will be evident, if we remember that *it is a part of the Saviour’s office as the High Priest of his church, to be touched with a feeling of its infirmities.*

The appointment of the Levitical high priest, as we learn from the passage of scripture which has already been referred to, had mercy and compassion in its very design. One branch of the duties of his office had a reference chiefly to God, and consisted in offering sacrifices to him; while the other had a reference principally to the people, and consisted in feeling for them, in being touched with a compassionate sense of their infirmities and sins. Hence the names of the twelve tribes were to be written upon the breast-plate of the high priest when he went into the holy of holies, to remind him that it was his duty to remember all his brethren in the sacrifices and prayers he offered there.

The same office Jesus has undertaken to sustain for ever in the Christian church, and bound himself to perform its duties. He has taken upon himself an unchangeable priesthood in the heavenly temple above, and will never be unfaithful to those covenant-engagements into which his love for his church led him to enter. He is gone into the holy of holies with the names of all his saints written on his heart, and he will for ever remember there all their wants. He delights to do all the will of God; and he will not surely neglect that part of it, which is connected with the safety, the comfort, and the happiness, of the people whom he has suffered so much degradation and misery to save.

The text which we have thus briefly considered, will suggest to us a few practical inferences.

It reminds us, first, that *the church of Christ has never lost a privilege which has once been granted to it, without receiving a greater.*

The sacrifices and intercession connected with the offices of the Levitical priesthood, were great and valuable blessings, and many of the Jews hesitated

to embrace Christianity from a fear of losing the benefits resulting from them. Hence the apostle labours with a marked anxiety to convince them, that so far from losing any of their privileges by welcoming the gospel to their hearts, they would have them all confirmed to them, and unspeakably improved.

Had they sacrifices for sin under the law? He tells them that under the gospel they should have the same, even the blood of the eternal Jesus, a far more noble and effectual sacrifice than thousands of rams or ten thousands of rivers of oil. "Christ," he says, "being come an High Priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood; he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

Had the Israelites under the law a high priest, whose office was the life and glory of their worship? The apostle assures them that the gospel of Jesus would not deprive them of this privilege; that all his followers have a High Priest ministering and interceding for them in the heavenly temple above, one "who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins and then for the people's, for this he did once when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore."

Let us then never fear for the church of Christ. From the creation of the world, the dispensations of heaven towards it have been continually changing, but by every change the church has been a gainer; and thus it will continue to be to the end of time. Clouds may indeed rise at seasons to darken its prospects, but they are always big with mercy; and will shower down a thousand blessings on the church, as they roll over it.

There is also in the text *a never failing source of consolation for every afflicted saint*, a spring of comfort, which will reach to every sort of trial, and that too at every season. We are told that Jesus, our great High Priest, "was in all points tempted like as we are."

Are we tried with poverty? Are we sometimes so poor as to want even the necessaries of life? We cannot be poorer than the ascended Jesus once was. Though he is now seated on a throne in a glorious temple, there was a time when he had not where to lay his sacred head.

Are we ill-treated in the world, misrepresented, reproached, and hated? Jesus too has suffered hatred and reproach. "He was despised and rejected of

men," stricken, wounded, and bruised.

Have we been bereaved by death of our friends? Does our sorrow spring from the grave of a mouldering parent or child, husband or wife? Jesus has stood by a grave, and groaned in the spirit as sorrowfully as we, and wept as bitterly.

Are we friendless in the world, standing alone, abandoned and forlorn? How many friends had Christ? A few poor fishermen. And how did they act, when he most needed their friendship? They "all forsook him and fled."

Do our sorrows flow from spiritual causes? from harassing temptations or the loss of religious consolations? The Son of God is no stranger to such sufferings as these. He was tempted; he was exceeding sorrowful; he was forsaken by his God.

However diversified our trials may be, our High Priest has felt the smart of them all. He has tasted of all the sorrows of life and all the pains of death, and knows by experience how to be touched with a feeling of them.

What a source of consolation then is here opened to every dejected spirit! In all my troubles and sorrows, Christ is near me, and pitying me, and suffering with me. My poor body may be racked with pain, my heart may ache, and my soul be filled with fear and anguish; but Jesus, my Saviour, sees all my trials; he has experienced them, and knows exactly what I am now feeling under them. While I am complaining, he is, as it were, hanging over me, and weeping with me. O then let me take contentedly my cup of suffering, and cheerfully drink the bitter draught! Let me take up my cross, and rejoice to bear it, though it may seem heavy to my feeble frame. Let me look unto Jesus, and be comforted.

There is also in the text *encouragement for every penitent sinner who desires to return to God.*

Can such a Saviour as this, with such a heart, ever refuse to receive one contrite transgressor who casts himself on his mercy? Can he turn away from one trembling soul? Can he push back the perishing sinner who flies to his cross for refuge? Sooner could a mother refuse to have compassion on the son of her womb. Venture then to this Saviour, brethren, and make trial of his compassion. He already knows all your misgivings and fears; he is touched with the feeling of them, and is anxious to chase them all away. Take to him your weary and heavy-laden souls; commit them into his hands; and you shall find in him the richest comfort and the sweetest rest.

The subject we have been considering reminds us, further, of *the duty of feeling one for another*, of making each other's sorrows our own.

To have Christ for his compassionate High Priest, is the Christian's privilege; to imitate his compassion, is the Christian's duty; not a duty which may be dispensed with, but a duty which he will most assuredly be led to perform and delight in, as soon as the love of God is shed abroad in his heart. O that the meekness, and gentleness, and tenderness, of Jesus may constrain us all to be

pitiful and kindly affectioned one to another! His compassion would produce this effect in us, if we were really “followers of him as dear children.” The reason why we are censorious, and uncharitable, and hard-hearted, is simply this—we have not the spirit of Christ, and are none of his. Never let us deem ourselves Christians, till we bear some faint resemblance to our compassionate Master. The religion which he puts into the heart of his followers, softens the character, sweetens the temper, enlivens all the tender affections of the soul, and fills it with kindness and with love.

The apostle calls upon us in the text, finally, *to hold fast the profession of our faith*. This indeed seems to be the great end, for which he alludes, in the passage before us, to the sympathy of Jesus. “Seeing then,” he says, “that we have a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.” He then proceeds to tell us for our encouragement, that this Jesus is touched with the feeling of our infirmities; that the ascended Saviour knows all the difficulties, all the trials and struggles, which we meet with in the profession of his religion, and is ready to help us in them all; to strengthen us when weak, to refresh us when weary, to make us more than conquerors when tempted.

The apostle well knew the liability of his fellow-Christians to turn away from the faith of the gospel, the great danger which they were in, of becoming apostates from the truth. The mere nominal professor of religion thinks nothing of this danger, and cannot perhaps be prevailed on even to acknowledge it; but the real Christian sees it, he feels it hourly, and is sometimes ready to tremble on account of it. He is travelling the road, and sees all the dangers which surround it; while the other has never entered in at its strait gate, has never taken one step in its narrow path, and knows nothing of its difficulties. The wonder is, not that this or that man should turn aside from “the way which leadeth unto life,” but that any feeble sinner should persevere in it to the end, so as to be saved.

The true Christian therefore wants comfort and support under this fear and danger of departing from the living God, and the text gives him all he can wish for. His Redeemer knows his infirmities. He sees all the ruggedness and dangers of the path in which he is treading. Will he then look on with indifference, and not help his beloved saints? Will he suffer them to sink while striving to draw near unto himself? No; their foot may well-nigh slip, but the Lord will place underneath them his own everlasting arm, and save them from falling, and sustain them. “My sheep,” he says, “shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Here then, my brethren, is our safety and our comfort—a leaning on Christ, a resting on his compassion, his faithfulness, and his power. If we rest simply

on his almighty arm, we are as safe in the midst of our dangers, as though there were not a single danger in our path. If we rest anywhere else, we are undone. No matter how near we may seem to have ascended to heaven, we shall sink into hell. Where we go for pardon, there we must also go for perseverance, and there we shall obtain it. “Let us then lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us; and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”