

# THE TRUE AIM OF PREACHING.

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## A Sermon

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DELIVERED BY

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“Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins.”—Acts xiii. 38.

PAUL’S mode of preaching, as illustrated by this chapter, was first of all to appeal to the understanding with a clear exposition of doctrinal truth, and then to impress that truth upon the emotions of his hearers with earnest and forcible exhortations. This is an excellent model for revivalists. They must not give exhortation without doctrine, for if so, they will be like men who are content with burning powder in their guns, but have omitted the shot. It is the doctrine we preach, the truth we deliver, which God will make a power to bless men. However earnest and zealous we may be in speaking, if we have not something weighty and solid to say, we shall appear to be earnest about nothing, and shall not be at all likely to create a lasting impression. Paul, if you notice, through this chapter, first of all gives the history of redemption, tells the story of the cross, insists upon the resurrection of the Saviour, and then he comes to close and personal dealings with the souls of men, and warns them not to neglect this great salvation.

At the same time it was not all doctrine and no exhortation, but whenever Paul wound up his discourse and left the synagogue, he made a strenuous, pointed, personal appeal to those who had listened to him. Let such of our brethren as are passionately fond of mere doctrine, but having little of the marrow of divine mercy or the milk of human kindness in their souls, do not care to have the Word pressed upon the consciences of men, stand rebuked by the example of the Apostle Paul. He knew well that even truth itself must be powerless unless applied. Like the wheat in the basket, it can produce no harvest till it be sown broadcast in the furrows. We cannot expect that men will come and make an application of the truth to themselves. We must, having our hearts glowing and our souls on fire with love to them, seek to bring the truth to bear upon them personally, to impress it up-

on their hearts and consciences, as in the sight of God and in the stead of Christ.

The subject to which Paul drew attention, the target at which he was shooting all his arrows, was *forgiveness of sins through the man Christ Jesus*. That is the subject to which I now want to address your attention, and when I have spoken upon it as my leading theme, I shall have a few words to add about *his audience*, and *what became of them*.

PAUL'S SUBJECT was superlative—the subject of subjects—the great master-doctrine of the Christian ministry—“*Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you forgiveness of sins.*” The “forgiveness of sins” is a topic which will be more or less interesting to every one of my hearers, in proportion as he feels that he has committed sins, the guilt of which appals his conscience. To those good people among you who fold your arms and say, “I have done no wrong either to God or man,” I have nothing to say. You need no physician, for you are not sick. You evidently would not be thankful for the heavenly eye-salve, for you are not blind. The wealth that Christ can bring you will not induce you to bow the knee to him, for already you think yourselves to be rich and increased in goods. But I shall be quite sure of the ear of the man whose sins have been a burden to him. If there be one here who wants to be reconciled to God, who says with the prodigal, “I will arise and go unto my Father,” I shall not need to study how to fit my words; let them come out as they may, the theme itself will be sure to enlist the attention of such a one, who says—

“How can I get my sins forgiven?  
How can I find my way to heaven?”

While we attempt to tell him that, we shall ensure his attention.

This is our aim; and this will we do if God permit. The Christian minister tells men the ground of pardon; the exclusive method (for there is a monopoly in this matter), the exclusive method by which God will pardon sin. “*Through this man,*” says the text; that is to say, God will pardon, but he will only pardon in one way—through his Son Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus has a monopoly of mercy. If you will depend upon the uncovenanted mercy of God, the mercy of God apart from Christ, you shall find that you have depended upon a reed, and built your house upon the sand. Into the one silver pipe of the atoning sacrifice God has made to flow the full current of pardoning grace. If you will not go to that, you may be tempted by the *mirage*, you may think that you can drink to the full, but you shall die disappointed. You must die, unless you come for salvation to Christ. What does he say himself? “I am the door, by me if any man enter in, he shall go in and out and find pasture.” “He that believeth on the Son of God is not con-

demned, but he that believeth not”—may he go right too? No, he “is condemned already, because he believeth not.” “He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved.” These are Christ’s own words, not mine. He that believeth shall be saved, “but he that believeth not shall be”—what? Pardoned for his unbelief? No; “*shall be damned!*” There is no alternative. The expression might seem harsh if I were the inventor of it, but as it came from the lips of the man Christ Jesus, who was the gentlest, meekest, and most tender of men, God forbid that I should affect a charity of which the Lord himself made no profession. “He that believeth not shall be damned.” God presents mercy to the sons of men, but he has chosen to present it in one channel— through that man who died for sinners, the just for the unjust, that he might bring them to God.

Wherefore is it that forgiveness comes to us alone through Jesus Christ? The whole economy of redemption supplies us with an answer. The man Christ Jesus is a divine person. He is the Son of God. You will never doubt that reconciliation is an effect of infinite wisdom, if you once clearly understand the condition that made it requisite. Though his people were objects of God’s everlasting love, their sins had kindled his fierce anger, as it were an unquenchable fire. Inasmuch as God is just, he must from the necessity of his nature punish sin. Yet he willed to have mercy upon the fallen sons of men. Therefore it was that Christ came into this world. Being God, he was made man for our sakes. He suffered from the wrath of God that which we, the offending sinners, ought to have suffered. God exacted from the man Christ Jesus that which he must otherwise have exacted from us. Upon his dear devoted head was laid the curse; upon his bare back fell the scourge that must have tortured our souls throughout eternity. Those hands of his, when nailed to the tree, smarted with our smart. That heart bled with our bleeding. “The chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed; surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” Substitution, then, is the cause of it all. God will forgive sin, because the sin which he forgives has been already atoned for by the sufferings of his dear Son. You know, many of you, the story in old Roman history, of the young man who had violated discipline, and was condemned to die. But his elder brother, a grand old soldier, who had often been to the front in the battles of the Republic, came and exposed his breast and showed his many scars, and exhibited his body covered with the orders and insignia and honours of his country, and he said, “I cannot ask life for my brother on account of anything that he has ever done for the Republic; he deserves to die, I know, but I set my scars and my wounds before you as the price of his life, and I ask you whether you will not spare him for his brother’s sake;” and with acclamation it was carried that for his brother’s sake he should live. Sinner, this is what Christ does for you. He points to his scars, he pleads before the throne of God. “I have suffered the venge-

ance due to sin; I have honoured thy righteous law; for my sake have mercy upon that unworthy brother of mine!” In this way, in no other way, is forgiveness of sins preached to you through this man Christ Jesus.

*It is our business also to preach to you the instrument through which you may obtain this pardon.* We read the question in your anxious eyes—“Now I can understand that Christ, having stood a substitute, has received from God power to pardon human souls, but how can I obtain the benefit; how can I draw near to him?” Didst thou never read how Moses described the righteousness of faith? and Paul has endorsed his description. “Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven, or who shall descend into the deep?” Thou hast no call to climb so high or dive so low. “The word is nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart. That is the word of faith which we preach.” Thou hast no need to go home to get at Christ. Thou hast no need even to come here to find him. He is accessible at all hours, and in all places—the ever-present Son of God. “But wherewithal shall I come to him?” says one. Oh! thou needest not torture thy body; thou needest not afflict thy soul; thou needest not bring thy gold and silver; thou needest not bring even thy tears. All that thou hast to do is to come to him as thou art, and trust in him where thou art. Oh! if thou wilt believe that he is the Son of God, and that he is able to save to the uttermost, and if thou wilt cast thyself upon him with thy whole weight—falling upon him, leaning upon him, resting upon him with that simple recumbency which needs and lacks no other support, thou shalt be saved. Now cling to the cross, thou shipwrecked sinner, and thou shalt never go down while clinging to that. Here is the life-belt, and if thou art enabled by the Holy Ghost to put thy sole and simple reliance upon Christ, earth’s pillars may totter, and the lamps of heaven be extinguished, but thou shalt never perish, neither shall any pluck thee out of Christ’s hand. Trust Jesus; that is the way of salvation. “What!” says one, “if I trust Christ at this moment, shall I have my sins forgiven?” Ay, forgiven now. “What! if I just rest in Christ, and look to him?” “Even so. “Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.”

“There is life for a look at the crucified one,  
There is life at this moment for thee;  
Then look, sinner, look unto him and be saved,  
To him who was nailed to the tree!”

You will be saved, not by repentings and tears; not by wailings or workings; not by doings or prayings; but coming, believing, simply depending upon what Jesus Christ has done. When thy soul saith by faith what Christ said in fact—“It is finished,” thou art saved, and thou mayest go thy way rejoicing.

We have thus preached God’s way of pardon, and man’s way of getting

at God's pardon; but we are also enjoined to preach about *the character of this forgiveness of sin*. Never had messengers such happy tidings to deliver. When God pardons a man's sins, he pardons them all. He makes a clean sweep of the whole. God never pardons half a man's sins, and leaves the rest in his book. He has pardon for all sin at once. I believe that virtually before God all the sins of the believer were so laid to the account of Christ, that no sins ever can be laid to the believer's door. The apostle does not say "Who *does* lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" but "Who *shall*?" as though nobody ever could. I am inclined to think that John Kent's words are literally true—

"Here's pardon for transgressions past;  
It matters not how black their caste;  
And, O my soul! with wonder view,  
For sins to come there's pardon too!"

It is a full pardon. God takes his pen, and writes a receipt. Though the debt may be a hundred talents, he can write it off; or be it ten thousand, the same hand can receipt it. Luther tells us of the devil appearing to him in a dream, and bringing before him the long roll of his sins, and when he recited them, Luther said—"Now write at the bottom, 'The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin'"—Oh, that blessed word "all"!—"from all sin"—great sins and little sins; sins of our youth, and sins of our grey hairs; sins by night and sins by day; sins of action and passion, sins of deed and thought—all gone! Blessed Saviour! Precious blood! Omnipotent Redeemer! Mighty Red Sea that thus drowns every Egyptian! It is a full pardon and it is *a free* pardon likewise. God never pardons any sinner from any other motive than his own pure grace. It is all gratis. It cost the Saviour much; but it costs us nothing. It is a pardon freely given by a God of grace, because he delighteth in mercy. There is too this further blessing about it, that while it is full and free, it is also *irreversible*. Whom God pardons he never condemns. Let him once say, "*Absolvo te*"—"I absolve thee,"—and none can lay anything to our charge. We have heard of men who, after having been pardoned for one offence, have committed another, and therefore they have had to die; but when the Lord pardons us, he prevents our going away to our old corruption. He puts his Spirit in us, and makes new men of us, so that we find we cannot do what we used to do. That mighty grace of God is without repentance. God never repents of having bestowed his grace. Do not believe those who tell you that he loves you today and hates you tomorrow. Oh, beloved! once in Christ, in Christ for ever; the devil cannot get you out of him. Get into the sacred clefts, sinner, of that Rock of Ages which was cleft for you, and out of it the fiends of hell can never drag you. You are safe when once you get into that harbour. Get Christ, and you have got heaven. All things are yours when Christ is yours. Full pardon,

free pardon, and everlasting pardon, and let me tell you *present* pardon. It is a notion still current that you cannot know you are forgiven till you come to die. When people talk thus, it shows how little they know, or rather, how much they do not know about it. There be some here who can bear witness; nay, there be millions of God's people who, if they could speak from heaven, would tell you that they knew their pardon long years before they entered into rest.

If you had ever been shut up in prison, as some of us were—five long years it was with me a bitter agony of soul, when nothing but hell stared me in the face, when neither night nor day had I peace—oh, what joy when I heard that precious truth, “Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth!” I felt the pardon really announced to me! I was as conscious of pardon as this hand is conscious of being clean after I have washed it; as conscious of being accepted in Christ at that moment as I am now sure that I am able to stand here and say as much with my mouth. A man may have this infallible witness of the Holy Ghost. I know that to some stolid minds it will always seem fanaticism, but what do I care whether it seems fanaticism to them or not, as long as it is real to my heart. We count ourselves as honest as others, and have as much right to be believed; whether they credit our sanity and our sincerity or not does not affect us a straw, so long as we know that we have received the grace. If you reckoned a clear profit of ten thousand pounds upon some speculation, and somebody said to you, “It's all foolery!” the proof would be unanswerable if you had received the amount and had the bank notes in your house; then you would say, “Ah! you may think as you like about it, but I have got the cash.” So the Christian can say. Being justified by faith we have peace with God—“And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.” When some tell him that he is not forgiven, he says, “Oh! you may say what you like about it; but I have got the witness within that I am born of God. I am not what I used to be; if I were to meet myself in the street I should hardly know myself; I mean my spiritual self—my inner self, for I am so changed, so renewed, so turned upside down, that I am not what I was; I am a new man in Christ Jesus.” The man who can say this can bear to be laughed at. He knows what he is about, and at the coolest and most sober moment of his life, even when lying on his sick bed and ready to die, he can look into eternity, soberly judge of Christ, and find him to be worthy of his confidence, and, thinking of the blood-washing, find it to be a real fact. There are a thousand things in this world that look well enough till you come to look upon them in the prospect of the grave; but this is a thing that looks better the nearer we get to eternity; the more solemnly and deliberately we take our account of it in the sight of God, the more substantial it appears. Oh, yes! there is a present pardon; but what I want to say most emphatically is, that there is a present pardon for

you. "Who is that?" say you. Oh! I am not going to pick and choose from the midst of you. Whosoever among you will come to Christ, believe his word, and put your trust in himself, there is instant pardon for you. What! that grey-headed man there, seventy years old in sin? Yes, blessed be the name of the Lord! If he should now rest in Christ, there is instantaneous pardon for him. And is there a harlot here? Is there a drunkard here? Is there one here who has cursed God? Is there one here who has been dishonest? Is there one here over whom all these sins have rolled? Why, if thou believest, thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee. And though there should be brought before us one so guilty that we might well start away from approaching him, yet if he can but trust Christ, Christ will not start away from him, but will receive him. Oh! was not that a wonderful moment when the Saviour wrote on the ground, while the woman taken in adultery stood before him, as all her accusers, being convicted by their own consciences, went out, leaving the sinner and the Saviour alone together, and when Jesus Christ, who hated all kinds of sin, but who loved all kinds of sinners, lifted himself up and said, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more"? Ah, poor sinner! Jesus Christ does not condemn you. If you condemn yourselves, he never will condemn you. He will only condemn your sin, for that is what he hates; but he does not hate you. If you and your sins part, Christ and you shall never part. If you will but trust him now, you shall find him able to save you even to the very uttermost from all these sins of yours, which have become your plague and your burden. God help you, then, at once to trust him, and to find this present pardon—this pardon which will last you for ever, and which you may have now.

Let me repeat it again, though I said it before, all this will be good news only to those who want pardon, and not for those who do not require it. I have nothing to say to those who do not want it. Why should I? "The whole have no need of a physician, but those that are sick." God will have something to say to you one of these days. I recollect, and I hope you have not forgotten, the story of the rich man. It is more than allegory, it is fact. You all know that while he was in this world he had fared sumptuously every day. He was covered with purple and fine linen, or at least he thought so. As for God's child, Lazarus, he thought he was a poor miserable beggar, only fit to be with the dogs, and he despised him. He looked at him, and said, "Oh! I am a gentleman; I am dressed in purple and fine linen; I am none of your beggarly saints lying on the dunghill, though they call themselves saints, and much beside; I am rich." Now, it so happened that he did not see himself; he had got scales over his eyes. But he found it out one day. You remember Christ's words, "In hell he lifted up his eyes." Ah! and he saw then what he had never seen before. All that he had ever seen went for naught, there had been a glamour over his eyes; he had been dazed and benighted. He had been the beggar all the while, if he had but known it,

while Lazarus, who had worn the beggar's garb, is waited on like a prince, and carried by angels into Abraham's bosom. So the poor beggar covered with wounds and sores, who thinks he is only fit for the dunghill, he is the man Christ will have; he is the man Christ will take up to heaven at last. As for your self-righteous men, who think themselves so good and excellent, they will be like the tinsel and the gilt, and will all be burned up in the fire; the varnish and paint will all come off; God will knock the masks off their faces, and let the leprosy that was on their brow be seen by all men. But, sinner, you who are such, and who know it—unto you is preached the forgiveness of sins, through the man Christ Jesus.

LET THE CONGREGATION TO WHICH PAUL ADDRESSED HIMSELF, AND WHAT BECAME OF THEM, now engage our attention for a few minutes.

The text says, "Unto *you* is preached forgiveness of sins." Never mind the Jews and Gentiles to whom Paul preached. The verse is quite as applicable here as it was there. "*Unto you* is preached the forgiveness of sins." My dear friend, it is no small privilege to be where the message of the forgiveness of sins can yet be heard. Unto *you* is preached the forgiveness of sins, but not to the tens of thousands who have gone the way of all flesh, unpardoned and unsaved. How is it that you are spared? Your brother is dead; your children have, some of them, died; but you are spared. You have been at sea. You have been in peril. You have had the fever. You have been near death; and yet here you are kept alive. Is not this a privilege, that unto *you* is preached the forgiveness of sins? What would they give to hear it once more? What would they give to have another opportunity? But it has been said of them—

"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now."

"Unto you is preached the forgiveness of sins." I said that this was a privilege! but it is a privilege which some of you have despised. Those who heard Paul had never heard it before. Many of you have heard it from your youth up. Alas! I cannot help saying of some of you—that I am almost ready to despair of your conversion. You do not improve. All the exhortations in the world are to you as if they were spoken to an iron column or a brazen wall! Why will ye die? What shall be done unto you? What shall be said you? Unto you is preached the forgiveness of sins. When you die, careless, Christless, unsaved one—when we throw that handful of dirt upon your coffin-lid, we shall have to think, "Ah! that man is lost, and yet unto him was preached the forgiveness of sins!"

Well, but it is still preached unto you. Notwithstanding that you have neglected the privilege, it is still preached unto you. Fain would I point with my finger to some of you, and say, "Well, now, we really do mean you personally. You people under the gallery whom I cannot see, and you upstairs

here—every one of you—unto *you*, is preached the forgiveness of sins. God has not sent us to preach to your neighbours, but to you—you, Mary, Thomas, George, John, Sarah—you, you personally—unto you is preached the forgiveness of sins, and it rests with you now to consider what reception shall be given to the message of mercy. Shall a hard heart be the only answer? Oh, may the Spirit of God come upon you, and give instead thereof a quickened conscience and a tender heart, that you may be led to say, “God be merciful to me a sinner!”

“And WHAT BECAME OF THEM,” do you ask, “TO WHOM THE WORD WAS PREACHED WITH SUCH THRILLING EARNESTNESS?”

Some of them raved at a very great rate. If you read through the chapter you will find that they were filled with envy, and they spoke against those things that were declared to them by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming, and so on, until Paul shook off the dust of his feet against them, and went his way.

But there was another class. The 48th verse says, that “When the Gentiles heard, they were glad, and they glorified the word of the Lord, and as many as were ordained unto eternal life believed.” Ah, that is the comfort; albeit there are some who, whenever the gospel is preached, dislike and reject it. A person was once very angry with me, because, in preaching on the natural depravity of man, I had charged man with being depraved; I had said that man was proud. This man would not confess it. Thereby he was proving the truth of the assertion as regarded himself all the while. So proud was he that he could not bear to hear the truth told him about it. If he had said he was proud, I should have thought I had made a mistake; but when he bridled up, and got into an angry temper, I knew that God had sent me to tell him the truth. Outspoken truth makes half the world angry. The light distracts their eyes. When the Jews kicked against Paul’s preaching, did Paul feel disappointed? Oh, no! If he did feel depressed for a moment, there was a strong cordial at hand—that very cordial by reason of which Jesus rejoiced in spirit as he saw the good-will of the Father, in revealing unto babes those things that are hid from the wise and prudent. Here was his comfort—there were some upon whom there had been a blessed work; there were some whose names were written in the book of God; some concerning whom there had been covenant transactions; some whom God had chosen from before the foundation of the world; some whom Christ had bought with blood, and whom the Spirit, therefore, came to claim as God’s own property, because Christ had bought them upon the bloody tree, and those “some” believed. Naturally they were like others, but grace made the distinction, and their faith was the sign and evidence of that distinction. Now, you need not ask the question whether you are God’s elect. I ask another question—Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? If you do, you are his elect: if you do not, the question is not to be decided yet by us. If you

are God's chosen ones, you will know it by your trusting in Jesus. Simple as that trust is, it is the infallible proof of election. God never sets the brand of faith upon a soul whom Christ has not bought with his blood, and if thou believest, all the treasure of eternity is thine; thy name is in God's book; thou art a favoured one of heaven; the divine decrees all point to thee; go thy way and rejoice.

But if thou believest not, thou art in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity. May eternal mercy bring thee out of that state, yea, bring thee out of it at once. Oh that I had time and power to plead with some here who know that Christ died, who know that he can save, who know the gospel, but who still do not trust in that gospel for their salvation! Oh, may you be led to do it, and to do it now, before this day is over! We want to be made a blessing among you. At the commencement of our prayers we besought the Lord for the conversion of many more beside you. If we had these souls given to us, what a token would it be, and what a comfort! May the Lord bring you in, and bring you in without delay! Oh, trust him, soul—trust him! May God help you to trust him, and his shall be the praise, world without end!