

BARABBAS PREFERRED TO JESUS

NO. 595

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“Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.”
John 18:40.

THE custom of delivering a prisoner upon the day of the Passover was intended, no doubt, as an act of grace on the part of the Roman authorities towards the Jews. And by the Jews it may have been accepted as a significant compliment to their Passover. Since on that day they, themselves, were delivered out of the land of Egypt, they may have thought it to be most fitting that some imprisoned person should obtain his liberty. There was no warrant, however, in Scripture for this—it was never commanded by God—and it must have had a very injurious effect upon public justice. The ruling authority would discharge a criminal, quite irrespective of his crimes or of his repentance—letting him loose upon society—simply and only because a certain day must be celebrated in a peculiar manner.

Since some one prisoner must be delivered on the paschal day, Pilate thinks that he has now an opportunity of allowing the Savior to escape without at all compromising his character with the authorities of Rome. He asks the people which of the two they will prefer, a notorious thief then in custody, or the Savior. It is probable that Barabbas had been up, till that moment, obnoxious to the crowd. And yet, notwithstanding his former unpopularity, the multitude, instigated by the priests, forget all his faults and prefer him to the Savior!

Who Barabbas was, we cannot exactly tell. His name, as you, in a moment will understand, even if you have not the slightest acquaintance with Hebrew, signifies “his father’s son.” “Bar” signifying “son,” as when Peter is called Simon Barjona, son of Jonah. The other part of his name, “Abbas,” signifying “father”—“Abba” being the word which we use in our filial aspirations, “Abba Father.” Barabbas, then, is the “son of his father,” and some mystics think that there is an imputation here, that he was particularly and specially a son of Satan. Others conjecture that it was an endearing name and was given him because he was his father’s darling, an indulged child. His father’s boy, as we say.

And these writers add that indulged children often turn out to be imitators of Barabbas and are the most likely persons to become injurious to their country, griefs to their parents and curses to all about them. If it is so, taken in connection with the case of Absalom and especially of Eli’s sons, it is a warning to parents that they err not in excessive indulgence of their children.

Barabbas appears to have committed at least three crimes—he was imprisoned for murder, for sedition and for felony—a sorry combination of offenses, certainly. We may well pity the sire of such a son. This wretch is brought out and set in competition with Christ! The multitude are appealed to. Pilate thinks that from the sense of shame they really cannot possibly prefer Barabbas. But they are so bloodthirsty against the Savior and are so moved by the priests, that with one consent—there does not appear to have been a single objecting voice, nor one hand held up to the contrary—with a marvelous unanimity of vice, they cry, “Not this man, but Barabbas!”

Though they must have known, since he was a notable well-known offender, that Barabbas was a murderer, a felon and a traitor, they still preferred him. This fact is very significant. There is more teaching in it than at first sight we might imagine. Have we not here, first of all, in this act of the deliverance of the sinner and the binding of the innocent, a sort of type of that great work which is accomplished by the death of our Savior? You and I may fairly take our stand by the side of Barabbas. We have robbed God of His Glory! We have been seditious traitors against the government of Heaven—if he who hates his brother is a murderer, we also have been guilty of that sin.

Here we stand before the Judgment Seat. The Prince of Life is bound for us and we are allowed to go free. The Lord delivers us and acquits us, while the Savior, without spot or blemish, or shadow of a fault, is led forth to Crucifixion. Two birds were taken in the rite of the cleansing of a leper. The one bird was killed and its blood was poured into a basin. The other bird was dipped in this blood and then, with its wings all crimson, it was set free to fly into the open field.

The bird slain well pictures the Savior and every soul that has, by faith, been dipped in His blood flies upward towards Heaven singing sweetly in joyous liberty—owing its life and its liberty entirely to Him who was slain!

It comes to this—Barabbas must die or Christ must die—you, the sinner must perish, or Christ Immanuel, the Immaculate, must die. He dies that we may be delivered! Oh, have we all a participation in such a deliverance today? And though we have been robbers, traitors, and murderers, can we rejoice that Christ has delivered us from the curse of the Law, having been made a curse for us?

The transaction has yet another voice. This episode in the Savior's history shows that in the judgment of the people, Jesus Christ was a greater offender than Barabbas. And, for once, I may venture to say that vox populi, (the voice of the people), which in itself was a most infamous injustice—if it is read in the light of the imputation of our sins to Christ—was vox Dei, (the voice of God)! Christ, as He stood covered with His people's sins, had more sin laid upon Him than that which rested upon Barabbas. In Him was no sin—He was altogether incapable of becoming a sinner—holy, harmless and undefiled is Christ Jesus! But He takes the whole load of His people's guilt upon Himself by imputation and as Jehovah looks upon Him, He sees more guilt lying upon the Savior than even upon this atrocious sinner, Barabbas.

Barabbas goes free—innocent—in comparison with the tremendous weight which rests upon the Savior. Think, Beloved, then, how low your Lord and Master stooped to be thus numbered with the transgressors. Watts has put it strongly, but, I think, none too strongly—

*“His honor and His breath
Were taken both away,
Joined with the wicked in His death,
And made as vile as they.”*

He was so, in the estimation of the people and before the bar of justice—for the sins of the whole company of the faithful were made to meet upon Him. “The Lord has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all.” What that iniquity must have been no heart can conceive, much less can any tongue tell! Measure it by the griefs He bore and then, if you can guess what these were, you can form some idea of what must have been the guilt which sunk Him lower before the bar of justice than even Barabbas himself.

Oh, what condescension is here! The Just One dies for the unjust! He bears the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. Yet, again, there seems to me to be a third lesson before I come to that which I want to enforce from the text. Our Savior knew that His disciples would in all ages be hated by the world far more than outward sinners. Full often the world has been more willing to put up with murderers, thieves, and drunkards, than with Christians. And it has fallen to the lot of some of the best and most holy of men to be so slandered and abused that their names have been cast out as evil, scarcely worthy to be written in the same list with criminals.

Now Christ has sanctified these sufferings of His people from the slander of their enemies by bearing just such sufferings Himself, so that, my Brethren, if you or I should find ourselves charged with crimes which we abhor—if our heart should be ready to burst under the accumulation of slanderous venom—let us lift up our head and feel that in all this we have a Comrade who has true fellowship with us, even the Lord Jesus Christ who was rejected when Barabbas was selected! Expect no better treatment than your Master! Remember that the disciple is not above his Lord. If they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, much more will they call them of His household. And if they prefer the murderer to Christ, the day may not be distant when they will prefer even a murderer to you.

These things seem to me to lie upon the surface—I now come to our more immediate subject. First, we shall consider the sin as it stands in evangelical history. Secondly, we shall observe that this is the sin of the whole world. Thirdly, that this sin we ourselves were guilty of before conversion. And fourthly, that this is, we fear, the sin of very many persons who are here this morning—we shall talk with them and expostulate, praying that the Spirit of God may change their hearts and lead them to accept the Savior.

I. A few minutes may be profitably spent in CONSIDERING, THEN, THE SIN AS WE FIND IT IN THIS HISTORY. They preferred Barabbas to Christ. The sin will be more clearly seen if we remember that the Savior had done no ill. No law, either of God or man, had He broken. He might truly have used the words of Samuel—“Behold, here I am: witness against me before the Lord and before His anointed: whose ox have I taken? Or whose ass have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or of whose hand have I received any bribe to blind my eyes? And I will restore it to you.”

Out of that whole assembled crowd there was not one who would have had the presumption to accuse the Savior of having done him damage. So far from this they could but acknowledge that He had only conferred great temporal blessings upon them! O ravening multitude, has He not fed you when you were hungry? Did He not multiply the loaves and fishes for you? Did He not heal your lepers with His touch? Did He not cast out devils from your sons and daughters? Raise up you paralytics? Give sight to your blind and open the ears of your deaf? For which of these good works do you conspire to kill Him?

Among that assembled multitude there were, doubtless, some who owed to Him priceless gifts and yet, though all of them His debtors if they had known it, they clamor against Him as though He were the worst trouble of their lives—a pest and a pestilence to the place where He dwelt. Was it His teaching that they complained of? Where did His teaching offend against morality? Where against the best interests of man? If you observe the teaching of Christ there was never any like it, even judged of by how far it would subserve human welfare. Here was the sum and substance of His doctrine, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.”

His precepts were of the mildest form. Did He bid them draw the sword and expel the Roman, or ride on in a ruthless career of carnage and rapine? Did He stimulate them to let loose their unbridled passions? Did He tell them to seek, first of all, their own advantage and not to care for their neighbor’s needs? No! Every righteous State must own Him to be its best pillar, and the commonwealth of manhood must acknowledge Him to be its conservator. And yet, for all this, there they are, hounded on by their priests, seeking His blood and crying, “Let Him be crucified! Let Him be crucified!”

His whole intent, evidently, was their good. What did He preach for? No selfish motive could have been urged. Foxes had holes and the birds of the air had nests, but He had not where to lay His head. The charity of a few of His disciples kept Him from absolute starvation! Cold mountains and the midnight air witnessed the fervor of His lonely prayers for the multitudes who now are hating Him. He lived for others—they could see this. They could not have observed Him during the three years of His ministry without saying, “Never lived there such an unselfish soul as this.” They must have known, the most of them—and the rest might have known, had they enquired ever so little—that He had no object whatever in being here on earth except that of seeking the good of men.

For which of these things do they clamor that He may be crucified? For which of His good works, for which of His generous words, for which of His holy deeds will they fasten His hands to the wood and His feet to the tree? With unreasonable hatred, with senseless cruelty they only answer to the question of Pilate—“Why, what evil has He done?”—with, “Let Him be crucified! Let Him be crucified!”

The true reason of their hate, no doubt, lay in the natural hatred of all men to perfect goodness. Man feels that the presence of goodness is a silent witness against his own sin and therefore he longs to get rid of it. To be too holy in the judgment of men is a great crime, for it rebukes their sin. If the holy man has not the power of words, his very *life* is one loud witness-bearing for God against the sins of His creatures. This inconvenient protesting led the wicked to desire the death of the Holy and Just One.

Besides, the *priests* were at their backs. It is a sad and lamentable thing, but it is often the case that the people are better than their religious teachers. At the present moment the laity of the Church of England, as a whole, have honest consciences and would have their Prayer Book revised tomorrow if their voices could be heard. But their clerics care far too little about the Truth of God and are not very particular how they swear, or with whom they associate. So long as their Church can be kept together, Father Ignatius shall be heard in their assemblies, although Christ’s call to the Church to purify herself, awakens only resentment and ill-will.

No matter that the throats of certain clergymen were exercised in hissing for a moment at the apparition of the bold Anglican monk—he is one of themselves, a brother of their own order—and their Church is responsible for all that he does. Let them come out and separate themselves and then we shall know that they abhor this modern popery. But so long as they sit in the same assembly and are members of the same Church, the sin is theirs, and we shall not cease to denounce both it and them!

If Evangelical clergymen remain in communion with Papists, now that they come out in their full colors, I will cease to say that they violate their consciences, but I shall doubt whether they have any consciences at all! Brethren, it is still the case that the people are better than their teachers. This people would not have crucified Christ had not the clergy of the day, the priests, the endowed ministers, cried out, “Let Him be crucified!” He was the Dissenter, the heretic, schis-

matic, the troubler in Israel. He it was who cried aloud against the faults of their establishment! He it was who could not be put down—the ignorant man from Galilee who would continue to clamor against them! The mischief-maker and therefore, “Let Him be crucified! Let Him be crucified!” Anything is good enough for the man who talks about reform and advocates changes in established rules.

No doubt bribery also was used in this case. Had not Rabbi Simon paid the multitude? Was there not a hope of some feast, after the Passover was over, to those who would use their throats against the Savior? Beside, there was the multitude going that way. And so if any had compassion they held their tongue. Often they say that, “Discretion is the better part of valor,” and truly there must be many valorous men, for they have much of valor’s better part, discretion. If they did not join in the shout, yet at least they would not disturb the others and so there was but one cry, “Away with Him! Away with Him! It is not fit that He should live.”

What concentrated scorn there is in this fortieth verse! It is not, “this Jesus.” They would not foul their mouths with His name, but this *fellow*—“this devil,” if you will. To Barabbas they give the respect of mentioning his name! But “this”—whom they hate so much—they will not even stoop to mention. We have looked, then, at this great sin as it stands in history.

II. But now let us look, in the second place, AT THIS INCIDENT AS SETTING FORTH THE SIN WHICH HAS BEEN THE GUILT OF THE WORLD IN ALL AGES, AND WHICH IS THE WORLD’S GUILT NOW. When the Apostles went forth to preach the Gospel and the Truth of God had spread through many countries, there were severe edicts passed by the Roman Emperors. Against whom were these edicts framed? Against the foul offenders of that day?

It is well known that the whole Roman Empire was infested with vices such as the cheek of modesty would blush to hear named. The first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans is a most graphic picture of the state of society throughout the entire Roman dominions. When severe laws were framed, why were they not proclaimed against these atrocious vices? It is scarcely fit that men should go unpunished who are guilty of crimes such as the Apostle Paul has mentioned, but I find no edicts against these things—I find that they were borne with and scarcely mentioned with censure.

But burning, dragging at the heels of wild horses, the sword, imprisonment, tortures of every kind were used against whom, do you think? Against the innocent, humble followers of Christ, who, so far from defending themselves, were willing to suffer all these things and presented themselves like sheep at the shambles, willing to endure the butcher’s knife! The cry of the world, under the persecutions of Imperial Rome, was, “Not Christ, but Sodomites and murderers and thieves—we will bear with any of these—but not with Christ! Away with His followers from the earth!”

Then the world changed its tactics. It became nominally Christian and Antichrist came forth in all its blasphemous glory. The Pope of Rome put on the triple crown and called himself the Vicar of Christ. Then came in the abomination of the worship of saints, angels, images and pictures. Then came the mass and I know not what, of detestable error. And what did the world say? “Popery forever!” Down went every knee and every head bowed before the sovereign representative of Peter at Rome! The Church of Rome was equal in sin to Barabbas.

No! I do but compliment Barabbas when I mention him in the same breath with many of the popes, for their character was foul and black through and through, till even those who superstitiously looked upon them as infallible in their office could not defend their personal characters. The world chose the harlot of Rome and she who was drunk with the wine of her abominations had every eye to gaze upon her with admiration! And Christ’s Gospel was forgotten—buried in a few old books and almost extinguished in darkness.

Since that day the world has changed its tactics yet again. In many parts of the earth Protestantism is openly acknowledged and the Gospel is preached, but what then? Then comes in Satan and another Barabbas, the Barabbas of mere ceremonialism and mere attendance at a place of worship is set up. “Yes, we are orthodox, so orthodox, so sound! Yes, we are religious, strictly religious! We attend our meeting house, or go to our Church. We are never absent. We attend every form.” But you have no vital godliness—you have not been born again—you have not passed from death unto life! “That is all right! This will do! So long as we are as good as our neighbors and keep the outward rite, the inward does not matter.”

This which is a foul robbery of God’s Glory, this which murders men’s souls, is the Barabbas of the present age! An outward name to live is set up and is received by those who are dead and many of you now present are quite easy and content though you have never felt the quickening Spirit of God—though you have never been washed in the atoning

blood—yet you are satisfied because you take a seat in some place of worship! You give your guinea, your donation to an hospital, or your subscription to a good object, forgetting and not caring to remember that all the making clean of the outside of the cup and the platter will never avail, unless the inward nature is renewed by the Spirit of the living God!

This is the great Barabbas of the present age and men prefer it before the Savior! That this is true—that the world really loves sin better than Christ—I think I could prove clearly enough by one simple fact. You have observed sometimes Christian men are inconsistent, have you not? The inconsistency was nothing very great if you had judged them according to ordinary rules of conduct. But you are well aware that a worldly man might commit any sin he likes without much censure. But if the Christian man commits ever so little, then hands are held up and the whole world cries, “Shame!”

I do NOT want to have that altered! But I do want just to say this—“There is Mr. So-and-So, who is known to live a fast, wicked, evil life. Well, I do not see that he is universally avoided and reprobated, but on the contrary he is tolerated by most and admired by some. But suppose a Christian man, a well-known professor, to have committed some fault which, compared with this, were not worth mentioning—then what is done? “Oh, publish it! Publish it! Have you heard what Mr. So-and-So did? Have you heard of this hypocrite’s transgression?” Well, what was it? You look at it. It is wrong, it is very wrong—but compared with what you say about it, it is nothing at all.

The world, therefore shows by the difference between the way in which it judges the professedly religious man and that with which it judges its own, that it really *can* tolerate the most abandoned, but *cannot* tolerate the Christian. Of course, the Christian never will be altogether free from imperfections. The world’s enmity is not against the Christian’s imperfections evidently, because they will tolerate greater imperfections in others! The objection must therefore be against the *man*—against the profession which he has taken up and the course which he desires to follow! Watch carefully, Beloved, that you give them no opportunity! When you see that the slightest mistake is laid hold of and exaggerated, in this you see a clear evidence that the world prefers Barabbas to the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now the world will change its various modes of dealing, but it will never love the Church better than it does now. We do not expect to see the world lifted up to become more and more absorbed into the Church, The union of the world with the Church was never the object of our religion. The object of Christ is to gather to Himself a people from among men. It is not the lifting up of *all*, but the calling out of *some*—the making of men to differ, the manifestation of His special and discriminating Grace—the gathering together of a people whom He has formed for Himself.

In this process morality is promoted and men are civilized and improved. But this is only indirectly God’s object and not His immediate end. The immediate end of the Gospel is the salvation of the people whom He has ordained unto eternal life and who, therefore, in due season are led to believe in Him. The world, to the end of the chapter, will be as much at enmity with true Believers as ever it was. “You are not of the world, therefore the world hates you.” This will be as true when Christ shall come as at the present moment. Let us expect it! And when we meet with scorn and persecution, let us not be surprised as though some strange thing had happened to us.

III. I come in the third place, and O for some assistance from on high, to observe that THE SIN OF PREFERRING BARABBAS TO CHRIST WAS THE SIN OF EVERY ONE OF US BEFORE OUR CONVERSION. Will you turn over the leaves of your diary, now, dear Friends, or fly upon the wings of memory to the hole of the pit where you were lifted? Did you not, O you who live close to Christ, did you not once despise Him? What company did you like best? Was it not that of the frivolous, if not that of the profane?

When you sat with God’s people, their talk was very tedious. If they spoke of Divine realities and of experimental subjects, you did not understand them, you felt them to be troublesome. I can look back upon some whom I know now to be most venerable Believers, whom I thought to be a gross nuisance when I heard them talk of the things of God! What were our thoughts about? When we had time for thinking, what were our favorite themes? Not much did we meditate upon eternity. Not much upon Him who came to deliver us from the misery of Hell’s torments. Brothers and Sisters, His great love with which He loved us was never laid to heart by us as it should have been.

No, if we read the story of the Crucifixion, it had no more effect upon our mind than a common tale. We knew not the beauties of Christ! We thought of any trifle sooner than of Him. And what were our pleasures? When we had what we called a day’s enjoyment, where did we seek it? At the foot of the Cross? In the service of the Savior? In communion with Him? Far from it! The further we could remove from godly associations the better pleased we were. Some of us have to

confess with shame that we were never more in our element than when we were without a conscience—when conscience ceased to accuse us and we could plunge into sin with riot.

What was our reading then? Any book sooner than the Bible—and if there had lain in our way anything that would have exalted Christ and extolled Him in our understandings—we would have put the book away as much too dry to please us. Any three-volume heap of nonsense, any light literature—no, perhaps, even worse—would have delighted our eyes and our heart. But thoughts of His eternal delight towards us—thoughts of His matchless passion and His Glory now in Heaven never came across our minds, nor would we endure those who would have led us to such meditations!

What were our aspirations then? We were looking after business, aiming at growing rich, famous for learning or admired for ability. SELF was what we lived for! If we had some regard for others and some desire to benefit our race, *self* was at the bottom of it all. We did not live for God—we could not honestly say, as we woke in the morning, “I hope to live for God today.” At night we could not look back upon the day and say, “We have this day served God.” He was not in our thoughts! Where did we spend our best praise? Did we praise Christ? No! We praised cleverness and when it was in association with sin, we praised it none the less.

We admired those who could most fully minister to our own fleshly delights and felt the greatest love to those who did us the worst injury. Is not this our confession as we review the past? Have I not read the very history of your life? I know I have of my own. Alas, for those dark days in which our besotted soul went after any evil, but would not follow after Christ! It would have been the same today with us if almighty Grace had not made the difference. We may as well expect the river to cease to run to the sea as expect the natural man to turn from the current of his sins! As well might we expect fire to become water, or water to become fire as for the unrenewed heart ever to love Christ!

It was mighty Grace which made us seek the Savior. And as we look back upon our past lives, it must be with mingled feelings of gratitude for the change and of sorrow that we should have been so grossly foolish as to have chosen Barabbas and have said of the Savior, “Let Him be crucified!”

IV. And now I shall come to the closing part of the sermon which is THAT THERE ARE DOUBTLESS MANY HERE WHO THIS DAY PREFER BARABBAS TO OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. Let me first state your case, dear Friends. I would describe it honestly, but at the same time so describe it that you will see your sin in it. And while I am doing so, my object will be to reason with you, and pray the Lord may change your will.

There are many here, I fear, who prefer sin to Christ. I may say, without making a guess I *know* that there are those here who would long ago have been followers of Christ, but that they preferred drunkenness. It is not often, it is not every day, it is not even every week—but there are occasions when they feel as if they must go into company—and as a sure result they return home intoxicated. They are ashamed of themselves—they have expressed as much as that. They have even gone so far as to pray to God for Divine Grace to overcome their habit. But after being the subject of convictions for years, they have up to now made no advance.

It did seem once as if they had conquered it. For a long time there was an abstinence from the fault, but they have gone back to their folly. They have preferred the bestial degrading vice—did I say *bestial*? I insult the beasts!—for beasts are not guilty of such a vice as this! The drunk prefers this degrading vice to Christ Jesus. There stands drunkenness, I see it mirrored before me with all its folly, its witlessness, its greed and filth. But the man chooses all that, and though he has known by head knowledge something concerning the beauty and excellency of Christ, he virtually says of Jesus, “Not this man, but drunkenness!”

Then there are other cases where a favorite lust reigns supreme in their hearts. The men know the evil of the sin and they have good cause to know it. They know also something of the sweetness of religion, for they are never happier than when they come up with God’s people. And they go home sometimes from a solemn sermon, especially if it touches their vice, and they feel, “God has spoken to my soul today and I am brought to a standstill.” But for all that, the temptation comes again and they fall as they have fallen before. I am afraid there are some of you whom no arguments will ever move. You have become so set on this mischief that it will be your eternal ruin.

But oh, think! How will this look when you are in Hell—“I preferred that foul Barabbas of lust to the beauties and perfections of the Savior who came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost!” And yet this is the case, not of some, but of a great multitude who listen to the Gospel and yet prefer sin to its saving power. There may be some here, too, of another class, who prefer gain. It has come to this—if they become truly the Lord’s people, they cannot do in

trade what they now think their trade requires them to do. If they become really and genuinely Believers, they must, of course, become honest! But their trade would not pay, they say, if it were conducted upon honest principles! Or it is such a trade and there are some few such, as ought not to be conducted at all, much less by Christians.

Here comes the turning point—shall I take the gold, or shall I take Christ? True, it is cankered gold, and gold on which a curse must come. It is the fool's pence—it may be it is gain that is extorted from the miseries of the poor—money that would not ever stand the light because it is not fairly come by. Perhaps it is money that will burn its way right through your souls when you get upon your deathbeds. But yet men who love the world, say, “No, not Christ, give me a full purse and away with Christ.”

Others, less base or less honest, cry, “We know His excellence! We wish we could have Him, but we cannot have Him on terms which involve the renunciation of our dearly-beloved gain.” “Not this Man, but Barabbas.” Others say, “I would gladly be a Christian, but then I should lose so many of my acquaintances and friends. For the matter of what it comes to, my friends are not much good to me—they are such friends as are fondest when I have most money to spend with them. They are friends who praise me most when I am often at the ale-house—when I am seen plunging deepest into their vices. I know they do me mischief, but,” says the man, “I could not venture to oppose them. One of them has such a glib tongue and he can make such telling jokes! I could not bear to have him down upon me. And there is another, I have heard him give Christians such stinging names and point at their faults in such a sarcastic manner—I could not run the gauntlet of his tongue! And therefore, though I gladly would be a Christian, yet I will not.”

That is the way you prefer to be a serf, a slave, to the tongue of the scorner sooner than be a free man and take up the Cross and follow Christ! You prefer, I say, not merely by way of allegory, but as matter of *fact*—you prefer Barabbas to the Lord Jesus Christ! I might thus multiply instances but the same principle runs through them all. If anything whatever keeps you back from giving your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ, you are guilty of setting up an opposition candidate to Christ in your soul and you are choosing, “not this Man, but Barabbas.”

Let me occupy a few minutes with pleading Christ's cause with you. Why is it that you reject Christ? Are you not conscious of the many good things which you receive from Him? You would have been dead if it had not been for Him! No, worse than that, you would have been in Hell! God has sharpened the great axe. Justice, like a stern woodman, stood with the axe uplifted, ready to cut you down as a cumberer of the ground. A hand was seen stopping the arm of the Avenger and a voice was heard saying, “Let it alone, till I dig about it and feed it.”

Who was it that appeared just then in your moment of extremity? It was no other than that Christ, of whom you think so little, that you prefer drunkenness or vice to Him! You are this day in the House of God listening to a discourse which I hope is sent from Him. You might have been in Hell—think one moment of that—shut out from hope, enduring in body and soul unutterable pangs. That you are *not* there should make you love and bless Him who has said, “Deliver him from going down into the pit.” Why will you prefer your own gain and self-indulgence to that blessed One to whom you owe so much?

Common gratitude should make you deny yourself something for Him who denied Himself so much that He might bless you. Do I hear you say that you cannot follow Christ because His precepts are too severe? In what respect are they too severe? If you, yourself, were set to judge them, what is the point with which you would find fault? They deny you your sins? They deny you your miseries! They do not permit you, in fact, to ruin yourself. There is no precept of Christ which is not for your good and there is nothing which He forbids you which He does not forbid on the principle that it would harm you to indulge in it.

But suppose Christ's precepts to be ever so stern—is it not better that you should put up with them than be ruined? The soldier submits implicitly to the captain's command because he knows that without discipline there can be no victory and the whole army may be cut in pieces if there is a want of order. When the sailor has risked his life to penetrate through the thick ice of the north, we find him consenting to all the orders and regulations of authority and bearing all the hardships of the adventure because he is prompted by the desire of assisting in a great discovery, or stimulated by a large reward.

And surely the little self-denials which Christ calls us to will be abundantly recompensed by the reward He offers! And when the soul and its eternal interests are at stake, we may well put up with these temporary inconveniences if we may inherit eternal life! I think I hear you say that you would be a Christian, but there is no happiness in it. I would not tell you a falsehood on this point. I would speak the truth if it were so, but I do solemnly declare that there is more joy in the Christian life

than there is in any other form of life! If I had to die like a dog and there were no hereafter, I would prefer to be a Christian! You shall appeal to the very poorest among us—to those who are most sick and most despised and they will tell you the same.

There is not an old country woman shivering in her old ragged red cloak over a handful of fire, full of rheumatism, with an empty cupboard and an aged body who would change with the very highest and greatest of you if she had to give up her religion! No, she would tell you that her Redeemer was a greater comfort to her than all the luxuries which could be heaped upon the table of Dives. You make a mistake when you dream that my Master does not make His disciples blessed. They are a blessed people who put their trust in Christ!

Still, I think I hear you say, “Yes, this is all very well, but still I prefer present pleasure.” Do you not, in this, talk like a child? No! Like a fool! For what is *present* pleasure? How long does that word “present” last? If you could have ten thousand years of merriment I might agree with you in a measure, but even there I should have but short patience with you, for what would be ten thousand years of sin’s merriment compared with millions upon millions of years of sin’s penalty? Why, at the longest, your life will be but very short. Are you not conscious that time flies more hurriedly every day? As you grow older, do you not seem as if you had lived a shorter time instead of longer? Perhaps if you could live to be as old as Jacob, you would say, “Few and evil have my days been, for they appear fewer as they grow more numerous.”

You know that this life is but a span and is soon over. Look at the graveyards! See how they are crowded with green mounds. Remember your own companions—how one by one they have passed away. They were as firm and strong as you, but they have gone like a shadow that declines. Is it worthwhile to have this little space of pleasure and then to lie down in eternal pain? I pray you answer this question! Is it worth while to choose Barabbas for the sake of the temporary gain he may give you and give up Christ and so renounce the eternal treasures of joy and happiness which are at His right hand forevermore?

I wish that I could put these questions before you as they ought to be put. It needs the earnest seraphic voice of Whitfield, or the pleading tongue of Richard Baxter to plead with you! But yet I think I talk to rational men. And if it is a matter of arithmetic, it shall need no words of mine. I will not ask you to take your life at the longest that you expect it to be—at eighty, say—crowd it full of all the pleasures you can imagine. Suppose yourself in good health! Dream yourself to be without business cares, with all that heart can wish! Go and sit upon the throne of Solomon if you will, and yet what will you have to say when it is all over? Looking back upon it, can you make more of it than Solomon did, when he said, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. All is vanity and vexation of spirit”?

When you have cast up that sum, may I ask you to calculate how much you will have gained, if, in order to possess this vanity, you have renounced eternal happiness and have incurred everlasting woe? Do you believe the Bible? You say, “Yes.” Well, then, it must be so. Many men profess to be Believers in Scripture and yet, when you come to the point as to whether they believe in eternal woe and eternal joy, there is a kind of something inside which whispers, “That is in the Book—but still it is not real, it is not true to us.” Make it true to yourselves and when you have done it and have clearly proved that you must be in happiness or woe—and that you must here either have Barabbas for your master, or have Christ for your Lord—then, I say, like sane men, judge which is the better choice and may God’s mighty Grace give you spiritual sanity to make the right choice!

But this I know, you will never make the right choice unless that mighty Spirit who alone leads us to choose the right and reject the wrong, shall come upon you and lead you to fly to a Savior’s wounds! I need not, I think, prolong the service now, but I hope you will prolong it at your own houses by thinking of the matter. And may I put the question personally to all of you separate—whose are you? On whose side are you? There are no neutrals. There are no betweenites—you either serve Christ or Belial! You are either with the Lord or with His enemies! Who is on the Lord’s side this day? Who? Who is for Christ and for His Cross? For His blood and for His Throne?

Who, on the other hand, are His foes? As many as are not for Christ are numbered with His enemies. Be not so numbered any longer, for the Gospel comes to you with an inviting voice—“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” God help you to believe and cast yourself upon Him now. And if you trust Him, you are saved now and you shall be saved forever! Amen.

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