

A DESPERATE CASE—HOW TO MEET IT

NO. 549

A SERMON
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 AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

*“Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?
 And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you,
 If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain,
 Remove, hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.
 Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”*
Matthew 17:19-21

THE narrative, of which our text forms a part, describes a scene which took place immediately after the transfiguration of our Lord. Not to divorce it therefore from its connection, let us glance at the antecedents of the case that nothing may be lost by negligence, or that peradventure we may gain something by meditation.

How great the difference between Moses and Christ! When Moses had been forty days upon the mountaintop, he underwent a kind of transfiguration, so that his face shone with exceeding brightness when he came down among the people and he was obliged to put a veil over his face. For they could not bear to look upon his glory.

Not so our Savior! He had been really transfigured with a greater glory than Moses could ever know, and yet, as He came down from the mount, whatever radiance shone upon His face it is not written that the people could not look upon Him. But rather they were amazed, and running to Him, they saluted Him.

The glory of the law repelled, for the majesty of holiness and justice drive the awed spirits away from God. But the greater glory of Jesus attracts, though He is holy, and just, and righteous too. Yet blended with these there is so much of truth and grace, that sinners run to Jesus, amazed at His goodness, attracted by the charming fascination of His love, and they salute Him, become His disciples, and take Him to be their Lord and Master.

Some of you may just now be blinded by the dazzling brightness of the law of God. You feel its claims on your conscience, but you cannot keep it in your life. It is too high, you cannot attain to it. Not that you find fault with the law, on the contrary, it commands your profoundest esteem. Still you are in no wise drawn by it to God. You are rather hardened in your heart, and you may be verging towards the inference of desperation, “As it is impossible for me to earn salvation by the works of the law, I will continue in my sins.”

Ah, poor heart! Turn your eye away from Moses, with all his repelling splendor, and look to Jesus, yonder, crucified for sinful men. Behold His flowing wounds, and thorn-crowned head! He is the Son of God, and He is greater than Moses. He bear the wrath of God, and therein He shows more of God’s justice than Moses’ broken tablets could ever do. Look you to Him, and as you feel the attraction of His love, fly to His arms and you shall be saved.

How different the spirit of Moses and Jesus! When Moses comes down from the mountain, it is to purge the camp. He seems to grasp the fiery sword. He breaks the golden calf. He smites the idolaters. But when Jesus comes down from the mountain, He finds a strife in the camp, as Moses did. He finds His own apostles worsted and beaten, just as Aaron had been defeated by the clamors of the people.

But He has not a word of cursing, there is a gentle rebuke—“O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?” His actions are actions of mercy—no

breaking in pieces, but healing; no cursing, but blessing. Love sits smiling on His brow as He touches the poor wretch who is almost dead with diabolical possession, and restores him to life and health.

Go you then to Jesus. Leave the law and your own self-righteousness, for these can do nothing but curse you. Fly to Jesus, for be you whomsoever you may, there are pardons on His lips, there are blessings in His hands, there is love in His heart, and He will not disdain to receive even you.

How much of condescension there is in the manner of Christ! Our Lord, we have told you, had been very glorious on the mountain's top with Moses and Elias, yet, when He comes down into the midst of the crowd, He does not ignore the cry of the poor man, nor refuse to touch Him who was possessed with a devil.

Observe my Master's condescension, for He deigns attention, and yet His manner softens into pity, and presently it melts into a gracious sympathy, as if this were the only channel through which His peerless power could flow. Then remember, He is the same today as He was then.

*“Now, though He reigns exalted high,
His love is still as great:”*

He is as willing now to receive sinners as when it was said of Him, “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them,” just as ready to receive you, poor sinners, as when He was called “The friend of publicans and sinners.” Come to Him. Bow at His feet. His love invites you still. Believe that the transfigured and glorified Jesus is still a loving Savior, willing to pardon and forgive.

Once again, what choice instruction there is in the history! After Jesus had been absent for some time, He came back. You may ask for what purpose He had retired. Evidently He went up into the mountain to pray. It was while He was praying (and I have no doubt, fasting likewise) that the fashion of His countenance changed. By His own personal devotion, and by the Father's special revelation, He had thus come back, as it were, with great refreshment to carry on His ministry.

Hence we become witnesses of a remarkable power which He immediately showed forth, and of no less remarkable counsel which He pertinently spoke to His disciples when they felt their own weakness. Thus we have before us, in our text, a peculiar case—a patient who utterly baffled the skill of all His disciples, healed at once by the great Master, and we have a reason given why the apostles themselves were not able to deliver him.

Let us look, for a little time *at this very sad case*, not so singular either, I think, but that we may find the like round about us. Then let us notice *the scene around the case*—the father, the disciples, the scribes. Afterwards we shall joyfully observe *the Savior's coming into the midst and deciding all the difficulty*, and lastly, we shall attend to the reason He gives in private to His disciples, why they, *before His coming, were utterly powerless to achieve the work*.

I. First, we have before us a VERY PECULIAR CASE.

It appears that the disciples had cast out devils of almost all sorts. Wherever they had gone, heretofore, this was their uniform testimony, “Lord, even the devils are subject unto us.” But now they are baffled. They seem to have encountered a devil of the worst kind. There are grades in devilry as there are in human sin.

All men are evil, but all men are not alike evil. All devils are full of sin, but they are not all sinful to the same degree. Do we not read in Scripture, “Then goes he and taketh unto him seven other spirits more wicked than himself”? It may be there is a gradation in the wickedness of devils, and perhaps also, in their power to fulfill their wicked impulses.

We can scarcely think that all the devils are Satan. There seems to be one chief arch-spirit, one great Diabolus, who is an accuser of the brethren—one mighty Lucifer, who fell down from heaven and has become the prince of the powers of darkness. In all his hosts it is probable that there is not his like. He stands first and chief of these fallen morning stars. The rest of the spirits may stand in different grades of wickedness, a hierarchy of hell.

This poor wretch seems to have been possessed of one of the worst, most potent, and violent, and virulent of these evil spirits. I believe, brethren, that here we have a picture of a certain class of individuals who are not only desperately sinful, but subject to extraordinary impulses which carry them to infernal lengths and depths of infamy. They are incapable of restraint, a terror to their kinsfolk, and a misery to themselves.

All men are sinful, as I have said before, but the power of depravity in some men is much stronger than in others, at least, if it is not intrinsically stronger, yet it certainly has manifestations in some which we have never perceived in common among men. Let us try and pick out the case according to the narrative.

How frequently, dear friends, too frequently alas! have we seen young people who have answered to the description here given. They have had a precocity of wickedness. When Jesus asked the father, “How long has he been in this way?” the answer was, “Of a child.”

I remember having once known such a child, over whom paroxysms of passion came, in which his face would turn black. When he was able to run about and was sent to a public school, a flint-stone, a club, a brick-bat, anything which might come next to hand, he would throw, without a moment’s thought, at anyone who vexed him. His knife would be drawn from his pocket and open in an instant. The young assassin has often been prevented from stabbing others by a careful hand and watchful eye which guarded him.

We have noticed this, I say, in some of the very young. They begin to lie early, and to thief soon, and the young lip even assays to swear, while the anxious mother cannot understand where the child could have learned it. You have protected such a child from all contamination, and seemed to shut him in and girdle him about with holy influences. And yet, in these desperate instances, as soon as ever the child could know right from wrong, he has deliberately chosen the wrong with a violence of self-will and recklessness of consequence altogether unusual.

Some such cases we have seen. O, may God grant it may never be your lot or mine, to be the parents of such children. Yet, such there have been, and such men there are who have grown up now, and the youthful passions of their childhood have become developed. And you may find them with the low forehead, and the dark scowling eye, if you will, in our prison houses.

Or if you see them in the streets, you may hopefully wish that they may be in prison ere long, for they are unsafe abroad. Of a child they seem to have been possessed with this chief of devils, and to have been carried captive by him at his will.

This lad seems also to have been afflicted with what is here called lunacy, which was indeed, only a form of epilepsy. He was constantly subjected, it seems, to epileptic fits. For I think we can hardly understand lunacy to mean anything short of occasional madness.

Attacks of such outrageous violence would come upon him, that there would be no enduring him. He would then dash himself into the fire, or if water were near, he would attempt self-destruction by plunging into it. We have met with persons of this kind, perfectly outrageous and beyond all command when fits of evil came upon them. I will instance cases which I have observed.

I know a man now, he may be here this morning, if he is, he will recognize his own portrait. At times he is as reasonable as anyone I could wish to associate with. He enjoys listening to the Word of God. He is, in some respects, an amiable, excellent, and respectable man.

But occasionally, fits of drunkenness come upon him in which he is perfectly powerless under the influence of the demon, and while it lasts, it matters not, even when he knows he is wrong. A thousand angels could not drag him from it. He is thrown into the water of self-destruction, and he will continue in it.

You may urge him and reason with him, and you may think—oh, how often have some thought who love him!—He will never do that again, he is too sensible a man. He has been too well-taught. The Word of God has had such an effect upon him that he will never do it again. Yet he does. He repeats the

old paroxysms, and has done so for twenty or thirty years, and if he lives, unless sovereign grace prevent it, he will die a drunkard as sure as he is a living man, and go from his drink to damnation.

Another case, which I likewise draw from life. The man is kind, tender, and generous—generous to a fault. He has a home—he *had* one, I ought to say—he had a home, and he was the light of it. No one ever suspected him—that is, in his better times—of any grievous faults. But sometimes—and this has been concealed by many an indulgent friend—sometimes an attack of lasciviousness comes upon him, and at such seasons it matters not what the temptation may be, nor how foul the vice may be, the man runs into it.

If you should meet him in the street and talk with him, and argue with him, it would be all time and labor thrown away. Nay, I have known him to break up his home, and cross the sea to go to another land, that he might indulge his vile passions without rebuke, or the restraint of associating with former friends. He will come back again, broken-hearted, wondering that he ever could be such a fool, but he will go again.

It is *in* him. The devil is in him, and unless God casts it out, he will do the same again, deliberately choosing his own damnation. Though he knows it, yet, so possessed of the love of sin is he, that when the fit comes upon him, this diabolical epilepsy, he falls into sin with his whole might and power.

I might go on describing cases of the kind, but you will not need that I should picture anymore. It could only be to vary the different forms of sin. However, let me try one more. A lad had as good a father as ever a child could have. He was bound apprentice. It became whispered in a few weeks that little moneys were missing. The father was very grieved, so indeed was the master, and the matter was quietly hushed up.

A little while after, the same thing occurred. The indentures were cancelled, and nothing more was said of it, but the father was sorely perplexed. He looked out for some other situation for the boy where he might, perhaps, recover his character. After a time, it was precisely the same again. Bad companions had got hold of him, or rather he had become a ringleader among other bad companions.

Well, something else must be tried. It was tried. He has had twenty situations, and they have all been thrown up from the very same cause. And now, what do you think is his treatment of his parents? Instead of being grateful for the repeated kindness and longsuffering shown to him, he will break out sometimes into such dreadful passions, that even the lives of his parents are scarcely safe.

And when he has been in his old haunts a little more than usual, he is really so terrible a being that his mother who loves him and who weeps over him, would almost as soon see a fiend from hell as see him. For when he comes home, everything goes wrong. Confusion is in the house, and terror in every heart. He acts precisely as if he were a madman.

They have said, “Send him to Australia, or send him to America”—where they do send many of that sort—but if he goes there he will turn up, sooner or later, at the foot of the gallows. He is desperately set on evil, and nothing turns him aside. He tears and foams at the mouth with passion. His whole heart goes forth outrageously after anything like vice, and there appears to be not one redeeming trait in his character, or if there is, it only seems to be subjected to the power of his lusts. He devises means to be more mighty to do mischief in the world.

What dreadful cases these are! Wherefore am I talking of them? Dear friends, I have taken them because it has been laying upon my heart to encourage and comfort you who are compelled to carry a daily cross in having such relations and such children as these. It is one of the heaviest afflictions which can come upon you.

In the case before us, the child was both deaf and dumb—not, I suppose, through any organic effect, but through the epilepsy and the Satanic possession. So we have often seen children—shall I look them in the face this morning, as I stand here?—they are no children now—who are positively deaf to all spiritual sounds. They have been pleaded with, but it is in vain. They know the truth, they know the whole truth, but they do not know the power of it. They are never absent from family prayer, nor in any prayer are they ever forgotten by their parents.

They come to this place, they attend our classes, they go to revival services. Now and then there is something like a little emotion, but it does not come to much. They are precisely similar to the deaf adder which cannot be charmed, charm we never so wisely. Others of the family have been converted. Nearly all the household has now been brought to Christ. Lydia has had her heart opened, God has been pleased to call young Timothy, but this one remains and after much anxiety, much effort, much labor, no good has been achieved. The adamant seems as soft as their heart, and the ear of the deaf as much alive to rebuke as is their conscience. This, again, is a very sad case.

I meet sometimes, too, with cases of another kind—persons who are beset with very high doctrine who have got the devil in them, puffing up their fleshly minds with a vain conceit of sound understanding, and degrading their carnal profession with a loathsome impurity of heart and life. You will talk with them, they will tell you they wish to be saved—would give their right arm to be saved, but it is not in their power. You bid them believe in Jesus. They have no sense, they tell you, of the need of a Savior. They are not in a fit state to believe. When God's time comes, the thing will occur.

They love high doctrine, they will hear nothing else but it. But then their Sunday, if there is a temptation which comes across their path, will be spent anywhere but in the worship of God. And during the week, they give way to all sorts of sins. Whatever temptation comes, they go after it.

The comfort they get from their religion, which they wrap about them like a cloak, is this—that no ministers speak the truth except one or two. That the truth is fatalism, that all they have to do is to be carried along like dead, inanimate logs down the stream and they are not at all responsible. Or if they are responsible, it is merely to maintain with unflinching hardihood their own crude sentiments.

I have seen some of these people—good people in their way too—of whom I have thought that the conversion of drunkards was more hopeful than theirs. For that damnable fatalism, which by some is put instead of the predestination of the Scriptures, has locked them up—put them in an iron cage, and so they are beyond the reach of help, going on still in their sin, rejecting the Gospel of Christ, while assaying to be connoisseurs of its choicest mysteries.

Now, brothers and sisters, why are such cases as these permitted? Why does the Lord allow the devil to fill the soul with sin?

I think it is, first, to show that there is a reality in sin. If we were all moral and outwardly respectable, we would begin to think sin was but a fancy. These daring sinners show us the reality of it.

It is to manifest the reality of divine grace. For when these are saved, then it is we wonder and we are compelled to say, "There is something in this. If such a hard, iron nature yet melts before the power of divine love, there must be a majesty in it."

It is to humble us too, to throw us on our back, and let us see how utterly powerless human agency is. When you cannot get in the thin end of the wedge, much less the whole wedge, when the ploughshare breaks on the edge of a hard rock, when the edge of the sword turns against the armor, then it is to draw yourself out of self to God!

You see it is a deadly evil, where only omnipotence can help. Your soul says, "Lord, put out Your arm! Now do it, and the glory shall be Yours." This is probably the chief reason, it is in order that God may get great glory to Himself. He lets the devil have it all his own way. "There," He says, "pick your own ground, fight in your own territory, maneuver in your own way, and with a word I will crush your power." He gives Satan great advantage, lets him entrench himself firmly in the soul from youth up, so that the victory may be splendid to the greatest degree.

We have thus before us now, for our sorrowful contemplation, the case of one whose disease mocks the physician, laughs at all human endeavors, and defies the watchful care of mild and gentle treatment to mitigate its force, or ameliorate its fearful symptoms.

II. Turn we now with passing glance to LOOK AT THE SCENE AROUND. The company is made up of five sorts of people.

There are the scribes—cynics, I think, to a man—"We told you so! We told you so!" they say. "Your Master pretended to give you power to cast out devils. No such thing! You cannot cast out devils. Those

whom you healed were not truly possessed. Little enough was ever the matter with them. They were fanciful, and they believed in you through enthusiasm. The dupes of credulity, your incantations bewitched them, and so they got better. But you cannot cast out a devil—you cannot cast that devil out.”

“Now then,” says one of the scribes to Andrew, “cast it out. Come, Philip, try what you can do!” And inasmuch as after all trying, the devil would not go out—“Ah! just so!” they say, “They are impostors. There is nothing in it.”

Just recall it, friends, to your own memories, have you not seen men of that kind? “Ah yes,” they say, “the Gospel converts one sort of people, such as always go to places of worship, the more intelligent and respectable of the community, but you see, it is no good in these tough cases. These hardened ones—it cannot touch them. They are beyond its power.” “Aha!” they say, “Where is the boasted might of this great Physician? He can heal your finger-aches, He does not know how to make these foul diseases fly.”

Then here is the poor father, all dejected. “I brought him to you—I knew you did cast out devils, and I thought you could cast my son’s devil out and he would be healed. I am disappointed in you all. Yet I do think your Master can do it, but I am not sure that even He can. If such excellent apostles as you are, have tried so hard and have failed, I do not think there can be any chance for me. I am full of unbelief. O, I wish I had never brought my child here at all, to make a public spectacle of him, that he might be a witness to your failures.”

That is the poor father. Perhaps that poor father is here this morning, and he is saying, “Ah, I do believe, but still I am full of unbelief. I have brought my daughter, I have brought my child under the sound of the Word, I have prayed and wrestled with God in prayer, and my child is not saved.”

“I brought my husband,” says one good woman, “but he is just as full of Satan as ever he was. I must give it up in despair.”

And then, there are the disciples, and they look pitiable indeed. “Well,” they say, “we do not know how to account for it. We cannot tell you how it is. We have said the same in this case that we were wont to say in others.” “Why,” says one of them, “when I went abroad and just said, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command thee to come out of him,’ the unclean spirit always did come out in every other case. I cannot understand this. I must give it up.”

“We all must give it up,” say the apostles. For some unknown cause this seems to be quite out of the catalog of cases which we are commissioned to cure. And so we sometimes hear dejected ministers after preaching long at such hard shells as these—they say, “Well, we cannot understand it. ‘The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.’ Oh, it must be that these are fore-ordained unto damnation, we must give it up!” That is how unbelieving ministers talk—or at least the most part of ministers in their season of misgiving and chagrin.

But then there is the general crowd. They are neither this way nor that. They say they will see fair. “Come, clear the ring out. If Jesus Christ be not an impostor—if He be God—certainly He can heal this poor man.” Now, here is the test and the ordeal. “If that man be not healed, we,” say the crowd, “will not believe. But if he be, then we will believe that Jesus Christ is sent of God.”

O dear friends, how often we have thought of those very hard cases in this way. There are hundreds of undecided people looking on and saying, “Ah, if So-and-so were converted, then I would say there was something in it. If truly he could have a new heart and a right spirit, then I too, would turn to God with full purpose of heart.”

There was a fifth party there, and that was the devil himself. Oh, how triumphant he was! “Ah!” he seemed to say, “try your exorcism. Go on with your words, preach at him, pray at me, weep over me, do what you will, you cannot get me out.” There he seems to stand entrenched within the stronghold of the poor tortured heart. “Do your best, do your worst, I am not afraid of you. I have got this man, and I will keep him. I have so fixed myself in him that no power shall ever be able to heal him.”

So we seem to hear that vile shriek of hell over some men, “Yes,” saith he, “I will trust him to go into Spurgeon’s Tabernacle. I know that thousands there have felt the power of the Holy Ghost in

making new men of them. This is a case I can trust. There is nothing will ever touch him. The great hammer has knocked the chains off of many, but it cannot touch his chains. They are harder than iron. I have no fear for him.” And perhaps he is gloating his thoughts now with the torments of the man in another world.

Ah, you foul fiend! if our Master should come here this morning, you would sing another tune. If He should say, “Come out of him, you foul spirit,” you will go back howling to your vile den. For His voice can do what our voice never could have done.

And may we not easily realize such a scene enacted in this congregation? You have the scoffers, you have the anxious parent, the ministry confessedly powerless in the matter, the crowd looking on, and the devil rejoicing that such cases are quite beyond human strength. What more can you want to vivify the picture before your imagination?

III. But look! THE MASTER COMES.

Ah! the Master comes! Forthwith the scene changes! The lieutenants and the captains who began the battle did not understand the art of war. They were precipitant and hasty. The right wing was broken, the left began to reel, the center almost fails. The trumpets of the adversary begin to sound a victory. Here they come—their dread artillery in front. What will become of the army now?

Hold! Hold! What is it that I see? A cloud of dust. Who comes galloping there? It is the commander in chief. “What are you doing?” says he, “What are you at?” In a moment he sees this is not the way to fight. He comprehends the difficulties of the case in an instant. “Forward there! Forward there! Backward there!” The scale is turned. The mere presence of the commander in chief has changed the whole face of the field, and now, you adversaries, you may turn your backs and fly.

It was so in Jesus’ case exactly. His lieutenants and captains—the apostles—had lost the day. He comes into the field, comprehends the state of the case. “Bring him here to me,” says He, and the poor wretch, foaming and tormented, is brought to Him, and He says, “Come out of him, thou unclean spirit.” The thing is done. The victory achieved. The undecided receive Christ as a prophet, the scoffers’ mouths are shut, the trembling father rejoices, and the poor demoniac is cured.

And yet, when Jesus Christ came to cure this poor man, he was in as bad a state as he well could be. Nay, the very presence of the Savior seemed to make it worse. As soon as ever the devil perceived that Christ was come, he began to rend and tear his poor victim.

As quaint old Fuller says—like a bad tenant whose lease is out, he hates the landlord and so he does all the damage he can, because he has got notice to leave. Often just before men are converted, they are worse than ever. There is an unusual display of their desperate wickedness, for then the devil has great wrath, now that his time is short.

The struggles of this child are appalling. The devil seemed as if he would kill him before he could be healed, and after paroxysms of the most frightful kind, the poor youth laid upon the ground, pale and still as a corpse, insomuch that many said, “He is dead.”

It is just the same with many conversions of these desperate sinners. Their convictions are so terrible, frequently the work of the devil within them in keeping them from Christ is so furious that you would give up all hope. You say, “That man will be driven mad. Those acute feelings, the intense agony of his spirit will rob him of all mental power, and then in abject prostration, he will die in his sin.”

Ah! dear friends, this again is only a piece of Satan’s infamy. He knew, and knew right well that Christ could set that poor young man free, and therefore he sets upon him with all his might to torment him while he may. Have I any such desperate cases among my hearers this morning—one who has been as a son of Belial among the children of men? Is the devil tormenting you today? Do you feel tempted to commit suicide? Are you urged to some mad freak of yet greater sin in order to drown your griefs and strangle your conscience?

O poor soul, do no such thing, for my Master will soon stoop over you, and take you by the hand, and lift you up, and your comfort shall begin, because the unclean spirit is cast out. “Ah! He means to destroy me,” says the soul under conviction. Nay, soul, God does not destroy those whom He convinces

of sin. Men do not plough fields which they have no intention to sow. If God ploughs you with conviction He will sow you with Gospel comfort, and you shall bring forth a harvest to His glory.

As a woman at her work first plies the needle with its sharp prick, and then draws the thread after it, so in your case the sharpness of sorrow for sin will be speedily followed by the silver thread of joy and peace in believing.

And oh, mark it! The vision just now, up there on the mountain of glory, resolved itself into “Jesus only.” His peerless radiance eclipsed every other. So, too, it is “Jesus only,” down here in the valley. His matchless grace can encounter no rival. Keep this forever in your mind’s eye—it is the Master who did it all. His appearance on the scene removed all difficulties. In such extreme cases, there will be, and there must be, a most eminent display of God’s power. And that power may be unassociated with means. Under any circumstances, it will be the Lord alone doing it, to the praise and glory of His grace.

IV. Now, we come to the last, and perhaps the most important part of the sermon. The riddle is perplexing. “WHY COULD NOT WE CAST HIM OUT?” Let the Master tell us the reasons why these cases thwart our power.

The Savior said it was want of faith—want of faith. No man may expect to be the means of the conversion of a sinner without having faith which leads him to believe that the sinner will be converted. Such things may occur, but it is not the rule. If I can preach in faith that my hearers will be saved, they will be saved. If I have no faith, God may honor His Word, but it will be in no great degree, certainly He will not honor me.

Abandoned sinners, if converted by means, are usually brought under the power of divine grace through ministers of great faith. Have you observed—there were persons who heard all the small fry of the Whitefield age, they had listened to this preacher and to that. Under whom were they converted? Under Mr. Whitefield, because Mr. Whitefield was a man of masterly faith. He believed that the lost could be reclaimed—that the worst diseases could be healed—that the most heinous, abandoned, profligate, blasphemous sinners could be saved. He preached to them as if he expected the deaf would be charmed by the Gospel melody, and the dead would be quickened at the commanding call of the great Redeemer’s name.

At Surrey Chapel, over yonder, in Rowland Hill’s day, some of the grossest blackguards and biggest scamps who ever infested London, were saved. Why? Because Rowland Hill preached the Gospel to big sinners, and believed the fact of big sinners being converted. The respectable people of his day said, “Oh, yes! it is only the tag, rag, and bob-tail who go to hear Mr. Hill.” “Just so,” said Mr. Hill, “and welcome tag, and welcome rag, and welcome bob-tail. They are the very people that I want.”

“What is the good of such people as they are, going to hear the Gospel? Why does Mr. Hill try to preach to harlots and thieves?” they said. “They are just the very people,” said Mr. Hill, “I believe that these people can be saved.” It was want of faith in the others, for if a man have faith as a grain of mustard seed, let it be ever so little, yet, if it is true, it is mighty in proportion to its power.

Mr. Hill had the power of faith, and he was the means of the conversion of very great sinners. A few years ago, it was utterly hopeless to try and reclaim fallen daughters of sin, but a few men had faith that it could be done, and it has been done.

And I will now make bold to say that if there be a great sinner here, such as I tried to describe just now, some gross case of infernal possession, if that person be not saved, it is for the want of faith in our case. If we have brought that person before God, and have been anxious about his salvation, and God has not heard that prayer, it is because we could not believe it possible that such a case could be saved. If God gives you the power to believe that any soul will be saved, it will be saved, there is no doubt about that.

Still, our Savior added, “Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” What did He mean by that? I believe He meant that in these very special cases, the ordinary preaching of the Word will not avail, and ordinary prayer will not suffice. There must be an unusual faith, and to get this there

must be an unusual degree of prayer. And to get that prayer up to the right point, there must be, in many cases, fasting as well.

No doubt, there is something special about the admonition to prayer from the association in which it stands. One sort of Christians will use formal supplications, and the petitions they ask are founded upon a sense of propriety, without any glow of feeling. Another sort will wait for the Spirit to move them, and when certain impulses stimulate their minds, they rejoice in a sense of liberty.

Yet, I show unto you a more excellent way. There be those who watch unto prayer, wait before the Lord, seek His face, and exercise patience till they get an audience. Such disciples continue in their retirement until they have that experience of access for which they crave.

And what is fasting for? That seems the difficult point. It is evidently accessory to the peculiar continuance in prayer, practiced oftentimes by our Lord, and advised by Him to His disciples. Not a kind of religious observance, in itself meritorious, but a habit, when associated with the exercise of prayer, unquestionably helpful.

I am not sure whether we have not lost a very great blessing in the Christian church by giving up fasting. It was said there was superstition in it, but as an old divine says, we had better have a spoonful of superstition than a porringer full of gluttony. Martin Luther, whose body, like some others, was of a gross tendency, felt as some of us do, that in our flesh there dwelleth no good thing, in another sense than the apostle meant it. And he used to fast frequently. He says his flesh was wont to grumble dreadfully at abstinence, but fast he would, for he found that when he was fasting, it quickened his praying.

There is a treatise by an old Puritan, called, “The soul-fattening institution of fasting,” and he gives us his own experience that during a fast he has felt more intense eagerness of soul in prayer than he had ever done at any other time.

Some of you, dear friends, may get to the boiling-point in prayer without fasting. I do think that others cannot, and probably if we did sometimes set apart a whole day for prayer for a special object, we should at first feel ourselves dull, and lumpish, and heavy. Then let us resolve, “Well, I shall not go down to my dinner. I shall stop here. I feel anxious for a praying frame of mind, and I will keep alone.”

And if when the time for the evening meal came on, we should say, “I feel a little of the cravings of hunger, but I will satisfy them with some very slender nutriment—a piece of bread, or something of the kind—and I will continue in prayer.” I think that very likely towards evening our prayers would become more forcible and vehement than at any other part of the day.

We do not exactly recommend this for those who are weak. There are some men with little or no encumbrance of flesh about them. But others of us of a heavy make, with sluggishness for a temptation, have to cry out because we are rather like stones on the ground than birds in the air. To such, I think, we can venture to recommend it from the words of Christ.

At any rate, I can suppose a father here setting apart a day of prayer, going on, wrestling with God without any intermission, pleading with Him till, as it was said of the famous martyr of Brussels, he would so pray that he forgot everything except his prayer. And when they came to call him to meat, he made no answer, for he had got out of all earthly things in his wrestling with the angel, that he could not think of anything besides.

Such a man taking up the case of a gross sinner, I believe, would be the means of that sinner’s conversion. And the reason why some are never brought to Christ, is, speaking after the manner of men, because we have not got the qualified men to deal with them. For “This kind goeth not out save with prayer and fasting.”

When we have prayed and have reached the point of true faith, then the sinner is saved by the mighty power of God, and Christ is glorified. I think I have some in this house who are ready to say, “Well, if such be the case, I will try it. I will take the Master at His word.” Brother, brother, if half-a-dozen of us joined together, it might be better, nay, “If two agree as touching any one thing,” it would be done. Let some of us put it to the test upon some big sinner, and see whether it does not come true.

I think I may fairly ask you who are lovers of souls, who have eyes which weep, and hearts which can feel, to try my Master's prescription, and see if the most unmanageable devil which ever took possession of a human heart be not driven out as the result of prayer and fasting, in the exercise of your faith.

The Lord bless you in this thing, and may He bring us all to trust in Jesus by a saving faith. To Him be glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

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.