

FAITHFUL AND JUST TO FORGIVE

Preached at Providence Chapel, Oakham, on Tuesday evening, June 24th, 1845

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" 1 John 1:8, 9

In the text John puts two conditional cases; and by them addresses himself to two distinct characters. We will therefore look:

I. At the first case: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

II. And then, if God enable us, we will look at the second: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

I. There are two characters who say they have no sin. One is a self-righteous Pharisee; the other, a fleshly perfectionist; both of them ignorant of the teachings of God in the law and in the gospel; both deceived, though each in a different way. In the instance of the self-righteous Pharisee, he says that he has no sin; not that he would be altogether so arrogant as to deny the very existence of sin in his heart or in his life; but that by his obedience, by his righteousness, and by his consistency, he has made such a compensation for his sins that the balance of his good deeds completely outweighs the balance of his evil deeds. Now such a person deceives himself, and how? He is ignorant of the real nature of sin; he looks merely at a few external actions, and is unacquainted with the filth and depravity that works within. He is deceived,

because he has not had the application of God's holy law in its spirituality and curse to his conscience, which makes sin known; for "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom.3:20). The depths of sin have not been discovered to him; the secret workings of it have not been laid bare. He has never seen it held up in the light of infinite, unblemished purity; he has never seen light in God's light. God has never set his sins in array before him. If he had, the man would know he was nothing but sin from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot. There is therefore no truth in him. The truth may be in his judgment; but were it in his heart and conscience, it would lay bare the horrible evils of his depraved nature.

On the other hand, there is another character, who thinks he has attained to perfection; that by some exercise of his own strength, and by some cultivation of what he thinks is the grace of God in him, he has attained to such a degree of holiness that he no longer sins. The inward iniquity of a depraved nature is a burden to a living soul; but no burden at all to one dead in sin. If then any say, "We have no sin, we have preserved our lives from every blemish; there is no evil word spoken, no evil action committed by us;" what are we to say? We must answer in the language of the apostle that such a one is deceived; he does not know the plague of his own heart; the core of his corrupt nature has never been laid bare; the inward fountain of iniquity perpetually flowing forth, has never been discovered. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." II. We will pass on, however, to consider the second branch of the subject, which enters more into the case of those who fear God. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Before we can confess our sins, we must know and feel them; we must experience their guilt, their filth, and their dominion. Now this is the most painful lesson that a child of

God can ever learn in this life. All men have to drink more or less of the cup of natural and providential afflictions; and the children of God frequently drink more deeply of this cup than others; but in addition to these, they have what is far deeper and more cutting. They have to endure spiritual troubles; and among them to see and feel their guilt and sinfulness before a holy and pure God.

i. But what is it discovers to them the wickedness of their hearts, lips, and lives? It is *light*. Light makes all things manifest. In God's light we see light. "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph.5:14). Now this light comes from him who is eternal and essential purity, who is infinitely spotless and holy. And more than that; who is not only holy in himself, but who hates unholiness in others; and not only hates it, but is determined to show his displeasure and vengeance against it. A ray of his light must come into our consciences before we can know and feel that we are sinners before him.

ii. But there are times and seasons when there is not only *light* to see, but *life* to feel. These two go together, as the Lord himself says, "He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). They are twin sisters; they are like the rays of the natural sun: though each ray consists of seven colours, all the seven colours meet together, and form one beam. So light, life, faith, and all the graces of the Spirit come into the heart at the same time, and yet may be divided into distinct branches, though all are blended harmoniously together. Life then is needful to feel; and as this life works more powerfully, we feel more deeply; as this life works more feebly, we feel less deeply. Why is it that the very same sins that sometimes cut us up, and fill us with the greatest self-loathing, at others we can scarcely feel at all? Why is it that

sometimes what is called a "little" sin will cut us more than at other times what is called a "greater" sin? Why; it is just in proportion to the working of divine life in the soul. It is pure, because it comes out of a pure fountain. It must therefore always testify against sin, must always groan under it, must always hate everything opposed to its pure nature.

iii. But besides light and life in the soul, we must have *faith*, in order that we may believe the testimony of God in our consciences. If I had no faith to believe the eye of the holy God was looking down into my heart, and that he was solemnly displeased with transgression, I should have no feeling. So that light, life, and faith are all intimately blended together to produce feeling. Every groan and sigh, every sensation of distress, trouble, and bondage that a soul feels on account of sin, is a testimony that it is possessed of living faith. Those who are dead in sin do not believe that God is angry with them; they do not believe that God by sending his dear Son into the world and nailing his sacred body by the hands of wicked man to the cross, gave a most solemn testimony of his displeasure against iniquity.

iv. But again, besides faith we want *power*. We may feel sin deeply, and yet not have power to confess it. "If we confess our sins," the text declares. If I justify myself, there is no confession; if I am vain-confident, there is no confession; if I am shut up in sullen indifference, there is no confession; and if I am overwhelmed with despair, there is no confession. In order that confession should come, there must be power given to the soul, a softening, melting, humbling, and breaking down of the hardness of the heart. Sin will not bring confession. Nay: what says the Scripture? "Lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb.3:13). The tendency of indulged sin is to harden a man's heart; and then there will be no confession; for confession implies a

melting and humbling of the soul before God. In fact, there is no real confession till God touches the conscience with his finger, and thereby melts and breaks it down. *Then* indeed there will be confession; but the power to confess all will never take place but under the application of pardoning love. It is atoning blood felt in the conscience that makes a soul unreserved in confessing. There is no free unbosoming of the heart, there is something kept back, till free pardon flows into the soul. At the same time, I wish to observe that confession is necessary as a preliminary for pardon, as well as experienced after pardon. Though when pardon comes, it gives power to make greater confession than before, yet confession is a needful preliminary. We cannot expect to have our sins pardoned, if we do not confess them. Confession first, and pardon after.

But *how* do we confess our sins? Is it a mere acknowledgment with our lips that we have sinned? That is not *confession*; that is *acknowledgment*. Confession is something deeper; it is mingled with sorrow, with contrition, with penitence, with self-loathing, with real trouble of heart, that we have been entangled in the sins that we confess. None but God can give this. No man ever confessed his sins unreservedly before God gave him the power. But when the soul is enabled to confess its sin it is not one sin it confesses, nor two sins, nor twenty sins; it confesses all that are brought to its remembrance. You will find that God in making his people confess their sins will even lay on their conscience sins well-nigh buried in forgetfulness, sins of years past, sins well nigh swept out of the memory. When the Lord indulges a soul (and I am sure it is an indulgence, though often a very bitter one) with power to confess, it is no burden. There is a sweetness, though a bitterness in it, a sorrow mingled with joy. But what are the sins that pain us most? Those which we have committed since we have known the grace of God in

truth. The sins we committed before he called us out of darkness into light, the Lord does not usually, after pardon received, lay again on the conscience; but it is the sins we have committed after we have known the God of all grace; the backslidings and lustings of a depraved nature; the base workings of a wicked heart; the many foolish actions that we daily commit; the wandering desire, the roving, the polluted imagination, the evil thoughts, this is what grieves, and distresses a conscience made tender in God's fear. These sins will be confessed. Repentance cannot be put on one side. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). Paul preached "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). There must be sorrow felt in the soul for sin; there is no pardon except preceded by confession. God that cannot lie has said by the mouth of his inspired apostle, "If we confess our sins." If we are enabled to put our mouths in the dust, acknowledge them, and bewail them, and bewail ourselves for being entangled in them; if we, then, confess our sins he will forgive them. Will he then taunt us with them? Will he make use of our very confession to stab us with more deeply? No! His promise runs thus, and O what a promise it is! "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." Look at the words, "our sins." He does not say how many, he does not say how few; he does not say how long, he does not say how deep must be our repentance; but "if we confess our sins," what we have felt, what have been laid on our conscience, what we have groaned under as sin, "if we confess our sins," acknowledge them, and lament over them and spread them and ourselves with them at the footstool of mercy, and supplicate forgiveness for them, "He is faithful and just to forgive us" them all. But let us with God's blessing look a little into this clause: "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins;" for there is a fund of infinite sweetness and blessedness in the words. "He is faithful." God does not rest

his promise of forgiveness upon his mercy merely; though the forgiveness of our sins does in fact flow through the mercy of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But the Lord the Spirit in the text has not put it on that basis, but on God's faithfulness. That takes a wider sweep than his mercy. I will tell you how. Every act of vengeance that God has executed is a display of his faithfulness. Every lost spirit, and every undone soul in hell is a mark of God's faithfulness; but they are not marks of God's mercy. If we are to have a heavy door, we must not have a slight hinge for it to swing upon. We must have a hinge as ponderous in proportion as the door. Apply this to the subject. What a basis it is on which the forgiveness of sin rests, the faithfulness of a covenant-making, covenant-keeping Jehovah! It is as though it ran thus: God has promised to forgive the sins of those that confess them. Can he deny his word? Can he forego his infinite veracity? Has he not promised in his eternal covenant to receive as sons and daughters all whom his dear Son should die for? To forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more? To that covenant he will be faithful. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but not one jot or tittle of that covenant can pass away.

He is faithful also to his own dear Son, who is "the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person" (Heb.1:3); faithful to his pledged word that he would pardon sin for his sake; faithful to his atoning blood, when he viewed the sacred stream that washed away all sin on Calvary; faithful to his obedience to the law, whereby it was satisfied both in doing and suffering; faithful to his resurrection, and ascension, and present intercession at his right hand, as the great High Priest over the house of God. So that not merely God's mercy (though that cannot fail, for it is to be built up for ever, Psa.89:2), but his faithfulness, his promises, his perfections, the purity of his own spotless holiness are

pledged to forgive the sins of every one that confesses. What a broad foundation is this for a poor, lost sinner to stand upon! What an ever-flowing fountain for him to come to and slake his thirst at! What "a large room" (as David speaks)! "Thou hast set my feet in a large room" (Psa.31:8). What a large room it opens for a poor sinner to take shelter in the covenant faithfulness of a covenant Jehovah! We expect man to be faithful. Does not grace make a man honest and faithful? And shall the God of all grace, who gives the reflection merely of his grace in the heart of a sinner to make him faithful—shall the God of *all* grace not be faithful, if those who have a *little* grace are faithful? He has promised, and will he not perform? His very perfections are pledged to do so. What a broad foundation, then, it is for a poor sinner to stand upon who confesses his sins that God is faithful to forgive them!

But the apostle adds another word, a word that, if anything, is more surprising, more astounding, to reason than the word which precedes it: "and just." It is a wonderful thing that faithfulness should be on the side of forgiveness. It is a still greater thing that justice should be upon its side. What would not justice be out of Christ? Would not justice out of Christ be wrath, vengeance, and destruction? But through the wonder-working atonement, through the great mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh, through the astonishing scheme of salvation by redeeming love and blood, justice is now on the side of forgiveness. It is as though the apostle argued thus: Justice has been completely fulfilled, and all its demands accomplished to the very letter. It demanded punishment, and it has had punishment; it required vengeance, and it has had vengeance. It called for complete satisfaction to all its requirements, and it has had it; and not merely had it sufficiently, but had it super-aboundingly. As grace superabounds over the abounding of sin, so justice

has superabounded over the claims of the law.

Look at the infinite dignity of him who obeyed the law, that God should become also man, and as man obey his own law. What dignity does it put upon it! What an infinite fulness does this put upon every act of obedience! The law was given to man; and if man could have fulfilled the law, it would have been amply satisfied. But when God-Man fulfilled the law, he not merely satisfied it, but he gave it infinite dignity. I will endeavour to illustrate it thus. Suppose there were some office which could be adequately performed by a nobleman; but instead of that nobleman performing it, the sovereign performs it. Will not that give dignity to the office, make it shine more brightly, than if the nobleman had performed it? So spiritually; if Adam had obeyed the law, the law would have been satisfied; if the creature could render it obedience, as it was given to the creature, it would have been enough. But when the Creator obeyed it, when Immanuel, God with us, performed what the law demanded, then his obedience gave it infinite merit and stamped it with everlasting dignity. As we read, "He will magnify the law, and make it honourable" (Isa.42:21); that is, by clothing it with his own divine obedience. So that God is not merely faithful to his word, but also just, infinitely just, scrupulously just, perfectly just, in forgiving sin; because he can forgive it by virtue of the obedience which his only-begotten Son has paid to the law. O what a view is this! What an ample scope it offers, what a large room it sets before a poor sinner! That God is not only faithful, but also just to forgive us our sins! How we forget this! How ignorant we are of it! We sin, we feel it a burden; it presses the conscience; the soul falls down before God and confesses it. But, yet in all this how little eye there is to the spotless obedience of the Son of God! How much more we look at our confessing, our humbling, our self-loathing, than to the spotless obedience of Jesus! We are

such self-lovers, such self-conceited creatures, that we are more enamoured of our own polluted doings than of the spotless obedience of the Son of God. Yet if there be any forgiveness, it is only extended to us on the footing of Christ's obedience. Our confessions cannot draw it forth; and yet God will have us to confess, that we may have forgiveness poured into a clean vessel. We must be humbled in order to be raised up, and know the bitterness of sin in order to know the sweetness of pardon.

"He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." What? All? Every sin that we have committed? Sins of thought, sins of look, sins of action, sins of omission, sins of commission, sins in infancy, sins in childhood, sins in youth, and sins in old age? All the base lusts, all the filthy workings, all the vile actions, all the pride, all the hypocrisy, all the covetousness, all the presumption, all the envy, hatred, and malice, all the aboundings of inward iniquity, forgive them all? If God forgives one, he forgives all; if he retains one, he retains all. Either the whole weight of a man's sin will be tied about his neck as a mill stone, to sink him into perdition; or all his sins will be as completely blotted out from the remembrance of God as though they had never been committed. The Scriptures therefore compare it to a cloud: "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins" (Isa.44:22).

But some will say, "Does God forgive *no more sins* than we confess?" I want to know what the proportion of the sins that you confess bears to the sins that you do not confess? Or the proportion of the sins you recollect to the sins you forget? Have you not committed thousands of sins that you have forgotten, which God has not? Do we not sin with every breath that we draw? Is not every lustful desire sin? And is not every proud thought sin? And is not every wicked

imagination sin? And is not every unkind suspicion sin? Every doubt sin? Every act of unbelief sin? And every working of a depraved nature sin? How often do we remember and confess to God the sins thus daily, hourly, minutely, and momentarily committed? We might as well think of counting the stars in the midnight sky, or the sands that strew the coast of the sea, or the waves that come dancing to the shore, as to think of confessing all the sins of heart, lip, and life, that we have committed. We committed sin when we sucked our mother's breast; we committed sin as soon as we were able to stammer out a word; and as we grew in body we grew in sinfulness. Is not this the Scripture testimony: "Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen.6:5). Will God, then, only forgive those sins that we confess! Woe to us! Woe to us! If those sins only are remitted which we acknowledge. One sin banished angels from heaven, and turned them into devils. One sin drove Adam out of Paradise. One sin involved the whole human race in one universal condemnation, and would have sunk all into the depths of perdition, had not the Son of God come forth as a Mediator. Then every sin must be forgiven to a child of God, or he could not stand before infinite Purity. He must be covered from head to foot with a robe of spotless obedience before he can sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb. "He is faithful," then, "and just to forgive us" all our sins, if he do but give us grace and power to confess them.

But it adds, to sum up the whole: "And to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Cleansing applies not only to the purging away of the very existence of sin from the eyes of God, through the blood and obedience of his only begotten Son, but also to cleansing the conscience from the filth and guilt of it. I believe that the words, "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin," refer not only to the cleansing

of the persons of the elect from sin by Christ's blood and obedience, but also to the cleansing of their consciences from its guilt. Observe the words: "If we walk in the light," that is, in the light of his countenance, in the light of his manifested forgiveness, "as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). It is when we walk in the light of God's countenance, in the light of pardoning mercy, in the light of superabounding grace, that the blood of Jesus Christ sprinkled upon the conscience experimentally cleanseth from all sin, from its filth, guilt, and dead works.

But some may say, "I have confessed and acknowledged; I have lamented and bewailed my sins; but God has not pardoned me." Do you think your confession has been from the bottom of your heart? Do you think it has been with godly sorrow? With real self-abhorrence? Has there not been some secret justification, some hidden self-righteousness working at the bottom? Has it been full and free? If so, it may account for the delay. But the Lord may see fit to delay even where confession is full and free. Our part is to wait in quiet submission. "It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. He sitteth alone and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope" (Lam.3:26-29). And yet "he is faithful and just." He keeps the time in his own hands, for he hath reserved the times and seasons in his own power (Acts 1:7). But as sure as a poor soul is enabled to confess, in God's time pardon will be sealed in his heart. "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psa.130:4); and God will fulfil these words to the very letter: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."