

THE NEED AND NATURE OF CONVERSION

A Sermon
by
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*“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”—
Isaiah lv. 7*

Some years ago I preached from the last four words of this verse, laying special stress upon the abundant pardon which is given to repenting sinners through the rich mercy of our God. On this occasion, I am going to put the emphasis upon the first part of the verse, speaking more upon the necessity of the sinner forsaking his evil way, and of the unrighteous man abandoning his evil thoughts. There is urgent necessity for us continually to insist upon this course of action. This chapter, as we noticed in our reading, is full of gospel teaching, and it expresses, under the most striking and cheering metaphors, both the fullness and the freeness of the gospel. But the prophet also insists most clearly that the wicked man must forsake his way, and the unrighteous man must turn from his thoughts, and return to the Lord, that he may obtain the mercy and pardon that God is waiting and willing to bestow.

This is not a merely legal demand; it is a gospel demand, found in the centre of a gospel chapter in the writings of the most evangelical of all the prophets. The chapter begins with a number of gracious and wide invitations, and so naturally leads on to the promise of the coming Saviour. Only God himself could find a Saviour for our ruined race, and none but God's own Son could be that Saviour. Then there follows, in due order, the promise of a people to be saved. The Saviour shall not come to the earth in vain. He shall call a people unto himself, and “nations” shall run unto him. Then, following the promise of a Saviour, and the declaration of the certainty that many shall be saved by him, there comes in this loving invitation, “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.” Since he is to have a people who shall be his forever, put in your claim to be amongst them; and since, as a Saviour, he is near to you, call upon him, and he will hear your call.

This brings us to our text, which is consistent with the rest of the chapter, even though some people think it is not. Here we are told, first, that the wicked must forsake his way. There is no Saviour for the man who will not forsake his sin. Such a man can never be among the people who shall run to Christ, for how can he run to Christ while he continues in the way of sin? Such a man shall seek sin, he cannot embrace the Saviour who hates sin with a perfect hatred. This is the theme upon which I am going to speak now, and I want to do it in the spirit of the Master, of whom Malachi wrote, “For who may abide the day of his coming? And who

shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness." May the Master bless his own searching word, and he shall have all the praise.

I. First, then, let us meditate awhile upon THE NECESSITY OF CONVERSION. If a man is to be saved, he must turn from his sins. "Right about face!" is the marching order for every sinner. There is no hope of forgiveness for him if he will continue with his face as it now is. He must turn from his sin if he would be saved.

This will be at once evident to you when I ask, —How would it be consistent with the holiness of God for him to put aside our past sin, and then to allow us to go on sinning as we did before? How could he be thought to be just and pure if he should remit the punishment for past transgressions, without seeing in us any determination to abstain from such sin in the future? Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, but he never came here to spare their sins. God would never have sent his Son to this earth to be the messenger of sin, yet Christ would be nothing better than the messenger of sin if he had come, and said to men, "You may continue in your sin, yet I will forgive you. You may live as you like, yet you shall find mercy with the Lord at the last." It must strike you, in a moment, that such a course as this would be inconsistent with the character of the Judge of all the earth, who must do right. There is no such teaching as that in the whole of the Scriptures; and he who dares to believe it, believes a lie. Nowhere, in the whole compass of revelation, is there a promise of forgiveness to the man who continues in his iniquity. There is a promise of pardon to the sinner who forsakes his wicked way, and turns from his evil thoughts; there are many promises of forgiveness to those who confess their sins in humble penitence, and who seek to live new lives under the power of the Holy Spirit. Possibly, someone would remind me that the greatest promises are given to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is quite true; but the faith which believes in Jesus is a living and active faith, which works in the soul a hatred of sin; and if a man says, "I believe in Christ," and yet continues to delight in sin, he is a liar, and the truth is not in him, for "faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." That faith alone will save us which is proved to be a vital and real faith by bringing forth "fruits meet for repentance." It is no use wanting or trying to be saved without a change of heart, and a change of life. "Ye must be born again," is Christ's own word to all unregenerate sinners. Without holiness no man shall see the Lord. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." There has never been any revocation of these truths, and again I repeat that, in the whole compass of the Word of God, there is no promise of pardon to the man who continues in his iniquities.

Neither, dear friends, is there a single case in fact, nor one emblem in parable that would lead any man to hope that he could keep his sins, and yet be saved. If you remind me of the woman in the city who was a sinner, I also remind you that her life had been completely changed, else our Saviour would not have permitted

her to wash his feet with her tears, and wipe them with the hairs of her head. Saul of Tarsus was guilty of the great sin of persecuting the saints; but see what a changed man was Paul the apostle of the Gentiles. Zaccheus, the rich tax-gatherer, offered to make full restitution and recompense to any whom he might have wronged. So is it evermore where the grace of God works effectually. When the Lord Jesus Christ saves a sinner from the punishment of sin, he also saves him from the love of sin;—he makes him holy as well as makes him happy and safe. The same lesson is taught in our Lord's parables. For instance, there was no rejoicing over the lost sheep while it was still wandering away from the fold; the joy began when that lost sheep was found, and was brought home on the shepherd's shoulder. A more striking example is that of the prodigal son. There was no joy over him while he was in the far country, and no kiss for him from his father while he was feeding the swine. He must come back, he must say, "Father, I have sinned," there must be the forsaking of his former evil ways, or else there could be no enjoyment of his father's forgiveness. We must ever say, as plainly as we can possibly say it,—If thou wilt keep thy sins, thou shalt go to hell; but if thou wouldst go to heaven, thou must part company with thy sins. He who would be married to Christ must first be divorced from sin. There is no possibility of walking in the way of the Lord and, at the same time, treading the pathway of evil. "No man can serve two masters." No one can, at the same time, be a servant of the Saviour and a servant of Satan.

Besides, dear friends, our common sense tells us that it would be highly dangerous to society if men were to be pardoned, and yet were not to be renewed in character and life. If Christ should meet with a man, and say to him, "I forgive thee because of the precious blood I shed for thee on Calvary; go and be a drunkard still, go and be unchaste, go and be a thief," this would be the way to undermine the very pillars of society, and, very soon, we should not be safe in our beds. If there were no laws, or if the laws had no system of punishment for the guilty, human society would cease to be endurable. He who ruleth all things righteously will never set up such a scheme as this. The Judge of all the earth must punish sin; he will by no means clear the guilty.

Moreover, it would be a serious injury to the man himself if he could be pardoned, and yet not be changed. For God to forgive us without renewing us, would be a frightful peril to ourselves. A man, finding himself so easily forgiven, and having no change of heart, would plunge into sin worse than ever; and, so far as my observation is concerned, I have come to the conclusion that the very worst form of character is produced in a man who, for some reason or other, thinks himself to be a favourite of heaven, and yet continues to indulge in sin. I recollect the thrill of horror, which passed through me, in my youthful days, when I heard a man, who was accustomed to be drunk, boast that he could say what none of his pot companions could say, namely, that he was one of the elect of God. I felt, child as I was, that he was one of the devil's chosen followers, and I do not doubt that he really was. If a man once gets into his head such a perverted notion of the free grace of God as to imagine that it is compatible with the love of sin, and a life of sin, he is on the high road to being made into the worst conceivable character; and if

such a man as that could be delivered from all the consequences of his sin, from all such consequences as might be looked upon as arbitrarily fixed by the punishing hand of God, (I know that I am talking of an impossibility,) even then he must be miserable. Such a man must go on from bad to worse; and sin, whatever we may think of it, is misery. The worm that never dies is sin; the fire that is never quenched is sin; and hell is sin fully developed. "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death," and that second death is hell. O sirs, if you could get rid of the disease, the pain, the headaches, the qualms of conscience which follow upon indulgence in sin, it would be a mischievous riddance for you, for the very pain that is caused by sin is part of God's way of calling to you to come back to him. As long as you are in this world, the consequences that follow after certain forms of sin are really, with all their bitterness,—and they are bitter,—but a healthful tonic that should make you give up sin, and turn to God.

If you go on sinning, you cannot be saved. If you continue to love sin, and to practise it, you cannot be saved. Think, for a moment, what any other result would involve; if it were possible for a man to live in sin, and yet be forgiven, what would be the value of the work of the Holy Ghost? He has come in order that we may be born again, and have new hearts and right spirits; but if men could be forgiven without having new hearts and right spirits, of what service would the Holy Spirit be? This would be contrary, also, to the whole design of Christ in our salvation. The angel said to Joseph, before our Saviour's birth, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins;" but if they can be saved in their sins, where is the meaning of his name? When he hung upon the cross, and one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, "forthwith came there out blood and water;" but what is the use of the purifying water if we need not be purified, and can be pardoned without being cleansed? Paul wrote to Titus that Christ "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works;" but how can that purpose be accomplished if men can be pardoned, and yet continue to live in sin?

Beside that, the very character of heaven prevents such a thing being done; we know that the unholy cannot enter there, nothing that defileth can pass the watchers at the pearly portals; therefore, be ye sure of this,—that you can never enter heaven, and you can never have forgiveness, if you continue to cling to your sins. You must forsake them, or mercy cannot be yours.

II. Having spoken thus upon the necessity of conversion, I turn, for a little while, to the second part of our subject, THE NATURE OF THIS CONVERSION. How is it described here?

First, it deals with the life: "Let the wicked forsake his way." Observe that it is "his way" that he is to forsake; that is, his natural way, the way in which he says he was brought up, the way that his natural affections, and propensities, and passions lead him. He must forsake this way, even though it is the way in which he has walked these thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, or even eighty years; he will have to get out of this way, however much he may delight in it. Possibly, he has now got to love sin so much that he says he could not give it up. There are some sins which

men roll under their tongues as dainty morsels; but if you are to be saved, you will have to give them up. If you would have mercy of God, you must give them all up. You must give up your old sins, your sweet sins, your pet sins; the sins of the flesh, with all their pleasure, and the sins of the mind, with all their pride, must be given up; for notice that word “forsake.” “Let the wicked forsake his way.” It does not say, “Let him own that his way is bad.” There are some who will say, “Oh, yes, I know that my way is very wrong;” and there they stop. Such an admission as that will not save you, my friend; you must forsake your way as well as own that it is wrong. To know that it is wrong, and yet to go on in it, will double your sin. This kind of confession will not help you in the least; on the contrary, it will only increase your guilt. You must forsake your wicked way if you are to be forgiven. “Oh, sir,” you say, “I am very sorry for all the sin that I have committed!” I am glad that you are, and I hope that you will be still more so; but that sorrow alone will never save you. It is not saying, “I am sorry,” nor yet your being sorry for your sin that will save you; that is right as far as it goes, but you must forsake the sin as well as be sorry for it. “I must forsake it; well, I resolve that I will do so.” Yet that resolve by itself will not save you, for there are plenty of good resolutions that are good for nothing. You have actually to forsake your wicked way before you have complied with the requirements of our text. I know how the devil will try to deceive you, when you have made a good resolution. He will say, “Ah, you are a fine fellow; and that is a splendid resolution of yours!” Yet mere resolutions are not worth a penny a thousand; we must act, not simply resolve what we mean to do. We must not be like the man who owes a lot of money, and has not a penny to pay, yet who keeps on saying to his creditors, “I hope I shall be able to pay you tomorrow.” Then, when that day comes, he says he is very sorry, but he missed the friend he expected to see, so he must postpone the payment for a few days; yet, when the few days have passed, there is still nothing forthcoming. So it is with many who resolve to forsake sin; they are like those who promise, but never pay. This will not do; you must forsake your sin if it is to be forgiven.

“I will tell you what I will do,” says one; “I will still keep to my old way, but I will not travel quite so rapidly in it; I will not live such a fast life as I have done.” I tell thee, friend, that thou must forsake that old way of thine altogether if thou wouldst be saved. If thou standest still in it, if thou art decent and respectable in it, all that will avail thee nothing. Thou must clear right out of it, for so our text puts it, “Let the wicked forsake his way.” In plain terms, the prophet means just this. Is your way the way of the drunkard? Now, no drunkard can ever inherit the kingdom of God as long as he continues a drunkard, so you cannot be saved if you remain in that condition. Are you a thief? Do you privately cheat in business? All that kind of thing must be given up. It is no use for you to say, “I will do it, and yet go to heaven.” You will be damned unless that sin, as well as others, be given up. Or have you been a blasphemer? Do you talk profanely or filthily? You must wash all that foulness out of your mouth if you would be saved: “Let the wicked forsake his way.” Am I addressing any who have practised vice in unmentionable forms? Oh, how many there are who do that, and yet are not ashamed! You must forsake all that, young man, or old man either; it is no use mincing matters with you. If you

mean to go to hell, go on with your wickedness; but if you would be forgiven for the past, you must cut all connection with these evil things for the future. I most solemnly assure you, in the name of God, that there can be no compromise about this and every other sin. Let the wicked forsake his way, a fleshly way, a way of lust, a way of self-indulgence, any way of sin,—it must be forsaken. You must abandon it, or else you must abandon all hope of ever getting to heaven.

“That is pretty strong language,” says someone. Do you think so? I shall have to use still stronger expressions presently, for the next point concerning the nature of this repentance is that it deals with the man's thoughts: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts.” “But thoughts are free,” says some unthinking person; “I shall never be hanged for my thoughts.” No, perhaps not; but have you never heard that old saying, “A man may not be hanged for his thoughts, but he may be damned for his thoughts”; for, in thought, is often the very essence of sin. A deed might in itself be colourless; but the motive for doing it—the thought at the back of it—puts the venom, and virus, and guilt into the deed.

As that is the case, what sort of thoughts must the unrighteous man give up? He must give up a great many fine opinions of which he is very proud;—his opinion about God, for instance. It is possible that he has thought nothing of him; or if he has thought of him at all, he has dared even to judge his Creator, and to find fault with what God does. Ah, sir! You must give up all such thoughts of God, and you must come to reverence him, and to regard him as so great that you are less than nothing in comparison with him. You will also have to give up your opinion concerning God's law. You thought it was too severe, too stringent, and that you could improve it a great deal. You will have to confess, with the apostle Paul, that the law is spiritual, and that you are “carnal, sold under sin.” You will have to change your mind upon great many subjects if you really wish to be saved. You will have to forsake your old thoughts concerning sin. You said, “Oh, it is a mere trifle,—a peccadillo! Poor helpless creatures as we are, God won't be angry with us for such a little thing as that.” You will have to feel that sin is exceedingly sinful, a great and deadly evil, or you will never be likely to seek and to find peace with God. You will also have to change your mind about the Lord Jesus Christ. He is nothing to you now; but he will have to be everything to you if you are to be saved by him. You will have to change your mind about yourself; you fancy that you are a fine fellow now, but you will have to regard yourself as less than nothing before you come to your right position before God. If ever you are to find mercy at his hands, you will have to forsake your present thoughts on all these matters.

Do you ask, “What other thoughts shall we have to forsake?” I reply,—A whole set of thoughts in which many people indulge. To the ungodly man, it is often quite a treat to sit down, and think of what he calls the jolly days of his youth when he sowed his wild oats. He wishes that he had a handful or two of them left. Ah, sir! You will have to give up all thoughts of that sort; but you will have to think of those past days with bitter tears of sorrow over the sins that you then committed. The ungodly man often pictures to himself scenes of carnal delight; and if he cannot have a share in such scenes, he often wishes that he could. I would remind any of you, who have ever done so, that you may commit every sin forbidden in the

Decalogue, without having actually committed any one of them, by simply revelling in them in your thoughts. Remember that solemn affirmation of the Lord Jesus Christ concerning the seventh commandment, "I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart;" and learn from it how our Lord meant his interpretation to apply to the whole law, so that we should understand that the very thought of evil is sin; and to suck it down as a sweet morsel to think upon, even though we never dared to perpetrate the act, is still a gross evil; and if we would be forgiven, we must forsake all these vile, flesh-delighting thoughts.

We must also forsake our thoughts in the sense of turning from all purposes of evil. That, indeed, is the main meaning of the Hebrew word used here: "Let the unrighteous man forsake his purposes." You say that you will do this or that, without any thought of whether God would have it so or not. Possibly it is your purpose, as you express it, "to have your fling." You have come up from the country, young man, you are pleased that you have got away from your mother's apron strings, and now you are going to have your own way. Forsake all such thoughts, I implore you; and, if any, whom I am now addressing, have formed any purpose of sin,—if you have resolved to indulge in this or that evil, whatever it may be, I charge you, if you desire to have eternal life, to hate all such purposes and thoughts of sin. The garment spotted by the flesh must be flung away from us, and the very thought of evil must be banished from our minds as far as it is possible for us to do so.

Nor is this all, for the text further says, "and let him return unto the Lord," so that this conversion deals with the sinner in his relation to God. He who would find mercy must return to God to obtain it. Do you ask how you are to do so? Well, first, you must begin to think about God. I really believe that some of you do not think half as much about God as you do about the Sultan of Turkey; and with some of you, almost anybody is a greater factor in your life than God is. With some of you, it would not make any difference if there were no God at all, except that you would be rather glad if that could be proved to be the case, for you would feel easier in your mind, and could, in such a case, go on in your sin without any of the compunction that you now feel. Yet, is it not a singular state of mind for a man, who knows that he is a creature made by God, but who really cares so little about him that, if he could be assured that there were no such being, he would be better pleased than he is now? Oh, what a wretched state your heart must be in if it feels like that! It will have to be greatly altered if you are ever to be saved.

So, first, you must begin to think of God; and then, thinking of him, you must yield to him, give up your will to his will; and, doing that, you must pray to him, cry to him for mercy; and then you must trust him. Especially, you must accept his way of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ; and when you do that, then you will be sure to love him. When you get as far as that, you will be a new creature altogether. Then, God will delight in you; then, it will be misery to you to be out of his presence, and it will be the highest joy of your life to have constant communion with him.

III. Now I finish with the third part of our subject, that is, THE GOSPEL OF THIS CONVERSION.

Possibly, somebody says, "You have been preaching to us the law, sir." No, I have not. The law says nothing about repentance. The law curses you from the very first moment when you have broken it. That gracious message, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out," is not the utterance of law, but of the gospel.

I will try briefly to show you the gospel of it. It lies, first, in the fact that God has promised that he will abundantly pardon those who turn from their evil ways: "Let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." To the man who confesses his guilt, the law says, "Yes, you are guilty, and you must suffer the penalty attached to your crime." If a person pleads "guilty" in a court of law, the judge does not say to him, "If you will promise amendment, you may go free." No, he pronounces sentence upon him, and God, the righteous Judge, might justly have done the same to us; but, instead of doing so, he says, "Forsake your wicked way, and your evil thoughts, and turn to me, and I will abundantly pardon you. Only repent of your iniquity, and abandon it, and it shall all be blotted out. All the evil of your past life shall be forgiven and forgotten; and your sins and your transgressions I will not remember against you any more for ever." Oh, precious gospel message! Who would not turn from his sin when such a gracious promise awaits him in the turning?

Yet there is more even than that, a great deal; for not only does God bid men turn to him, but he enables them to turn to him; so the gospel of this passage is, that God the Holy Ghost is freely given to sinners to turn them, first in their hearts, and then in their lives. What you cannot do of yourself, the Holy Spirit will enable you to do, or will do for you. There is no form of sin that you cannot conquer by the power of the Spirit of God, and that Spirit is freely given to all who sincerely seek his aid. He is here on earth still. On the day of Pentecost, he descended from heaven, and he has never gone back again. "But," says someone, "the Holy Spirit was given to the saints." Yes, I know he was; but he was also given to sinners like yourself, for Peter said to those who were awakened on the day of Pentecost, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." I wish that many of you would pray the prayer, "Turn us, O God, and we shall be turned." You must be turned, by sovereign grace, if you would really turn unto the Lord; and you must forsake your wicked way, and your evil thoughts, if you are to be saved, and you cannot do this of yourself; but the Holy Spirit has been given on purpose to enable you to do it.

There is a further gospel message in the fact that Jesus Christ himself came into the world on purpose that this Divine Spirit might be given in connection with the exercise, by men, of faith in him. One of the simplest declarations of the gospel is, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life;" and one of the last sayings of our Lord Jesus Christ before he went back to heaven was, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." To believe is to trust; and whosoever trusts Christ Jesus, depends upon the merit of his death, relies upon the excellence of his atoning sacrifice, and proves the reality of his faith by confessing it in the Scriptural way,

such a man shall assuredly be saved; and, in order to his being saved, he shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost by whose almighty power he shall be enabled to conquer the sin that still dwells within him.

Once more,—and this is the part of the gospel that is the best of all,—in order that you might be able to believe that God can have mercy on the guilty, and in order that you might be saved, God gave his Son, Jesus Christ, to offer a full and complete atonement for sin. I never weary of preaching that glorious truth to you, but I long that, when I have done so, you may close in with Christ, and that Christ may close in with you, that you may be eternally saved. According to the righteous law of God, sin must be punished. Conscience tells you that it is not possible that guilt should go without its due penalty. Therefore it was that Jesus came, and bore the dread penalty that was due to sin. The lash of the law must fall on someone, so he bared his shoulders to its terrible blows. The sword of divine justice was unsheathed, and it must smite someone; so Jesus gave his heart to that sword's point, and quenched the flaming blade in the crimson fountain of his own blood. Now that this has been done, God can be just, and yet the Justifier of everyone who believes in Jesus; and the effect of that atoning sacrifice upon everyone who truly trusts to it is that he finds himself so changed that he hates the sin he formerly loved, he rushes out of the wicked way in which he once delighted, he abhors the thoughts that once charmed him, and he turns to the Saviour whom once he despised.
