

UNSOOUND SPIRITUAL TRADING

NO. 849

A SERMON
DELIVERED ON LORD'S-DAY MORNING, JANUARY 10, 1869,
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

“All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weighs the spirits.”
Proverbs 16:2.

DURING the last two years some of the most notable commercial reputations have been hopelessly destroyed. Men in the great world of trade who were trusted for hundreds of thousands of pounds, around whose characters there hovered no cloud of suspicion, nor even the shadow of a doubt, have proved themselves reckless of honesty and devoid of principle. The fiery trial has been too much for the wood, hay, and stubble of many a gigantic firm. Houses of business which seemed to be founded upon a rock, and to stand as fast as the commonwealth of England itself, have been shaken to their foundations, and have caved in with a tremendous crash.

On all sides we see the wrecks of great reputations and colossal fortunes. There is wailing in the palaces of sham, and desolation in the halls of pretense. Bubbles are bursting, windbags are collapsing, paint is cracking, gilt is peeling off. Probably we have more of this to come, more revelations still to be made of apparent wealth which covered insolvency, as a rich paper may cover a mud wall. Crafty schemes which duped the public with profits never made, and tempted them to advance to deeper speculations—even as the mirage of the desert mocks the traveler.

We have seen in the public prints, month after month, fresh discoveries of the modes of financing adopted by the villainy of this present age to accomplish robbery respectably, and achieve felony with credit. We have been astonished and amazed at the vile tricks, and shameless devices to which men of eminence have condescended.

And yet we have been compelled to hear justifications of gigantic frauds, and have even been compelled to believe that the perpetrators of them did not consider themselves to be acting disreputably—their own previous successes, and the low state of morality together, have lulled them into a state in which conscience, if not dead, was thoroughly asleep. I say we may probably have yet more to see of this school of dishonesty, but it is a pity that we should, and altogether needless, for the whole trade of financing is now to be examined by the diligent student with models and living examples—more than enough to illustrate every single portion of the art.

Some ages may have been great in science, others in art, and others in war, but our era excels every other in the proficiency of its rascals. This is the classic period of chicanery, the golden age of fraud. Let a man have a base heart, and a seared conscience, and a plausible mode of address, and let him resolve upon deluding the public out of millions, he need not travel to learn the readiest method—he can find examples near at home, among high professors and the great ones of the earth.

My brethren, these noises of falling towers on the right, these sounds of crumbling battlements on the left, these cries of the shipwreck everywhere along the coasts of trade, have not only awakened within me many thoughts relative to themselves and the rottenness of modern society, but they have made me muse upon similar catastrophes evermore occurring in the *spiritual* world.

Unrecorded in the journals, and unmourned by unregenerate men, there are failures, and frauds, and bankruptcies of soul, most horrible to think upon. There is a spiritual trading just as pretentious, and apparently just as successful, as your vaunted limited liability juggle, but really just as rotten and as sure to end in hopeless overthrow. Speculation is a spiritual vice as well as a commercial one—trading without capital is common in the religious world, and puffery and deception are everyday practices. The

outer world is always the representative of the inner. The life which clusters round the Exchange illustrates that which gathers within the church. And if our eyes were opened, and our ears were able to hear, the sights and the sounds of the spirit world would far more interest us, and sadden us than the doings which begin in the directors' boardroom, and end we know not where.

We would see at this moment colossal religious fortunes melting into abject spiritual poverty. We would see high professors, much revered and held in esteem, brought into shame and everlasting contempt. We would see the wealthy in divine matters, whom men have unwisely trusted as their guides and counselors as to their souls' best interests, unmasked and proved to be deceitful through and through.

I seem at this moment to be peering into the world of spiritual things, and I see many a Babel tower tottering and ready to fall, many a fair tree decaying at the heart—many a blooming cheek undermined by disease. Yes, a sound comes to my ears of men in the church, apparently rich and increased in goods, who are naked, and poor, and miserable, and great men whose towering glories are but a fading flower. There ever have been such, there are many now, and there will be to the end.

The supply of deceivers is sure to be maintained, since the text tells us that all the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes. There is a propensity in human nature which leads men, even when they are most wrong, to judge themselves most right. The text at the same time suggests the terrible conclusion to which all self-deception will certainly come, for the judgment of man concerning himself is not final, and there comes a day when the Lord who weighs the spirits will reverse the verdict of a perjured conscience, and make the man to stand no longer in the false light which his conceit has thrown around him, but in the true light, in which all his fancied glory shall vanish as a dream.

Traveling some time ago in an iron steamboat to the Continent, the captain told me that the compass was far from trustworthy where so much iron was on every side, and that sometimes, when as far as he knew, he had steered correctly, he had found himself very considerably off his course. Though the compass was fixed aloft, so as to be as much as possible out of the region of the metallic attraction, yet the deflection and aberrations in the case of his own compass had been occasionally most remarkable.

In like manner our conscience originally, as it came from God was, no doubt, an exceedingly correct standard of right and wrong, and if we had sailed by it, we must have reached the haven safely enough, but conscience is now placed in connection with a depraved nature which forbids its accurate working. Now, if when the compass erred, the laws of nature would vary to make up for its defects, the aberrations would not matter, but if the man is misled by the perverted needle, he may unexpectedly be upon a rock, and will be as surely wrecked as if the helmsman had neglected the compass altogether. So, if God's law could be shaped to suit the errors of our judgment, it might not matter, but the laws of God stand sternly and inflexibly the same, and if we deviate from the right way through this false judgment of ours, we shall be none the less guilty, and we shall find our fate to be none the less terrible.

Hence I do with a greater vehemence and earnestness this morning, on your account, and with more brokenness and humility of spirit on my own, approach this matter desiring to speak with divers classes among you, urging you not to be so flattered by your own conceptions of your position as to get out of the course in which you ought to steer, beseeching you to remember that however well you may cajole yourselves with the idea that your way is right and clear, yet the inevitable judgment day will come to end all delusions, however pleasant.

Spiritual traders, I speak to you this day, reminding you of the great audit which hastens on, and warning you lest you make a fair show for a while, and then in the end come down with a crash. I am sure there is much rotten spiritual trading abroad, and to save you from it, I pray the Holy Ghost to help me speak plainly and searchingly this morning.

I intend, as God shall help me, to address the text to different characters. We will endeavor to be practical throughout the sermon, and to push home vital truth with great earnestness upon each one.

I. THE WAYS OF THE OPENLY WICKED are clean in their own eyes, but the Lord will weigh their spirits.

At first sight this statement seems to be rash. The drunkard, the blasphemer, the Sabbath-breaker—can it be that these people are right in their own eyes? Solomon was a profound student of human nature, and when he penned this sentence, you may rest assured he knew what he wrote. They who are best acquainted with mankind will tell you that self-righteousness is not the peculiar sin of the virtuous, but that most remarkably it flourishes best where there appears to be the least soil for it. Those men who distinctly and plainly, in the judgment of their fellows, have no righteousness in which they can glory, are the very persons who, when you come to search into the depth of their nature, are relying upon a fancied goodness which they dream about and rest upon.

Take the outwardly immoral for a moment, and begin to talk with them about their sins, and you will find that they are accustomed to speak of their faults under very different names from those which Scripture and right reason would use. They do not call drunkenness, “drunkenness,” for instance, but it is, “taking a glass”. They would not for a moment advocate downright blasphemy, but it is “strong language which a fellow must use if he’s to get on,” or “letting slip an ugly word or so, because you were plagued so.”

They disguise vice to themselves as pleasure. They label their uncleanness as gaiety, their filthiness as lightheartedness. They speak of their sins as though they had no enormity about them, but were trifles light as air—if wrong at all, themes, rather for the feather lash of ridicule than for the scourge of reproof. Moreover, the most of them will claim that they are not so bad as others. There is some one point in their character in which they do not go so far as some of their fellows, and this is a grand point and a vast comfort to them. They will confess that they are sinners, not meaning it for a moment, and if you come to particulars and details, if they are in an honest frame of mind, they will recede step by step, admitting fault after fault, till they come to a particular point, and there they take their footing with virtuous indignation.

“Here I am right beyond all rebuke, and even deserving of praise. So far my sin has come, but how thoroughly sound at heart must I be that I have never permitted it to advance further!” This boasted line is frequently so singular and mysterious in its direction, that no one but the man himself can see any reason or consistency in it, and the satirist who shoots at folly as it flies, finds abundant objects for his arrows. Yet to that man himself, his pausing there is the saving clause of his life. He looks to that as the sheet anchor of his character.

The woman whose character long since has gone, yet boasts some limit to her licentiousness which is merit in her esteem—merit sufficient to make all her ways pure in her own eyes. Moreover, the worst of men conceive that they have some excellences and virtues which if they do not quite atone for their faults, yet at any rate greatly diminish the measure of blame which should be awarded them.

The man is a spendthrift, “But sir, he was always free-hearted, and nobody’s enemy but his own.” The man, it is true, would curse God, but then, well, it was a mere *habit*, he always was a dashing blade, but he meant no harm, and besides, he never was such a liar as So-and-So. And indeed, he scorned to tell a lie upon any business subject.

Another has cheated his creditors, but he was such a nice man. And although, poor fellow, he never could keep accounts or manage money matters, yet he always had a good word for everybody. The immoral man, if he sits down to write his own character, and summons all the partiality he is capable of, will say, “I am a sad dog in some respects, sowing a great many wild oats, but I have a fine character underlying it all which will, no doubt, come up some day, so that my end shall be bright and glorious notwithstanding all.” That last point that I hinted at is very often the righteousness of men who have no other, namely, their intention one of these days to amend much and improve.

To make up for present poverty of righteousness, they draw a bill upon the future. Their promises and resolves are a sort of paper currency on which they imagine they can trade for eternity. “Is it not often done in business?” they ask. “A man who has no present income may have a reversionary interest in an estate. He gets advances thereon—why should not we?” Thus the open sinner eases his all too

ready conscience with the imaginary picture of his future repentance and amendment, begins to feel himself already meritorious, and bids defiance to all the threatenings of the Word of God.

I may be speaking to some to whom these remarks are very applicable, and if so I pray that they may lead to serious thought. My hearer, you must know, or at any rate a few sober moments of reflection would make you know, that there is no truth in the pleas, excuses, and promises with which you now quiet your conscience. Your peace is founded on a lie, and is upheld by the father of lies. Whilst you are continuing recklessly to break the laws of God in your ordinary life, and to take pleasure in sin, you most assuredly are under the anger of God—and you are heaping up wrath against the day of wrath—and when the measure of your iniquity is full, then shall you receive the terrible reward of transgression. The Judge of all the earth will not pay regard to the idle pretences which now stultify your conscience.

He is not a man that He should be flattered as you flatter and deceive yourself. You would not have the impertinence to tell your excuses to Him. Dare you kneel down and speak to the great God in heaven, and tell Him all these fine things with which you are now smoothing your downward road? I hope you have not come to such a brazen pitch of impertinence as that.

But if you have, let me remind you of that second sentence of my text, “The LORD weighs the spirits.” A just and true balance will be used upon you ere long. When the Lord puts such as you are into the scale, there will be no need for delay—the sentence will go forth at once, and from it there shall be no appeal—“You are weighed in the balances and found wanting.”

Ah, then, my hearer, when that conscience of yours wakes up, how it will torment you! It sleeps now, drugged by the opiates of your ignorance and perverseness, but it will start up soon like a giant refreshed with new wine, and then with strength and fury unthought of before, it will pull down the temple of your peace about your ears, even as Samson smote the Philistines. An awakened conscience in another world is the worm that dies not, and the fire which never can be quenched.

O sirs, it is a dreadful thing to be delivered up to one’s own conscience when that conscience is enlisted on the side of right. Old tyrants had their terrible headsman with grim masks across their brows, who carried the bright and gleaming axe. The old inquisitors had their executioners arrayed in gowns of wool and hoods, from the loopholes of which their fierce eyes gleamed like wolves. But no tormentors, yea, no fiends of hell can ever prove more terrible to a man than his conscience when its lash is corded with truth and weighted with honesty.

Did you ever spell the burning letters of that word *remorse*? Within the heart of that single word there lies hell with all its torments. O sirs, if you be but a little aroused now by an earnest sermon or a sudden death, how wretched you feel and how desperately you plunge into fresh gaiety and wantonness to drown your thoughts. But what will you do with thoughts which no dissipation can drown and remembrances which no mirth can banish? What will it be to be haunted by your sins forever and forever? What will it be to have it made sure to you that from the guilt and punishment no way of escape can ever be discovered?

O you who fondly dream that the broad road to destruction is the upward path to celestial bliss, I beseech you learn wisdom, and hearken to the voice of instruction. Consider your ways, and seek unto the precious blood which alone can blot out your sins.

II. A second class I will now address. THE WAYS OF THE GODLESS MAN are clean in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirits.

The godless man is often exceedingly upright and moral in his outward behavior to his fellow men. He has no religion, but he glories in a multitude of virtues of another kind. It is unhappily true that there are many who have much that is amiable about them, who nevertheless are unamiable and unjust towards the one Being who ought to have the most of their love, and who should have been respected in their conduct first of all.

How often have I met with the ungodly man who has said, “You talk to me about fearing God! I know Him not, neither do I regard Him, but I am much better than those who do.” He will sometimes say, “Your religion I look upon as a mere farce. I regard Christians as being made up of two sorts—

knaves and fools. They are either duped by others, or else for purposes of their own they are deceiving others. Their talk about God, sir, it is all cant. With some of them I grant you it is not quite that, but then they have too few brains to be able to discover that they are deceived. However, take the whole thing for all in all, it is all a piece of nonsense, and if people just behave as they ought towards their neighbors, and do their duty in their station in life, that is enough.”

Yes, and there are in this city of London, thousands, and hundreds of thousands who think this to be good logic, and indeed who open their eyes with astonishment if for a single moment you are supposed to contradict their statement that such a style of life is the best and most commendable. And yet if they would but think, nothing can be more unsound than their life and its supposed excellence. Here is a man created by his God, and he is put down among his fellow creatures—surely the first duty that he owes is towards his Creator. His life depends entirely upon that Creator’s will—it must be his first duty to have respect to Him in whose hands his breath is.

But this man not only refuses to be obedient to the law of his Creator, and have regard to Him in his daily actions, but he turns round to his neighbors, who are mere creatures like himself, and he says, “I will have respect to you, but not to God. Any laws of the State which bind me in my relation to you I will obey, but any laws which describe my relation to God, I will not consider except to ridicule and laugh at them. I will be obedient to any but to God. I will do the right thing to any but to the Most High. I have a sense of right and wrong, but I will restrict its action to my fellow men, but that sense of right and wrong, when it comes in relation to God, I will utterly obliterate.”

Now, if there were no God, this man were wise enough, but as there is a God who created us and who shall surely come in the clouds of heaven to call every one of us to account for the things which we have done in the body, what think you will be the judgment dealt out to this unfaithful servant? Will he dare to say to his King, “I knew that You were my Maker and Lord, but I considered that if I served my fellow servants it would be enough. I knew what was right to them, but I disregarded the doing of anything that was right towards You”?

Shall not the answer be, “You wicked and faithless servant, you knew what was right and wrong, and yet towards Me, having first claim upon you, you have acted unjustly, and whilst you would bow your neck to others, you would not yield to Me. Depart from Me, I know you not. You did not know Me, neither do I know you. I weigh you in the balances, and I find you utterly reprobate. You are cast away forever.” O ungodly man, let this warning, if you be here this morning, sound in your heart as well as your ears—no longer set yourself in defiance to your Creator or live in negligence of Him, but say, “I will arise, and go unto my Father. I will confess that I have forgotten Him, and despised Him, and I will seek peace through the blood of Jesus Christ.”

III. Further, I shall now address myself to another class of persons. In all ages of the church, and especially at this time, there are numbers of persons who are **OUTWARDLY RELIGIOUS**, but whose religion ends there.

Now, it seems to some of us amazingly strange that a man should be acting viciously, should be living wickedly, and yet should think that his ways are clean, because he takes a sacrament or attends a certain place of worship. I must confess that to my mind this seems a very strange phenomenon—that there should exist men of intelligence in this world who know that their conduct is altogether blameworthy, and yet feel perfectly at ease because a chosen ritual has been diligently observed, as if bowing and scraping, singing or groaning could be a substitute for holiness of heart.

Look at the Pharisee and tell me if he be not a moral wonder! He devours widows’ houses. He is ready to prey on everything that comes to hand. He is a detestable hypocrite, but the man is perfectly at ease because he has made broad the border of his garments, because he fasts twice in the week, and strains out gnats from the wine that he drinks. He is quite content with himself, and all his ways seem right, so right, indeed, that other men who are better than he, he passes by with contempt, afraid lest they should come between the wind and his nobility. He thanks God that he is not as other men when, so far as you and I can judge, he is ten thousand fathoms deeper down in dark damnation in his horribly

hypocritical character. Yet brethren, some form or other of this is very common. All the ways of a man are clean unto him when he once imbibes the idea that ceremonial religion, or religious talk, or religious profession can make up for moral sin.

Ah, brethren, this evil may even creep in among ourselves. Let us not be so swift in condemning the Pharisee when, perhaps, the same sin may pollute our own souls. I have known the man who was reckoned a sound Calvinist, and believed in very high doctrine, live a very unhallowed life. He despised, “Arminians,” as he chose to call them, though some of these despised ones lived very near to God, and walked in holiness and integrity. The Arminian, indeed, godly man as he was, would be lost, but this self-righteous orthodox man, who could at the same time drink and cheat, thought that he should be saved because he had been able to see the truth of certain doctrines, which also the devil sees as well as he.

I have known another who thought he had a deep and memorable experience, who would talk by the yard of the depravity of his heart, some people thinking that he ought to be able to talk about that very truly, for he proved it in his life. And yet because he could repeat cant phrases, and had picked up certain rich expressions of experience from books, he verily thought within himself that he was not only as good as others, but a very pattern for others to copy. Right and left such men as these will hurl curses and anathemas upon the best and most earnest of saints. They are *the* men—wisdom will die with them. Holiness being already dead with them, it is no wonder that wisdom should die, too.

Ah! take care lest you and I drink in the same spirit in another shape. Ah! preacher, your preaching may be all well and good, it may be sound enough, and right enough, and it may be even edifying to the people of God, and arousing to the unconverted, but remember, God will not judge you by your sermons, but by your spirit, for He weighs not your words, but your motive, your desire, your object in preaching the Gospel.

Deacon of the church, you may have walked in all honor for many years, and may be universally respected, and your office may have been well-maintained in all the outward duties of it, but if your heart be not right, if some secret sin be indulged, if there be a canker upon your profession which none know but your own self, the Lord who weighs the spirit will make nothing of your deaconship, and your carrying round the cups and bread at the communion, but you shall be found wanting, and cast away.

You, too, brother elder, your labors and your prayers are nothing if the heart be evil. You may have visited others and instructed them, and been a judge of their state. Still, if you have not served God and His church out of a pure desire for His glory, you too, put into the scales, shall be rejected with abhorrence. I often pray—I wish I prayed it, however, more—that none of us here may be preached into the idea that we are all right if we are all wrong. It is not your coming to the Tabernacle, it is not your joining the church, your being baptized, your attending prayer meetings, or your doing anything, that will be the slightest matter in this business—it is your giving up your hearts to God truly, and your living in conformity with your profession.

And unless the grace of God be really given you, helping you to do this, your ways may be clean unto you, because of your outward profession, but the Lord who weighs the spirits will make short work of these bubbles. He will break this confectionery, smash to pieces these shams, and leave the man who thought he would have a palace over his head throughout eternity, to sit down and shiver amongst the ruins of his Babylon, and cry out and weep and wail amongst dragons and the fiends.

IV. But to pass on, there is another character that must be addressed. “All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes,” and so are THE WAYS OF THE COVETOUS PROFESSOR.

It is marvelous to some of us that a man whose object in life is merely to get money, and who withholds what he has from the cause of God, should take up the profession of being a Christian man, because none of all the vices is more contrary to true religion than covetousness. Where will you find an instance of a single saint in Scripture that ever fell into covetousness? Into all other sins have they fallen, but into this one, I do not remember that one child of God mentioned in Scripture ever descended. Grace may exist where there are many occasional sins, but never where there is abiding covetousness.

Think of Paul's words: "Know you not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortionists shall inherit the kingdom of God."

Luther used to say, "I have been tempted to all sins but covetousness." This he so detested that he distributed gifts made to him, lest he should have his portion in this world. Adams, in his book on Peter, well remarks, "Noah was once drunk with wine, but never with the world. Lot twice incestuous, never covetous. Peter denied his Master thrice, but it was not the love, but the fear of the world that brought him to it. Once David was overcome by the flesh, never by covetousness. Why did not these purge themselves from adultery, anger and the like? Because into these sins the infirmities of a saint may fall, but if once into covetousness, there is nothing of a saint left—not even the name. Covetousness has the brand of God's hate full on its brow."

"If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." And when a professor shows the love of the world in its grossest shape, when he gives way to being the slave of "Mammon, the least erect of all the fiends," he bears evidence to all who judge righteously according to Scripture, that the love of God is not in him, and cannot be in him—the two things are inconsistent. Yet strange to say, we know not a few whose way seems very clean to them. They screw here and there, now their servants, and now their customers. The widow and the fatherless would not be safe from them, if they could pick their bones. What they scrape together is held with an iron grasp. Let souls be damned, they shall have no missionary sent to them by their money. Let this London fester with sin. Let it be covered with the ulcers of the most fearful depravity, they are never stirred to give any assistance towards the healing of the city's wounds.

And yet while their certain damnation awaits them, and their condemnation stares them in the face, as plainly as the sun in the heavens, yet their ways seem clean unto themselves. Strange it should be so, but the Lord weighs the spirits, and what a weighing that shall be when men who escape church censure, because theirs was a sin of which the church could not deal with, shall be found guilty of it, and God shall cast them away! Vain will be their pretensions that they ate and they drank in God's house, for the answer shall come, "I was a hungred and you gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; naked and you clothed me not. I was sick and in prison, and you did not minister unto me. Verily I say unto you, I know you not!"

O let this truth, for truth it is, pierce like a two-edged sword right through the hearts of any of you who are beginning to yield to this damning vice. Cry unto God that as He gives you substance, you may use it for His glory. Ask Him that you may never perish with a millstone about your neck, for even if that killing weight is made of gold, it will be no better perishing for all that.

V. Another character must have a word also. We will now note THE WAYS OF THE WORLDLY PROFESSOR.

It is amazing how some people, making a profession of religion, square it with their conscience that they live as they do live. You could not with a microscope detect any difference between them and common worldlings, and yet they think there is a vast difference, and they would be insulted if you did not allow it. Here they come up to the house of God today, but to what amusements have they been during the week? How are they dressed? How are their children educated? Is there any family prayer? Is there anything in the household that is Christian?

Look at them in business. Do not they trade precisely like those who make no pretensions to religion? Ask their workpeople, just go yourselves and watch them—see if they cannot tell white lies as well as others, whether they are not for all the world as alike as two peas are to one another, like other unregenerate and unconverted people! And yet their ways seem very dear unto them, very clean indeed, and their conscience does not trouble them in any way whatever. I have but this word to say in all affection to such, earnestly desiring that they may be plucked out of this fire, "the LORD will weigh the spirits."

The whole of our life is known to Him. He will not judge us without book. When He comes to the account, He will not be like a judge who has to learn the facts. He will come to the last assize having seen with those eyes of fire the secret thoughts, the private feelings of our life. God be merciful to us sinners, we may all of us say—but God especially save us from being like the ungodly.

VI. Yet another word, and this is addressed to all professors here more or less. It is a solemn word concerning THE WAYS OF SECURE BACKSLIDERS.

Do you not know, brethren and sisters, that very often our ways seem very clean to us when they are not? I have learned by experience, most painful to my own soul, that I am not in the least qualified to judge of my own spiritual health. I have thought myself gradually advancing in the ways of God when I have been going back, and I have had the conceit crossing my mind that I had now overcome a certain besetting sin, when to my surprise I had found it return with greater force than before.

Fellow professor, you may be at this moment walking, as you think very rightly, and going on very well and comfortably, but let me ask you a few questions. Are you not less in private prayer than you used to be? Do you not now hurry over it? Do you not sometimes omit it altogether? Do you not frequently come from your closet without really having spoken to God, having merely gone through the form for the sake of quieting yourself? Your way may seem clean, but is it not foul when the mercy seat becomes neglected?

How about your Bible? Is that read as it once was, and are the promises as sweet to you? Do they ever rise from the page and talk with you? Oh, but if your Bible be neglected, my brother, you may be just as diligent in attending to the house of God as you used to be, but is not yours a sad state of decay? Let me come closer still. Is there the vitality about your profession that there used to be?

There are some in this house, this morning, who, if they could speak, would tell you that when to their great sorrow they fell into sin, it was because by little and little their piety began to lose its force and power of life. They have been restored, but their bones still ache where they were once broken, and I am sure they would say to their brethren, “Take care of allowing a gracious spirit to evaporate, as it were, by slow degrees. Watch carefully over it, lest, settling upon your lees, and not being emptied from vessel to vessel, you should by-and-by become carnally secure, and afterwards fall into actual sin.”

I ask some of my brethren here, and I ask the question because I have asked it of my own soul, and answered it very tearfully—may not some of us be growing hardened in heart with regard to the salvation of our fellow creatures? Do we not love less now, than we used to, those who are crying to us, “Come over and help us”? Do we not think ourselves getting to be experienced saints? We are not the poor sinners we once used to be. We do not come broken-heartedly to the mercy seat as we did.

We begin to judge our fellow Christians, and we think far less of them than we did years ago, when we used almost to love the ground that the Lord’s saints did tread upon, thinking ourselves to be less than nothing in their sight. Now, if it were the case in others, that they were growing proud, or becoming cold, or waxing hard of heart, we should say of them, “they are in great danger.” But what about ourselves, if that be the case with us?

For myself, I dread lest I should come to this pulpit merely to preach to you because the time has come, and I must get through an hour, or an hour-and-a-half of worship. I dread getting to be a mere preaching machine, without my heart and soul being exercised in this solemn duty. And I dread for you, my dear friends who hear me constantly, lest it should be a mere piece of clock-work, that you should be in the seats at certain times in the week, and should sit there and patiently hear the din which my noise makes in your ears.

We must have vital godliness, and the vitality of it must be maintained, and the force and energy of our religion must go on to increase day by day, or else though our ways may seem to be very clean, the Lord will soon weigh our spirits to our eternal confusion. Do you know that to His people the divine weighing in fatherly chastisement is rough work? He can put the soul into the scale to our own consciousness, and when we think that it weighs pounds, He can reveal to us that it does not even reach

to drachms! “There,” says He, “see what you are!” And He begins to strip off the veil of self-conceit, and we see the loathsomeness and falsehood of our nature, and we are utterly dismayed.

Or perhaps the Lord does worse than that. He suffers a temptation to come when we do not expect it, and then the evil rolls up within us, and we, who thought we were next door to the cherubs, find ourselves near akin to the demons, wondering, too, that such a wild beast should have slumbered in the den of our hearts, whereas we ought to have known it was always there, and to have walked humbly with God, and watched and guarded ourselves. Rest assured, beloved, great falls and terrible mischief never come to a Christian man at once—they are a work of slow degrees. And be assured, too, that you may glide down the smooth waters of the river, and never dream of the Niagara beyond, and yet you may be speeding towards it.

An awful crash may yet come to the highest professor among us that shall make the world ring with blasphemy against God, and the church to resound with bitter lamentations because the mighty have fallen. God will keep His own, but how if I should turn out not to be His own! He will keep the feet of His saints, but what if I leave off watching, and my feet should not be kept, and I should turn out to be no saint of His, but a mere intruder into His family, and a pretender to have what I never had! O God, through Christ Jesus, deliver each of us from this.

VII. Had time not failed me, I meant to speak concerning the seventh and last character, namely, **THE WAYS OF THE DECEIVED MAN.**

There are, no doubt, many in the world who will never find out that their ways, which they thought to be so clean, are all foul, till they enter upon another world. There are some men who are Christians in all but this, that they have not true faith in Jesus. There are others who apparently are saved, but they have never been really born-again. There are many who have everything but the one thing needful, and who think they have that, and persuade their fellows that they have it. How near a man may come to being a Christian and miss salvation is were difficult to tell. But certainly he may come so near that no man, nor the angels of God, shall be able to tell the difference between him and a saved soul—only God shall discern the difference when He comes to weigh the spirits.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. It is this. Let us come, my brethren, all of us to the place of confession of sin and acknowledge that we have broken God’s law, and deserve His just displeasure. Let us go, by the help of His Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of supplication, and let us confess the depravity of our nature, and the error of our hearts. Let us pray that instead of thinking our ways clean, we may know them to be foul, may mourn over them, and may learn to see them as God sees them—as crooked ways and wrong ways in themselves, not to be boasted of, but to be remembered with shame and confusion of face. Blessed is he who is delivered from any rejoicing in himself. Happy is that man who can see no speck of soundness in his own flesh, but who feels that the leprosy of sin has covered him without and within from head to foot.

And brethren, if we come to such deep humiliation of spirit, the next word is this—let us go together to the great salvation which God has provided in the person of Christ Jesus. Come, linking hand in hand, saint and sinner, now all sinners consciously—let us stand and see where sin has pierced the body of the blessed Substitute with yonder bleeding wounds. Let us read the lines of grief written upon that blessed face. Let us gaze into the depth of His soul filled with an ocean of anguish, lashed to a tempest of suffering. Let us believe that He suffered in our place, and so roll our sin and our sinfulness on Him.

Jesus, accept a sinner, a poor sinner still. Though these twenty years I have known Your name, yet still a sinner I come to You, as the chief of sinners I. Ah, brethren and sisters, we are never safer, I am sure, never healthier, never in a better frame than when we are right flat down on the ground before the cross. When you feel yourself to be utterly unworthy, you have hit the truth. When you think you are doing something and are rich and flourishing, you are poor, and naked, and miserable. But when you are consciously weak and sinful, then you are rich. When you are weak, you are strong.

But O God, save us from letting our ways seem clean in our own sight, but may we weigh our spirits by the help of Your Spirit, and condemn ourselves that we may not be condemned of the Lord.

The Lord bless you richly and freely, for His name's sake. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—Psalm 51.

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