

SINS OF IGNORANCE

NO. 1386

A SERMON
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 AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

*“And if a soul sin,
 and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD;
 though he wist it not, yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.
 And he shall bring a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation,
 for a trespass offering, unto the priest:
 and the priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his ignorance wherein he erred and wist it not,
 and it shall be forgiven him.”*
Leviticus 5:17-18

IT is supposed in our text that men might commit forbidden things without knowing it. Nay, it is not merely supposed, but it is taken for granted and provided for. The Levitical law had special statutes for sins of ignorance, and one of its sections begins with these words, “If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the LORD.”

If you will, at your leisure, read the fourth and fifth chapters of Leviticus, you will find it first of all supposed that a *priest* may sin. They knew nothing of infallible priests and infallible popes under the Mosaic law. But it was known and recognized that priests might sin, and sin through ignorance, too.

“The priest’s lips should keep knowledge,” but as they were compassed with infirmities, they learned to have compassion on the ignorant by being made themselves conscious that they were not perfect in understanding.

In the fourth chapter, a sacrifice is prescribed for “the priest that is anointed, if he do sin according to the sin of the people.” The highest in office, who ought to be best read in the things of God, might nevertheless err through misunderstanding, forgetfulness, or ignorance. The priests were teachers, but they needed also to be taught. As Trapp says, “The sins of teachers are teachers of sins,” and therefore they were not overlooked, but had to be expiated by trespass offerings.

Further on in the chapter, it is supposed that a *ruler* may sin (see verse 22). A ruler should be thoroughly acquainted with the law which he has to dispense, but yet he might not know every point, and therefore might err. Therefore it is written, “When a ruler hath sinned, and done somewhat through ignorance against any of the commandments of the LORD his God concerning things which should not be done, and is guilty; or if his sin, wherein he hath sinned, comes to his knowledge; he shall bring his offering.”

There existed no fiction among the Jews that the king can do no wrong—however excellent his intentions, he might be misinformed upon the divine law, and so fall into error. Errors in leaders are very fruitful of mischief, and therefore they were to be repented of and put away by an expiatory sacrifice.

It was also according to the law regarded as very likely that any man might fall into sins of ignorance, for in chapter four, verse twenty-seven, we read, “And if any *one of the common people* sin through ignorance, while he doeth somewhat against any of the commandments of the LORD.” The sin even of the most common person was not to be winked at, and passed over as a mere trifle, even though he could plead ignorance of the law.

It was not to be said, “Oh, he is quite an insignificant person, and he did it in error, and therefore there is no need to take any note of it.” But on the contrary, he was also to bring his trespass offering

that the priest might make an atonement for him. Ignorance was common enough among the common people, and yet it did not constitute a license for them, nor screen them from guilt.

But we need not, dear friends, go to these Scripture references, for we are well-assured by our own observation, and the verdict of our own experience, that sins of ignorance are possible, for we have often ourselves sinned in this fashion, and we have had to mourn deeply over the fact when we have been convinced of it.

Very much in which we once allowed ourselves we would not do again, for we see the evil of it, though once we judged it to be right enough. An enlightened conscience mourns over sins of ignorance, which it would never do if they were innocent mistakes.

The word rendered “ignorance” may also bear the translation of *inadvertence*. Inadvertence is a kind of acted ignorance—a man frequently does wrong for want of thought, through not considering the bearing of his action, or even thinking at all. He carelessly and hastily blunders into the course which first suggests itself, and errs because he did not study to be right.

There is very much sin of this kind committed every day. There is no intent to do wrong, and yet wrong is done. Culpable neglect creates a thousand faults. “Evil is wrought by want of thought as well as want of heart.” Sins of inadvertence, therefore, are undoubtedly abundant among us, and in these busy, thoughtless, railway days they are apt to increase.

We do not take time enough to examine our actions. We do not take good heed to our steps. Life should be a careful work of art in which every single line and tint should be the fruit of study and thought, like the paintings of the great master who was wont to say, “I paint for eternity.”

But alas, life is often slurred over like those hasty productions of the scene painter in which present effect alone is studied, and the canvas becomes a mere daub of colors hastily laid on. We seem intent to do much rather than to do well—we want to cover space rather than to reach perfection. This is not wise. O that every single thought were conformed to the will of God.

Now, seeing that there are sins of ignorance and sins of inadvertence, what about them? Is there any actual guilt in them? In our text we have the Lord’s mind and judgment, not that of the church or of some eminent divine, but of the Lord God Himself, and therefore let me read it to you once again.

“If a soul sin, and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD; though he wist it not, yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.” Sins of ignorance, then, are really sins, needing atonement, because they involve us in guilt. Yet let us clearly understand that they greatly differ in degree of guilt from known and willful sins.

Our Lord teaches us this in the Gospels, and our own conscience tells us that it must be so. The Savior puts it, “That servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes.”

He who knew not his lord’s will was less punished than the intentional offender, but still he was beaten, and beaten with stripes, of which a few will be far more than you and I may wish to bear. The fewest stripes that will come from the hand of justice will be enough to afflict us grievously. One stroke has made good men lie in the dust and moan in sorrow.

Sins caused by ignorance are punished, for the prophet says (Isaiah 5:13), “My people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge.” And again in Hosea, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” Paul also tells us, “The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God.” These are to be punished, it seems, though their sinful ignorance is mentioned in the threatening.

Yes, and according to my text, there is sin in ignorance itself, for the eighteenth verse declares, “The priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his ignorance wherein he erred.” Ignorance of the law among those who dwell in the camp of Israel was essentially sinful. The Israelite had no business to be ignorant.

The law was plain and within his reach. If he neglected to study the statute, his breach of the statute could not be excused by his neglect, seeing the neglect was in itself an act of omission of a censurable kind. Willful ignorance of the Lord's will is in itself sin, and the sin which comes of it is grievous in the sight of the Lord our God.

Blessed be God, the solemn declaration of the text concerning the guilt of sins of ignorance need not drive us to despair, for a sacrifice is permitted for it. The offender on discovering his error might bring his offering, and pay the trespass money for any damage which he had caused by his action. And there was a promise given in connection with the atoning sacrifice, which was no doubt often realized by the contrite in heart—"It shall be forgiven him."

Be it ours this morning not to attempt excuse, but to seek forgiveness. May the Spirit of God work in us a tender-hearted confession of that sin which we did not before know to be sin, and while we are confessing, may the divine Spirit apply the precious blood that we may have a sweet sense of pardon. May the Lord make us rejoice in the truth that, "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

The teaching of my text does three things, of which I shall speak. First, by it *the commandment is honored*. Secondly, by it *the conscience enlightened*. Thirdly, by it *the sacrifice is endeared*.

I. By the divine declaration that sins of ignorance are really sins **THE COMMANDMENT OF GOD IS HONORED.**

I need not multiply words to prove it so. The law of God is by this solemn sentence lifted into a place of dignity. If it be really so, that to break one of its precepts involves us in guilt, even if we did not know that we were offending, then is the law indeed enthroned upon a terrible eminence and girt around with fire.

Enlarging upon this thought I would observe, first, dear friends, that *hereby the law is declared to be the supreme authority over men*. The law is supreme, not conscience. Conscience is differently enlightened in different men, and the ultimate appeal as to right and wrong cannot be to your half-blinded conscience or to mine.

I might condemn what you allow, and you would scarcely tolerate what I approve—we are neither of us judges, but both alike culprits upon trial when we come under the law. The ultimate appeal will be to, "Thus saith the LORD"—to the law itself, which is the only perfect standard by which the deeds and actions of men can be measured.

The law, from the supremacy into which this text lifts it, says to us, "You will not be excused because your conscience was unenlightened, nor because it was so perverse as to put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. My demands are the same in every jot and tittle, whatever your conscience may condemn or allow."

Conscience has lost much of its sensitiveness through the Fall and through our actual sins, but the law is not lowered to suit our perverted understanding. If we break the law, although our conscience may not blame us, or even inform us of the wrong, yet still the deed is recorded against us—we must bear our iniquity.

The law is also set above human opinion, for this man says, "You may do that," and a second claims that he may do the other, but the law changes not according to man's judgment, and does not bend itself to the spirit of the age or the tastes of the period. It is the supreme judge, from whose infallible decision there is no appeal. Right is right though all condemn, and wrong is wrong though all approve. The law is the balance of the sanctuary, accurate to a hair, sensitive even to the small dust of the balance.

Opinions continually differ, but the law is one and invariable. According to the moral sensitiveness of a man will be his estimate of the act which he performs, but would you have the law vary according to man's fickle judgment? If *you* would desire such a thing, God's infinite wisdom forbids it. The law is a fixed quantity, a settled standard, and if we fall short of it, though we know it not, yet are we guilty, and must bear our iniquity unless an atonement be made.

This exalts the law above the custom of nations and periods, for men are very wont to say, “It is true I did so and so, which I could not have defended in itself—but then, it is the way of the trade, other houses do so, general opinion and public consent have endorsed the custom. I do not therefore see how I can act differently from others, for if I did so I should be very singular, and should probably be a loser through my scrupulosity.”

Yes, but the customs of men are not the standard of right. Where they have been at first correct through strong Christian influence, the tendency is for them to deteriorate and sink below the proper standard. Habit, perpetuity, and universality of wrong, at last enable men to call the false by the same name as the true, but there is no real change wrought thereby—the customary wrong is still a wrong, the universal lie is still a falsehood.

God’s law is not changed. Our Lord Jesus said, “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail.” The divine law overrides custom, tradition, and opinion—these have no more effect upon the eternal standard than the fall of a leaf upon the stars of heaven. “If a man does any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD; though he wist it not, yet is he guilty.”

All the customs in the world cannot make wrong right, and if everybody that ever lived from Adam down to this hour had done a wrong thing and declared it to be righteous, yet would it make no moral difference in the evil deed. A thousand ages of whitewashing cannot make a vice a virtue. God’s command stands fast forever, and he who breaks it must bear his punishment. Thus you see that by the declaration of my text the law is enshrined in the place of reverence.

Note again, *if a sin of ignorance renders us guilty, what must a willful sin do?* Do you not perceive at once how the law is again set on high by this? For if an inadvertent transgression covers the soul with guilt which cannot be put away without a sacrifice, then what shall we say of those who knowingly and advisedly, with malice aforethought, break the commands of God?

What shall we say of those who, again and again and again, being often reprov'd, harden their necks, and go on in their iniquities? Surely their sin is exceeding sinful. If I may become a transgressor by breaking a law of God which I did not know, by what name shall I be called if, when I do know it, I presumptuously lift up my hand to defy the lawgiver and violate His statutes.

Thus again, dear friends, by the teaching of our text, *men were driven to study the law*. For if they were at all right-hearted they said, “Let us know what God would have us do. We do not wish to be leaving His commands undone, or committing transgressions against His prohibitory precepts through not knowing better.” They would, therefore, run to the prophets and other teachers, and ask them, “Tell us what are the statutes of the law of God? What has JEHOVAH ordained?”

And right-minded men would be led by a desire to obey, to become earnest students of the will of God—as I trust, beloved friends, we also shall be moved to be. Lest we should break the law through not knowing its commands, let us make it our continual study. Let us search it day and night. Let it be the man of our counsels, and the guide of our lives.

Be this the prayer of each one of us. What I know not, O my God, teach Thou me. Make me to understand the way of Your precepts. Let me not be as the horse and the mule, which have no understanding, but enlighten me in my inmost heart, lest I ignorantly transgress Your commandments.

Thus, you see, the law was glorified in the midst of Israel, and men were led to search it, to know what the Lord required of them. A holy fear, lest they should inadvertently fall into sin, moved them to diligent reading of the commands. Thus they were often checked when about to perform a hasty deed, and were made to ask themselves, “What would the Lord have us do?”

Without such an ordinance as our text, they might have acted hurriedly, and so have sinned, and sinned again, in the blundering haste of a thoughtless spirit. But by this they were checked in their heedlessness, called to consideration, and made to have the fear of God always before them. They were thereby warned to look at their actions and examine their ways, lest through thoughtlessness they should sin against the law.

And you will see at once, beloved, that *this would lead every earnest Israelite to teach his children God's law*, lest his sons should err through ignorance or inadvertence. The pious Jew carefully taught his children all things concerning the Passover and the yearly feasts, and the daily sacrifice, and the worship of the temple, and what was due to the service of God. He made him learn the moral law, and endeavored, as far as he could, to enlighten his conscience, knowing that “for the soul to be without knowledge is not good.”

He said to his son, “Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life.” Without knowledge a man will fall into many pitfalls and snares, which the true light would have enabled him to avoid. Good men, therefore, spent much of their time in training their families. “Come, you children,” they said, “hearken unto me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord.”

They were also zealous to make known the law as far as they could, saying each one to his fellow, “Know the Lord.” Fear of committing sins of ignorance was a spur to national education, and tended greatly to make all Israel honor the law of the Lord.

I close these thoughts by noting that to me *the sin-revealing power of the law is wonderfully displayed* as I read my text. I know the law to be exceeding broad. I know its eye to be like that of an eagle, and I know its hand to be heavy as iron, but when I find that it accuses me of sins which I wist not, that it searches the secret parts of my soul, and brings to light what my own eye of self-examination has never seen, then am I filled with trembling.

When I discover that I may stand before the bar of God charged with iniquities which I shall be quite unable to deny, but of which at this moment I am not at all conscious, then am I bowed in the dust. What a law this must be! What a light is this in which our conduct is placed!

If you set your character side by side with that of your fellow man, you may begin to compliment yourself. If you look at it by the dim candlelight of public opinion, you may begin to flatter yourself. If you even go no further than a diligent search by the aid of your own judgment, you may still be somewhat at ease.

But if the light in which we shall stand at last will be the light of JEHOVAH'S own ineffable purity, if His omniscience detects iniquity where we have not perceived it, and if His justice will visit sin even where we were not cognizant of it, our position is solemn indeed. What a law is this by which men are bound! How severe and searching! How holy and how pure must God Himself be?

O thrice holy JEHOVAH, we are filled with awe of You! The heavens are not clear in Your sight, and You charged Your angels with folly, how then can we be just with You? After reading this, Your own Word, we see how justly You will charge *us* with folly, and how impossible it is for us to hope to be justified in Your sight by any righteousness of our own. Thus, my brethren, we see that the law of God is honored.

II. Secondly, by the teaching of the text, THE CONSCIENCE IS AROUSED.

I feel, when I read these words, as if a great gulf opens at my feet, “If a soul sin, and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD; though he wist it not, yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.”

You know, dear friend, that you are a willful sinner, and have broken God's law consciously, but if you may be a sinner, though you wist it not, how the solid earth rolls away from under you as in a dreadful earthquake, and almost like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, you stand in dread as the devouring fire pours forth from the mysterious abyss.

Nothing which is human can be thought certain after this. Think of the sins you may have committed—sins of thoughts which have too rapidly flitted through your mind for you to recollect them—thoughts which pass over your mind as mere imaginations, like clouds floating aloft in the sky, which cast a flying shadow over the landscape and are gone.

Think of your evil thoughts, your pleasure in hearing of uncleanness, your desires, wishes, and excuses of evil—these are all iniquities. Then, too, our words, our hurried words of anger, of falsehood, of petulance, and pride. Our idle words, our murmuring words, our unbelieving words, our irreverent

words—words scarcely meant, which fell from us without thought. What a multitude of these may be laid at our door, and all of them are full of sin!

And actions in which we have excused ourselves very thoroughly, because we have never looked at them in God's light, but have been content to regard them in the dim ray of custom—are there not many of these which contain sin? When I think of all the forms of evil, I am compelled to fear that much of our life may have been a continuous sin, and yet we may have never condemned ourselves, or even thought about it!

Remember that great command, "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." How far short of that you and I have come!

Mentally we have not served God to perfection, neither have the affections loved Him with all possible intensity, nor has the soul with its desires gone after Him so eagerly as it should. Verily, we are guilty, guilty much more than we have ever imagined.

And as to that second command, "Thou shalt love your neighbor as thyself"—who among us has done so? Have we loved our fellow man with a love that even approximated to our love to ourselves? O God, amid the varied lights of Your ten commands, all comprehended in the white light of that one word "love," we stand convicted, and we perceive that our ignorance affords no covering for us! We hear Your voice and tremble before it whilst You say, "Though he wist it not, yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity."

Our ignorance, dear friends, is evidently very great. I do not suppose that the best instructed Christian here will claim to possess much wisdom. The usual rule is that the more we really know the more conscious we are of the littleness of our knowledge. Our ignorance, therefore, I may take for granted all round, has been very great.

What scope, then, has there been beneath the mantle of that mist of ignorance for sin to hide and multiply. As the conies swarm in the holes of the rock, the bats in the sunless caves of the earth, and the fish in the deep abysses of the sea, so do our sins swarm in the hidden parts of our nature. "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults!"

The ignorance of very many persons is to a large degree willful. Many do not read the Bible at all, or very seldom, and then without desiring to know its meaning. Even some professing Christians take their religion from a monthly magazine, or from some standard book written by a human author, and adopted by their sect—but few go to the Word of God itself—they are content to drink of the muddied streams of human teaching instead of filling their cups at the crystal fount of revelation itself.

Now, brethren, if you are ignorant of anything concerning God's mind and will, it is not, in the case of any of you, for want of the Book, nor for want of a willing guide to instruct you in it, for, behold, the Holy Spirit waits to be gracious to you in this respect. "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that gives liberally, and upbraideth not." If we do not know, we may know it. Our ignorance has been willful if in this privileged country we remain ignorant of the Gospel.

Where there is confessedly such a mass of willful ignorance, who among us can imagine what myriads of evil shapes of sin swarm in the grim darkness? The prince of darkness holds his court in the blackness of that ignorance which we ourselves have willfully created by refusing to come to the light. The enemy sows the seed of evil by night, and amid Egyptian darkness, the accursed grain grows to an awful ripeness and brings forth a hundredfold. Break in, O light eternal! Break in upon the dimness of our ignorance, lest it thicken into the eternal midnight of hell.

Now, *it will be vain for any man to say in his mind, as I fear some will do, "God is hard in thus dealing with us."* If you say thus, O man, I ask you to remember God's answer. Christ puts your rebellious speech into the mouth of the unfaithful one who hid his talent. He said, "I knew that you were an austere man, gathering where thou hadst not strawed."

What did his master say? Instead of excusing himself, which is far beneath the dignity of the great God to do, he took the man at his own confession, and He said, "Thou knewest that I was an austere

man, taking up that I laid not down, and reaping that I did not sow: wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury?"

If you know God to be hard, or say you think so, then recollect how earnest you ought to be to come up to His standard. For, call that standard what you like, it is *the* standard. Count it to be severe if you will, it is binding upon you for all that, and by it you will have to be tried at the last, so that there is no escape for any one of us by impeaching our Maker. Wiser far is it to submit and crave for mercy.

Let us recollect, in order that our doctrine may appear less strange, that *it is according to the analogy of nature* that when God's laws are broken, ignorance of those laws should not prevent the penalty from falling upon the offenders. The natural law is an instructive type of the moral and spiritual law, and from it we may gather much teaching. Here is the law of gravitation, by which objects are attracted to each other. It is inevitable that heavy matters will fall to the earth.

A man thinks that he can fly—he puts on his wings and ascends a tower. He is fully persuaded that he is about to mount like a bird. Spectators are invited to behold the wonder and expectations are excited. The law of gravitation is against the inventor, but he does not think so.

Poor man, he firmly believes in his own flight, but the moment he leaps from the tower he falls to the earth and is gathered up a mangled corpse. Why did not God suspend His natural law because the man did not intentionally violate it? No, the law is stern, and changes not, and he who offends in ignorance pays the penalty.

I have read that the Chinese at Peking often endure severe winters. They have coal just under them, but they refuse to dig the coal for fear they should disturb the equilibrium of the earth, and cause the celestial empire, which is now at the top of the universe, to turn over to the bottom. The celestials are thoroughly conscientious in this belief, but does the weather alter to suit their philosophy? Does God make them warm in winter without coal? By no manner of means. If they refuse the means of warmth, they must be cold—their ignorance does not raise the temperature so much as half a degree.

A physician, with the best possible motive, endeavors to find out a new drug, that he may alleviate pain. In conducting his experiments, he inhales a deadly gas, which he did not know to be fatal. He dies as surely as if he had willfully taken poison. The law is not suspended to reward his benevolence, and avert the fatal result of his mistake. Whatever his motives may have been, he has broken a natural law, and the appointed penalty is exacted of him. Verily, as it is in the natural, so will you find it to be in the spiritual world.

But let us go into the question a little, by way of argument. *It is of necessity that it should be according to this declaration.* It is not possible that ignorance should be a justification of sin. For, first, if it did so, it would follow that the more ignorant a man was the more innocent he would be. It would then assuredly be true that ignorance is bliss, for perfect ignorance would be under no responsibilities and free from all sin.

All that you and I would have to do, in order to be perfectly clear from all charge, would be to know nothing. To burn the Bible, refuse to hear the Gospel, and rush away from civilization would be the nearest way to freedom from all guilt.

Do you not see that if things were so, knowledge might be regarded as a curse, and that the light which Christ comes to bring into the world would be a man's most solemn affliction if it shone upon him? I proclaim that, in my unregenerate state, if I had been sure that ignorance would have rid me of responsibility, I would have closed every avenue of knowledge, and would have labored to abide in darkness. But such a supposition is not to be borne—it is inconsistent with the first principles of common sense.

If, again, the guilt of an action depended entirely upon a man's knowledge, we should have no fixed standard at all by which to judge right and wrong. It would be variable according to the enlightenment of each man, and there would be no ultimate and infallible court of appeal.

Suppose the statute book of our own country should be constructed on the principle that in proportion only to a man's knowing the law should be his guilt in breaking it, we should have numbers

of persons truthfully pleading ignorance, and a great many more endeavoring to do so—and such a simple and easy method of obtaining acquittal would become popular at once.

The art of forgetting would be diligently studied, and ignorance would become an enviable inheritance. We would have gentlemen brought up for being drunk and disorderly, who had paid forty shillings and costs a score of times, who would still say that they did not know that they could be punished again since they had paid the fine so often. Ignorance would be so continually pleaded that there would be practically an end of all law, and the very foundations of the state would be undermined. The thing cannot be endured—it is absurd upon its very face.

Moreover, ignorance of the law of God is itself a breach of the law, since we are bidden to know and remember it. Thus spoke the Lord by His servant Moses, “Ye shall lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thine house, and upon thy gates.” Knowledge of the law was a duty and ignorance a crime.

Can it be possible, then, that one sin is to be an excuse for another? It is a sin on a man’s part to refuse to search into the Word of God. Can it be that because he commits this sin, he is to be excused for the faults into which his willful ignorance leads him? It is out of the question.

If sins of ignorance are not sins, then Christ’s intercession was altogether a superfluity. You remember that our text last Sabbath morning was, “He made intercession for the transgressors,” and we illustrated it by the text, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” But if there is no sin when a man does not know what he does, why did our Lord pray for pardon for ignorant transgressors? Why ask forgiveness, if there be no wrong?

The correct way of putting it would have been, “Father, I do not ask You to forgive, for there is no offense, seeing that they know not what they do.” But by the fact of His having pleaded for forgiveness, it is clearly proved that there is guilt in the sin of ignorance.

The work of the Holy Spirit, too, would be an evil instead of a good work in the hearts of men, if ignorance were an excuse for sin, for He has come to convince the world of sin. But if unconvinced of sin they are innocent of it, why convince them of it? Of what use is it to quicken a conscience, and to enlighten it, and make it bleed over a transgression, if it would be no transgression, provided that conscience had never been made cognizant of it? Who is he that shall so blaspheme the Holy Ghost as to say that His work is needless and even idle? Sins of ignorance, therefore, must be sinful.

Look at one other consequence which would follow from the contrary doctrine. The more wicked a man is, the more hardened he becomes, and the more ignorant he grows as to the beauty of holiness. Everybody knows that. A sin which troubles a child when at home with his godly father will not trouble him at all when he gets to be fifty years of age, provided he has indulged in a course of vice.

From one sin to another the man descends, and as he descends, his mental and moral eyes grow dim, and he perceives less and less the sinfulness of sin. If a man who has arrived at the utmost pitch of infamy can commit any atrocity without the smallest idea of its being wrong—if he can cheat, and lie, and swear, and I know not what, and yet call it all nothing, and wipe his mouth—if that man is guilty of less sin because of the growing deadness of his conscience, and the limited degree of his spiritual knowledge, then verily things are turned upside down.

But it is not so. The test of the guilt of an action is not a man’s conscience, nor his perception of evil, nor his knowledge, but the law itself. For sin is a transgression of the law, be that law known or unknown. The statute stands immovable and immutable—and the sinner, blind though he may be—if he fall upon it shall be broken.

Once again, I am sure that many of us now present must have *felt the truth of this in our own hearts*. You who love the Lord and hate unrighteousness, must in your lives have come to a point of greater illumination, where you have said, “I see a certain action to be wrong. I have been doing it for years, but

God knows I would not have done it if I had thought it wrong. Even now I see that other people are doing it, and thinking it right—but I cannot do so any more. My conscience has at last received new light, and I must make a change at once.”

In such circumstances, did it ever come to your mind to say, “What I have done was not wrong, because I did not know it to be wrong”? Far from it. You have justly said to yourself, “My sin in this matter is not so great as if I had transgressed willfully with my eyes open, knowing it to be sin.” But yet you have accused yourself of the fault, and mourned over it. At least I know *I have*.

A man like John Newton, who in his early years had been connected with the slave trade, and thought it right, as most Christian men did in those times, did not excuse himself in his after years when his conscience was aroused to the iniquity of slavery.

Do you think that the good man would say, “I was quite right in doing as I did, because everybody else did it, and I knew no better”? Ah, no. It was right or wrong whether he knew it or not, and his conscience, when it became enlightened, told him so. My conscience and your conscience may need to be enlightened about several matters which now we are doing complacently enough, without any notion that we are sinning—but the action bears its own character of right or wrong—whatever our judgment may be.

Does not this show us the utter impossibility of salvation by works? If you expect to be saved by keeping the law, you must be a bolder man than I dare to be. I know that I cannot keep the law of God, and the doctrine of my text makes it impossible beyond all other impossibility, because the law accuses me of doing wrong even when I do not intend it and am not conscious of it.

O you who hope to be saved by works, how can you ever enjoy a moment’s peace? If you think your righteousness will save you if it is perfect, how can you ever be sure that it is perfect? You may have sinned ignorantly, and that will spoil it all. Think of this, and be dismayed.

I beseech you, believe our testimony when we assure you that the road to heaven by your own righteousness is blocked up. Ten great Krupp guns which fling, each one of them, a bolt huge enough to dash your soul to hell, stand pointed against you if you attempt to make your way to heaven by that steep ascent.

There is another path. Yon cross directs you to it, for it is the signpost of the King’s highway. That royal road to heaven is paved with grace—God forgives the guilty freely because they trust in Christ. That path is so safe that no lion shall be there, neither shall any ravenous beast go up thereon—but as for the road of legal righteousness, attempt it not, but hearken to what we have further to say to you.

III. By the grand and awful truth of the text THE SACRIFICE IS ENDEARED.

Just according to our sense of sin must be our value of the sacrifice. God’s way of delivering those who sinned ignorantly was not by denying their sin and passing over it, but by accepting an atonement for it. “The priest shall make an atonement concerning his sin wherein he hath erred, and wist it not, and it shall be forgiven him.”

The forgiveness was to come through atonement. How greatly you and I need an atonement for our sins of ignorance, seeing our ignorance is great! O blood of Christ, how much we need You! O divine Substitute, how greatly do we require Your cleansing blood!

How gracious it is on God’s part to be willing to accept an atonement, for if His law had said there shall be no atonement possible, it would have been just—but infinite grace devised the plan by which, through the sacrifice of another, pardon is possible for the ignorant sinner. Behold how generous God is, for He has Himself provided this sacrifice.

The man who had erred under the law had to bring an offering himself, but ours is brought for us. Jesus the Son of God was not spared by the great Father, but He gave Him out of His bosom that He might bleed and die. The incarnate God is the great bearer of the sin of ignorance, and today He can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way, for He has made an atonement for them.

Under the law this atonement was to be a ram without blemish. Our Lord had no sin, nor shade of sin. He is the spotless victim which the law requires. All that justice, in its most severe mood, could require from man by way of penalty our Lord Jesus Christ has rendered. For in addition to His sacrifice for the sin, He has presented a recompense for the damage, as the person who sinned ignorantly was bound to do.

He has recompensed the honor of God, and He has recompensed every man whom we have injured. My brother, has another injured you? Well, since Christ has given Himself to you, there is a full recompense made to you, even as there has been made to God. Blessed be His name, we may rest in this sacrifice. How supremely efficacious it is. It takes away iniquity, transgression, and sin.

My dear hearers, you are bound to confess your sins to God—but if pardon were offered you upon the condition that you should mention every sin you have committed—not one of you would ever be saved. We do not know, and if we ever did know, we cannot remember all our shortcomings, and all our transgressions.

But the mercy is, though *we* do not know them, HE does, and He can blot them out. Though we cannot weep over them with a distinct knowledge of them, because they are not known to us, yet Jesus bled for them with a distinct knowledge of them all—and they are all put away by His unknown sufferings—all cast into the deeps where an angel's eye can never trace them.

By His agonies immense, unsearchable, endured for us, and by His merits, infinite as His divine nature, our Redeemer has taken away that thick darkness of iniquity which we were not capable of comprehending.

O believing sinner, the debt you know not, your glorious Surety has nevertheless borne and discharged for you. Blessings on His name. Rest in Him, and then go your way and rejoice. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—PSALM 51

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—189, 51 (Verse III.), 564

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.