

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

A WARNING AGAINST HARDNESS OF HEART.

A SERMON

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“But exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”— Hebrews iii. 13.

THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, in their coming out of Egypt, and in their 40 years' sojourn in the wilderness, represented the visible Church of the living God; not the secret and elect body of the redeemed; but the professing company of the outward church. They were very prone to the great sin of unbelief. They believed in God after a fashion while they saw His wonders, but the moment they were brought into straits or difficulties, they at once began to doubt the power of Jehovah, and to cast off all reverence for His authority. Therefore, they fell into another sin which at last fastened on them so as to become a part of their nature—they became stiff-necked, obstinate, rebellious, perverse, and hard of heart. They would not learn, although their lesson-book had miracles for its pictures. Their hearts became so hard that albeit they saw all the great things which God did for them, they despised the pleasant land, and were ready at times for the sake of the flesh-pots of Egypt, to wear again the yoke of Pharaoh, and to die the inglorious death of slaves. Such, too, are the great sins of the Christian Church, unbelief the root, and obstinacy the fruit. Brethren, if we know our own hearts, we must confess that unbelief is a sin which does very easily beset us, and that our obstinacy may well provoke the Lord to anger. We rejoice in God while the rocks run with rivers, and while the daily manna drops about our tents; but when the fiery serpent bites us, or the wells are bitter, or our comforts are in any way interfered with, we begin to distrust and to suspect the faithfulness of God; and as the result of this, there is an obstinacy about us which often inclines us to stand out against the plain precepts of God, because, in the judgment of

our unbelief, obedience might lead us into trouble and disobedience might make our path smooth.

Oh that it were not so! It is sadly true that God's people are liable to be overtaken by the worst of sins! Egypt itself did not produce worse sins than those which provoked the Lord to anger in the camp of Israel, and to this day the Church has some in it who defile her with all the sins of the world. I do not mean to insinuate that the Church of God is not infinitely to be preferred to the world in character; God forbid that I should slander the fair bride of Christ, she is as much superior to the world as the curtains of Solomon excel the smoke-blackened tents of Kedar; but who dares deny that there are specimens to be found of the worst of sins occurring among the best of men, just as in the most carefully tended garden there will spring up here and there some of the most noxious weeds—not that the weeds are permitted to smother the whole garden and kill the flowers—but that their coming while men sleep, is an indication of what the soil is. And it is a plain manifestation that although the garden is very different from the piece of waste ground on the other side of the wall, yet it differs not in nature—but owes all its superiority to the culture of the farmer, even so, the saints owe all their excellence above the very chief of sinners to the guardian care and omnipotent grace of the great Lover of Souls.

It seems, dear friends, that it is really necessary to warn God's people, although they have received the new nature, and are partakers of the adoption, against being hardened in heart through the deceitfulness of sin. But there is machinery provided by which the saints may be preserved from this great evil. "Exhort one another daily, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

We will talk together thus this morning. First, we shall dwell for a season upon *the hardening effect of sin upon men, whether saints or sinners*; then we shall show *the peculiar power by which sin hardens, namely, through its deceitfulness*; then we will consider *the remedy which we are to use with others*—"Exhort one another daily." But what if we should be diseased ourselves with this same hardness of heart? Then it will be necessary for us to have a few words concerning *what to do for ourselves if we have to complain of a growing insensibility of spirit*, as I am afraid some of us may most justly do.

I. First, then, dear Friends, THE HARDENING CHARACTER OF SIN.

This is matter of experience. The first sin which came into the world hardened man's heart in a most terrific manner, so that he dared to excuse himself, and even to charge God as being indirectly the author of his sin, by giving him the woman. No sooner had Adam tasted of the forbidden fruit, than a stony hardness came upon his moral nature; the heart of sensitive flesh was suddenly petrified, and became hard, unfeeling stone; he no longer

shrank from the thought of sin, but tried to hide himself from the presence of his best Friend. He felt his nakedness in some degree, but that which made him naked he did not lament or even confess before his God. He would never have been content with an apron of fig leaves, if he had known the full measure of his degradation. His unborn children in that dread hour participated in his fall, and are now born into the world with a stone in their hearts. Man's heart, naturally, is like that of Leviathan, of which the Lord says, "It is as firm as a stone, yes, hard as a piece of the nether millstone"—the lower stone of the two in the mill was always chosen on account of its peculiar hardness. Still, hard as the heart is by nature, it may grow harder by practice and by association with sin, even as Zechariah writes of sinners in his day, "Yes, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the Law" (Zech. vii. 12).

There is no doubt whatever that *living among sinners* has a hardening tendency upon men. You cannot walk about in this great leper colony without receiving some contagion. Though you were pure in heart, unless you had the absolute perfection and Godhead of Christ Jesus to protect you, the prince of this world would make you his prey. It was hard to dwell in so foul a world as this without contracting some impurity. Those black coals, which fill this earthly cellar, if they will not burn us, will at least blacken us. When so many fires of sin are pouring forth their smoke, the whitest of linen cannot escape the falling ash. If "the thought of foolishness is sin," and we have divine authority for so judging, then even to *think* of sin exercises a polluting influence. Can I read a description of another man's sin without getting my heart hardened? I question if reading the daily reports of crime in the police news is not a very fertile cause of sin. Great crimes usually produce their like in congenial minds, and even in the purest hearts, their recital cannot but have an injurious effect. The tree of knowledge of good and evil bears dangerous fruit; it were well if we restrained our curiosity, and left foul deeds alone, unknown, unread by us. What good can come from turning over the foul dunghill of crime? Let those traverse our sewers whose business it is to do so; were it not better for the most of us to keep out of them? Those who are called in providence to deal daily with the coarser sins had need to set a special watch over themselves, lest they fall by little and little.

Let me here remark that *the sins of God's people are peculiarly operative in this manner*. If I see a drunk intoxicated, I am simply shocked at him, but I am not likely to imitate his example; but if I see the same vice in a man whom I respect, and whose example has up to now been to me the guide of my life, I may be greatly grieved at first, but the tendency of my mind will be to make an excuse for him; and when one has succeeded in framing a plausible excuse for the sin of another, it is very natural to use it on one's own behalf. Association with inconsistent Christians has been the downfall

of many young believers. The devil delights to use God's own birds as a decoy for his nets. "I could not have thought it," says the young Christian, "that men whom I esteemed as saints would have acted so." "Well, well," is the next reflection, "if these are good men, and go to heaven, and yet act so badly, then I need not be so precise." And thus, by a course of reasoning which sin makes as easy as casting up accounts by a ready reckoner, we arrive at the conclusion, that perhaps what we avoided as a sin may have been no sin at all! And we therefore indulge in it without stint, and step by step come down to the level of this evil generation. He, who handles edged tools, is apt to cut his fingers and none the less so, because the knife is made of the best steel. Let us walk warily among men, like a man with naked feet when going over thorny ground, lest our hurt be grievous.

I am fearful that even preaching against sin may have an injurious effect upon the preacher. I frankly confess, my brethren, that there is a tendency with those of us who have to speak upon these themes, to treat them professionally, rather than to make application of them to ourselves; and thus we lose our dread of evil in some degree, just as young doctors soon lose their tender nervousness in the operating room. We are compelled in our office to see ten thousand things which at first are heart breakers to us. In our young ministry, when we meet with hypocrisy and inconsistency, we are ready to lie down and die; but the tendency in later years is to take these terrible evils as matters of course. Worldliness, covetousness, and carnality, shock us most at the outset of our work—is not this a sad sign that even God's ministers may feel the hardening effect of sin? I daily feel that the atmosphere of earth has as much a tendency to harden my heart as to harden plaster which is newly spread upon the wall; and unless I am baptized anew with the Spirit of God, and constantly stand at the foot of the cross, reading the curse of sin in the crimson hieroglyphics of my Saviour's dying agonies, I shall become as steeled and insensible as the mass of professors already are. I cannot enter at length into the whole matter, but let me trace the gradual process of hardening of heart which may take place, in a measure, in a true Christian, but in its full extent in the mere professor, whose religion lacks the inward vital principle. You must understand that the hardening of a tender conscience is a gradual process, something like the covering of a pond with ice on a frosty night. At first you can scarcely see that freezing is going on at all. There are certain signs which a thoroughly practiced eye may be able to detect as prognostics of ice, but the most of us would see nothing. By and by, there is ice, but it would scarcely support a pin. If you should place a needle upon it ever so gently, it would fall through. In due time you perceive a thin coating which might sustain a pebble, and before long a child trips merrily over it and if old Winter holds his court long enough, it may be that a loaded wagon may be driven over the frozen lake, or a whole army may march without fear across

the stream. There may be no rapid congelation at any one moment, and yet the freezing is complete enough in the end.

Apostates and great backsliders do not reach their worst at one bound. The descent to hell is sometimes a precipice, but far oftener a smooth and gentle slope. It were hard to find out in the worst of men exactly when they were utterly given up to judicial blindness. It is often a long and laborious process by which conscience is completely seared. This dreadful work usually begins thus—*the man's first carefulness and tenderness departs*. When you were first converted, you felt afraid to put one foot down before another, for fear you should go astray. You scarcely ever ventured from your house without an anxiety to be kept by the grace of God. You used to pray in the morning with great ardour and earnestness that not a thought might be awry, not one single word amiss; and, when business was over at night, you felt uneasy lest in anything, however trivial, you might have injured your profession, and grieved the Spirit of God. Well do I recollect when I was the subject of excessive tenderness—some people called it “morbid sensibility.” How I shuddered and shivered at the very thought of sin which then appeared exceedingly sinful. I would to God I could always feel as I then did! O believer, your new-born character was then white as the lily, and the smallest grain of dust would show upon it; and your life was bright and shining, and the least speck could be discovered, and you, yourself, were like the sensitive plant—the slightest touch of sin sent a thrill of horror through every fibre of your soul. But it is not so now, at least not to the same admirable degree. It may be you can hear talk to which formerly you would have closed your ears; you can tolerate sins which once you would have shunned as though they were deadly serpents. Your walk is somewhat careless now; great sins you avoid right heedfully, but secret sin gives you little or no concern. The departure of that blessed sensibility of soul, which marks the new birth, is one very serious mark of declension. It may not seem a great evil to have less abhorrence of evil, but this truly is the egg from which the worst mischief may come. Hear me attentively, O my brethren to whom this message is directed, as I rebuke you in the words of the Saviour in the Revelation—“Nevertheless, I have something against you, because you have left your first love.”

The next distressing sign of growing hardness is, *increasing neglect or laxity of private devotion without any corresponding shock of the spiritual sensibilities on account of it*. The daily prayer will become shorter and shorter, if not irregular; occasionally the period allotted to the reading of the Word will be given to business or worldly pleasure, and perhaps frequently forgotten and neglected. It may perhaps have happened at the first, that on some occasion we could not conveniently read the Scriptures according to our desire, and our prayers were necessarily shortened, but then we sought to make up for the loss at the first opportunity, and we felt like men who,

having been cut short at their meals, must eat the more freely next time. But now, I am afraid these things become common with some professors, and they scarcely care to invent an excuse for their slackness in spiritual things. O what poor pleas do some men offer for deserting their closets! How unjustly may unread Bibles accuse those pretenders to divine grace who treat them so ill! Alas, brethren, we may look each other in the face, and few of us can plead, "Guiltless." Divine Spirit, help us to awake out of sleep, and to shake off this deadly lethargy.

Another symptom of increasing callousness of heart is, the fact that *hidings of the Saviour's face do not cause that acute and poignant sorrow which they produced in former times*. Ah, my soul recollects when she walked in the full blaze of Jesus' love—when the very thought of His turning His face away seemed like the chill blast of winter nipping the summer flowers of my soul. Then I sang—

"Your shining face can cheer
This dungeon where I dwell.
'Tis paradise if You are here,
If You depart, 'tis hell."

I have sometimes walked in darkness, and have seen no light; and I confess deep shame and profound sorrow that I have occasionally been half indifferent whether Jesus shone forth or not. The spouse who fondly loves her husband longs for his return if he is absent; a long protracted separation from her mate is a semi-death to her spirit; and so with souls who love the Saviour much, they *must* see His face, they cannot bear that He should be away upon the mountains of Bethel, and no more hold communion with them. A child that is full of love to its parent cannot endure a frown. An angry pat is heavy—a stroke cuts to the very heart. A reproaching look, a glance of rebuke, an uplifted finger, will be grievous to good and loving children, who fear to offend their tender father, and are only happy in his smile. Oh, beloved, it was so once with you! A text of Scripture, a threat, a touch of the rod of affliction, and you went to your Father's feet, crying, "Show me why You contend with me." Is it so now? Are you content to follow Jesus afar off? Are you content to be a wanderer from your Father's house? Can you contemplate suspended communion with Christ without alarm? Can you bear to have your Beloved walking contrary to you because you walk contrary to Him? Have your sins separated you and your God, and is your heart at rest? O my beloved brethren, let me affectionately, and even tearfully warn you—it is a grievous token of hardness of heart when we can live contentedly without the present enjoyment of the Saviour's face!

Still further, when the soul is hardened to this extent, it is probable that

sin will no longer cause such grief as it once did. Brother, you remember how you humbled yourself before God with many tears, when in your former days you felt that you had made a slip in your conversation? You could not sleep that night. Even that precious promise, which you tried to lay hold of, could hardly quiet your agitated mind. You bemoaned yourself most piteously, crying out upon your bed, "I have dishonoured the Lord who bought me; I have been false to my profession and my love to Jesus!" Your spirit had no rest even the next day, nor could time relieve your bitterness of grief. It was only when the Saviour had, by His sweet consolations, and the application of His precious blood, effectually purged your conscience, that your soul at last had rest. My brother, it may be you have lately sinned far worse than you did then, but you do not smart half as severely. Your life is not as pure as it once was, but still, your heart is quite as peaceful, for an evil spirit whispers, "Peace, peace," where there is no peace. Dr. Preston tells us of a professor who on one occasion was found drunk; and when much depressed on account of his folly, the devil said to him by way of temptation, "Do it again, do it again, for," he said, "the grief you feel about it now, you will never feel any more if you commit the sin again." Dr. Preston says that the man yielded to the temptation, and from that time he never did feel the slightest regret at his drunkenness, and lived and died a confirmed drunk, though formerly he had been a very high professor. Take special heed of the second sin if you have already fallen into the first, for that second fall may most effectually prevent your repenting and returning to the right way—the habit will take you as in an iron net, and hold you fast to be dragged down with other hypocrites like you, to the lowest depths of hell. It is a sad sign of coming declension, no, of decline already come, when we can talk of sin lightly, make excuses for it, or make jokes about it; when we can see it in others without sorrow, and in ourselves without the greatest shame.

The next stop in this ladder, down, down, down to destruction, is that *sin thus causing less grief, is indulged in more freely.* The man had *fallen* the first time—the second time he deliberately lies down. The first time he was overtaken in a fault—the second time he overtakes the fault, and runs after the sin. The first time he was a victim—the second time he is most willingly given up to it. The first time he drank the cup by mistake, or by a kind of compulsion—but the second time he comes to the feast like that of Ahasuerus, where none compel, and yet he rejoices to be a ringleader in rioting; first he sipped, but now, like the ox, he drinks by the bucketful. At first he carried only a spark in his bosom, but now he bears a whole pan of burning coals, and cries that it is sport. The man may not be ripe enough yet for outward sins under the immediate eye of the world—the probability is that he keeps his iniquities private. He eats the bread of sin in secret. He drinks, but no one calls him a drunk because it is done at home. He commits lust, but no one

charges him with it because he carefully conceals his tracks, and indulges himself only when he is out of sight of his fellows. He robs in business, but no one can detect it; perhaps even the ledger does not show it—there is a particular way, of making ends meet in dishonesty, by which a tradesman may be a gross thief, and continue to be so, and yet, by putting a gloss on matters, can maintain his reputation, and be considered honest. Into such a state of heart I fear that even some of God’s children may for a time be allowed to fall—but the far greater probability is that those who descend so low are *hypocrites*, and know not the grace of God in truth. I pray God we may never prove by experience how nearly an heir of heaven may become like a child of wrath.

After this there is still a greater hardening of heart—*the man comes to dislike rebukes*. He has sinned so long, and yet he has been held in such respect in the Christian Church, that if you give half a hint about his sin, he looks at you with a sharp look as if you were insulting him. He is not to be talked to or spoken with—he has been taken for a flaming professor so many years that he is not to be suspected now. You may rebuke the sins of the congregation, and he will be gratified if you do not make too particular an application. You may declaim against his sin in public, but woe unto the friend who shall be daring enough to give a private admonition. The more a man loves his sin and needs rebuke, the more heartily will he hate the person, who, with the best of motives, lays it at his door. Mark this word—if this hardening work goes on, the day comes at last to such a man that *the Word of God loses all effect upon him*—whether he reads it or hears it, it ceases to be an accusing voice any longer; he rather finds a song of lullaby in it, and rocked in the cradle of his sin, he sleeps on to his own eternal ruin. You say, “Can a child of God come as far as this?” I believe not, my brethren, but I am speaking now of *professors at large*. These *professors* have, at last, learned to sleep over the mouth of hell and dream of heaven while damnation is denounced upon them. I fear that some here are as easy under the thunders of God’s law as the blacksmith’s dog under the sound of his master’s hammer with the sparks flying about him. Some of you have heard the gospel so long, and have made a profession of being saved so long, that being still unconverted, there is now little hope for you. The gospel has no power over you—you know it so well and love it so little. If your character could be photographed, you would not acknowledge it. If we preach against hypocrisy, hypocrites say, “Admirable! Admirable!” If we deal out threats against secret sin, secret sinners feel a little twinge, but forget it all and say—“An excellent discourse.” They have hardened their neck against God’s Word, have made their brows like flints, and their hearts adamant stones, and now they might just as well stay away from the house of God as not, for there is but little

hope that the word will ever be blest to them—their soul has become hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. And yet would I have them keep from the means of grace? No, for with God nothing is impossible! The sovereign grace of God may yet step in, and He who has power to heal may yet in the mighty majesty of His love speak to the heart of stone, and make it gush forth with rivers of repentance like the rock in the wilderness of old!

II. We come, in the second place, to notice THE PECULIAR POWER WHICH LIES IN SIN TO HARDEN THE HEART.

It is *the deceitfulness of sin*. The heart is deceitful and sin is deceitful; and when these two deceitful ones lay their heads together to make up a case, there is no wonder if man, like a silly dove, is taken in their net. One of the first ways in which sin deceives the professor is by saying, “You see *no hurt has come of it*. The thing is hidden—nobody has mentioned it to the church officers; it is not known among the members. In fact, nobody has heard of it—you may as well enjoy yourself as not. You are not doing any mischief—if there is anything wrong it is confined to yourself.” “Really,” says sin, “I cannot see that you are any the worse. You preached quite well last Sunday; you prayed quite well at the prayer meeting, and as far as the family altar is concerned, there was not much difference there; evidently sin has not hurt you—do it again! Do it again!” You must not forget that the immediate results of sin are not always apparent in this world, and that if hardness of heart is not apparent, it is all the more real—for if a man could perceive the hardness of his own heart, it would be pretty good evidence that it was somewhat softened. Then sin will whisper next, “*This would be sin in other people, but it is not in you*. You see you were placed in a peculiar position; there is indulgence for you which could not be accorded to other men—you are young,” says sin, “nobody could accuse you if you did go a little rashly to work—if you were an older professor it would be very wrong.” Then if it is an old man who is to be deceived, sin will cry, “You *must* take care of yourself; you need more indulgence than others.” If a man is in private life, sin will then suggest, “It does not matter in you—it would be wrong in a deacon, or any other church officer—but nobody knows it in your case.” If it is some person in high repute, then sin whispers, “Your character is so well established it will bear it.”

There is a way in which you can look at things, and see them as they are not. Sin knows how to use the distorting glass so that a man will turn round on this side, and condemn his fellow for a sin, and call him some terrible name—and then he will turn to the other side, and commit the same sin himself! And, like the adulterous woman in the Proverbs, he will wipe his mouth and say, “I have done no wickedness.” Sin, if it cannot deceive in this way, will beguile its victim by insinuating, “Now this is a dangerous thing for others to do, but in your case, *you have so much prudence* and have acquired

so much experience, *that you can stop when you reach a certain point.* I know,” says sin, “young So-and-So was ruined by frequenting such-and-such places, but you may go in and out of the same doors because you have so much discretion. It would be dangerous to expose your son to such a temptation, and of course you would not like the church to know that you go there, but really, you are a person so well established, and you know the world so thoroughly, that you may do without the slightest hurt what others may not even dream of.” It is a great and grievous lie, as we ought to know, that sin can ever be touched without injury, but yet this suffices for many—“I will go to the verge of the precipice, I will look down, I will get the delicious feeling of the sublimity of danger, and then will go back. I will mix with bad company sufficiently to know its evils. I would not go over the line for all the world—I shall be sure to stop just on this side of it.”

Such boasters remind one, of that simple story of the lady who needed a coachman. When three applied, she had them in one by one. “Well,” she said to the first, “how near can you drive to danger?” “Madam,” said he, “I believe I could drive within a foot without fear.” “You will not do for me,” she said. To the second she said, “How near could you drive to danger?” “Within a hair’s breadth, Madam,” he said, “and yet, you would be perfectly safe.” “You will not suit me,” she said. The third came in and when asked the same question, “How near could you drive to danger?” He said, “Please Ma’am, I never tried. I always drive as far off as ever I can.” Such should the Christian act. Some, through the deceitfulness of sin, are always testing how near they can go to the edge so as not to fall over; how near they can sail to the rock, and not dash upon it; how much sin they can indulge in, and yet remain respected church members. Shame on us, that any of us should be guilty of such tampering with that accursed thing which slew the Lord of glory!

Again, sin will sometimes have the impudence to say, *“It is very easy to repent of it. If you have once plunged into the mire, you can at any time see the evil of it, and you have only to repent and straightway there is forgiveness.”* This vile traitor is even dastardly enough to take the doctrines of grace, and turn them into a reason for sin. The old serpent hisses out, as none but the devil dares do, “God will not cast you off; He never casts away His people; He can soon visit you in mercy, and lift you up to the highest state of spirituality; though you may have fallen into the lowest condition of degradation, you run no risks as others would, for the eternal purpose of God is engaged to keep you from final perdition, and therefore you may drink the deadly thing, and it shall not hurt you; and tread upon serpents, and they shall not bite you.” “Their damnation is just,” says the Apostle, of those who use the doctrines of grace as an argument for licentiousness. The child of God scorns the thought of making the love of God a reason for sin. When a little boy was tempted to steal from an orchard, the others said to him, “You may

safely do it; your father is so fond of you, that he will not beat you.” “No, no,” said the little fellow, “that is the very reason why I would not go a thieving, for I should grieve my father who is so kind and so good to me.” Yet the deceitfulness of sin is such that it will turn the strongest motive for holiness into an argument for rebellion against God! My dear friends, I feel the weight of this subject pressing down on my own heart; and for that very reason I cannot bring out these truths of God as I would desire, so as to make them flash into your faces; but I do feel that it must be true of some of you who make a profession of religion, that sin, through its deceitfulness, is tampering with your spirits, trying to make you traitors to God—seeking, if it possibly can—to pervert your mind from hatred of sin, and from true love to Jesus Christ.

III. I pass on, however, to hint at THE REMEDY WHICH IS PROVIDED IN THE TEXT FOR US TO USE WITH OTHERS.

“Exhort one another,” and we are told when to do it—“daily,” and when to begin to do it—“while it is called today.” Doubtless many professors would be saved from gross sins if mutual exhortation were more commonly practiced in the Churches of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. This duty belongs primarily to the *pastor* and to *church officers*. We are set in the church to see after the good of the people, and it is our business both in public and in private, as far as we have opportunity, to exhort daily; and especially where we see any coldness creeping over men, where there begins to be a decline in the ways of God, it is our duty to be most earnest in exhortation. The duty belongs to you all, too, “Exhort one another daily.” *Parents* should be careful concerning their children in this matter. You act not the part of a true father, unless you see to it your son is in church membership or not, that upon the slightest inconsistency your children should receive a gentle word of rebuke from you. You *matrons* in Israel— you are not true mothers of the church, unless you look after the young sisters to keep them out of sin. *Sunday school teachers*, this is peculiarly your work with regard to your own classes. In this Church, so many have been brought out of the school, into the church, that I may insist the more earnestly upon this duty. Watch over your children, not only that they may be converted, but that after being converted they may be as watered gardens—no plants withering—but all the graces of the Spirit coming to perfection through your care. Here is work for the *elders* among us. You whose grey heads betoken years of experience, and whose years of experience ought to have given you wisdom and knowledge, you may use the superiority which age affords you to offer a word of exhortation, lovingly and tenderly, to the young. You can speak as those of us who are younger cannot speak—for you can tell what you have tasted and have handled; perhaps you can even tell where you have smarted by reason of your own faults and follies. *All of you, without exception*, whether you are rich or

poor, see to each others' souls! Say not, "Am I my brother's keeper?" but seek your brother's good for edification.

I do hope there will be a larger degree of sociality among the members of this church than ever, although up to now I have had no cause of complaint. Some churches never can practice mutual exhortation because the members do not know each other; the members are lumps of ice floating about—huge blocks of ice without connection with one another. It ought not to be so—the very fact of church membership, drinking of the same cup, eating of the same bread, it seems to me, entitles every man to admonish, and to be admonished. No, it makes it the imperative duty of every such person to see that he cares for the soul of his fellow. I would not abolish social distinctions, God forbid! They must always exist, I believe, at least till the Lord comes; but in the Church of God, membership and brotherhood should, at least when you come together here, override all social distinctions; and as in Cromwell's army, the private might often be heard around the campfire talking to the major, and the captain taking it upon himself to rebuke the colonel, so should it be among us. We should feel that we are one in Christ Jesus—that while we regard distinctions among men in civil life, yet in spiritual things we so care for each other's good, and so desire the edification of the entire body of Christ, that we watch over one another carefully and prayerfully—and exhort one another daily. In such a church as this there is peculiar need of it. What can we, a handful of church officers, do among 3,000 of you? If you do not exercise oversight over one another, what can be done? I thank God the duty is not altogether neglected, but I would stimulate you to a greater diligence in the exercise of it. You know of someone, perhaps, who is backsliding—do not tell anybody else—go privately to him. You know of a sister whose spiritual life is in a decline. Do not talk to your neighbours, or even, at first, communicate with us about it—labour to get your own heart right, and then seek to restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, remembering yourself lest you also be tempted. If we do not do this, we shall as a church suffer great dishonour. It is unavoidable in so many but that we should be troubled with some hypocrites. How can our church be kept right, instrumentally, except by much watchfulness? We do not wish to be dishonoured, we do not desire by great falls to grieve the name of Christ; then let us watch over one another. It is so pleasant and so blessed to restore a brother from the error of his ways, that I can offer you no greater reward than these two—to screen the name of Christ from shame, and to have the pleasure of saving a soul from death, and covering a multitude of sins.

IV. Lastly, SUPPOSE THIS TO BE THE CASE WITH ANY ONE OF US, WHAT THEN?

We cannot very well, as a rule, ask a brother to exhort us when we feel conscious of insensibility, although it were well if some dear friend could be trusted to give us, every now and then, a solemn admonition. Some of us are

in such a position that we are not very likely to be exhorted—we are keepers of the vineyard, and have none who would take upon themselves to admonish us. Our enemies, however, very ably supply the lack—for they often tell us very profitable, but very unpleasant truths which do us a deal of good, and they are never restrained by any fear of hurting our feelings. We have great reason to thank God for some men’s enmity—it is the only way in which they could serve us. Failing this—and private Christians miss this bitter medicine—what is to be done? Suppose we have begun to falter? What is to be done? Shall I say, “Suppose?” Come pass the question round, dear friends. Is it not true with too many of us, that we are growing careless and insensible? Do I not hear some honest hearts cry, “There is no supposition in the case, we have already gone back”? Public services to some of you have grown dull compared with what they used to be, and yet the preacher is the same! Prayer meetings you scarcely attend, or if you are there, your hearts are not on fire with vehement longings after your God; private prayer drags heavily; Bible reading is almost given up; communion with Christ is becoming a thing of the past; holy joys and spiritual ecstasies, things which you have read of and heard about, but do not enjoy yourselves! May it not be so with you!

I feel sometimes as if were I cut in my heart with a sword, I would bless the sword, so long as I could but smart and bleed under it. Oh it is a horrible thing, an accursed thing, to abide in a state of insensibility! Oh, for heart-breaks! To have a heart broken thoroughly would be a blessing! Yes, to be driven to despair might be an enviable thing rather than not to feel at all! I will not, therefore, say, “Suppose,” but I will say it is so with a great many! Then what had we better do? My brethren, *let us labour to feel what an evil thing this is*—little love to our own dying Saviour, little joy in our precious Jesus, little fellowship with our spiritual and well-beloved Husband, our Lord, our covenant head. Be ashamed and be confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel! Cover your faces, brethren, and let boasting be put away. Put on sackcloth! Heap ashes on your heads! Hold a true lent in your souls, while you sorrow over your hardness of heart. Do not stop at sorrow! Remember where you first received salvation. *Go at once to the cross*. There, and there only, can you get your spirit quickened. There hangs the Saviour! There *was* life in Him 10 or 20 years ago, when you first looked; there *is* life in Him still! If your experience should seem to you to have been a delusion, and your faith to have been presumption, Christ is a Saviour still. He came into the world to save sinners—and if you are not a saint—you are a sinner; go to Him as such. Let us, my brethren, begin again. Let us go to the starting point. Let us lay again the fundamentals. Let us sing—

“Just as I am, without one plea,

But that Your blood was shed for me,
And that You bid me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come!"

No matter how hard, how insensible, how dead we may have become—let us go again in all the rags, and poverty, and defilement of our natural condition, and throw ourselves flat on our faces before His mighty cross. "With all my sin, and all my hardness of heart," let the believer say, "I do believe that Jesus died for me." Let him clasp that cross! Let him look into those listless eyes! Let him bathe in that fountain filled with blood—this will bring back to him his first love! This will restore the ancient holiness of his faith, and the former tenderness of his soul!

To you who think that you never were converted, and probably never were—who have grown very hard, and fear you never could by any possibility melt in repentance—I give this exhortation, and O, may the Holy Spirit enable you to obey it. Come to Jesus you vilest of men! Labouring ones, heavy-laden ones, come to Jesus! Black, foul, filthy, hard-hearted ones, come, to Jesus! He is able to save unto the uttermost them who come unto God by Him. We are not in hell yet, the iron door has not grated on its hinges, and the dread bolt has not yet slid into its socket! There is hope, for there is life. There is hope for there is a promise; there is hope for there hangs the Saviour—there is hope for me, for you, for both of us—if we go humbly to the mercy seat, and take Christ to be our all-in-all! God help us to do it for Jesus' sake. Amen.