

# Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

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SHAM CONVERSION.

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## A Sermon

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DELIVERED BY

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“And so it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the LORD: therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which slew some of them. They feared the LORD and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence. Unto this day they do after the former manners: they fear not the LORD.”—2 Kings xvii. 25, 33 and 34.

THE world is full of deceptions and counterfeits. We have had to protect ourselves by law against adulterations of the commonest articles of diet, but all the laws in the world will not be able to protect us against the constant, the almost universal deceit which is found in daily life. Men seem continually to be set on making the worse appear the better: putting the bitter for the sweet and the sweet for the bitter. If any man shall go through this world with his eyes shut, believing all that he hears, he will find himself the dupe of a thousand knaves. You must keep your eyes open; you must carry a test with you by which you shall be able to discern between things that differ, or else in the ordinary affairs of life you will soon be brought to bankruptcy and poverty.

In the highest regions also, where we have to do with spiritual and eternal things, there are even worse cheats than anywhere else. That old enemy of God and man, who is rightly said to be a liar from the beginning, takes care to use falsehood in order, if it were possible, to deceive even the very elect. If there is a Christ, he sets up an antichrist. If there is a church of Christ, he makes a world's church that shall mimic it. If there is a gospel, he too comes with his good news and sets up “another gospel, which is not another.” In the matters which concern the inner man—in the work of the Holy Spirit upon the soul—Satan is an adept at deception there also. He can imitate repentance with remorse. He can match faith with credulity. He can mimic assurance with presumption. He can give us the pleasures of this world instead of the joy of the Lord, and instead of a simple confidence in Christ he can offer us that which may look remarkably like it, and yet,

after all, be confidence in self. Hence, one of the very first things that a man has to do if he would be right at last, is to search his own heart, to test and try that which he supposes to be there whether it be the work of God or no; whether his spot be the spot of God's children or only a vile imitation of it.

Conversion which is absolutely necessary to salvation—conversion by which man turns from sin to righteousness, from self to Christ, from the world to heaven, from rebellion to obedience—conversion which we must all experience if we are to be right towards God, for “except ye be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven”—conversion, too, has been mimicked in many ways. In this discourse we are going to look at one instance in which the false has been put for the true, in order that by the light of that instance, as by a beacon, we may be warned off this dangerous rock. Another man's shipwreck ought always to be a beacon to us, so where these Samaritans failed, let us take heed unto ourselves lest we fall after the same fashion.

We shall have three points which will follow the order of the narrative. We shall look, first, at their first estate: “They feared not the Lord”; secondly, their sham conversion: “They feared the Lord and served their own gods”; thirdly, their real state while they professed thus to be converted: “They feared not the Lord.”

I. First, then, let us observe these Samaritans in THEIR FIRST ESTATE. They were brought, very likely much against their will, from different parts of the Assyrian empire, and they were put down as colonists in the various towns which had formerly been occupied by the tribes of Israel. There they were compelled to dwell. They do not appear to have had any reverence for God at all. *They were wholly indifferent.* “They feared not the Lord;” they scarcely knew his name, and they seem to have made no inquiries. They found that the land was good, and they tilled it; the vines were fruitful, and they pruned them; the houses were built, and they inhabited them; and thus they settled down. What did it matter to them about Jehovah? Who was he and what was he? No doubt there had been a people living there who more or less had revered his name, but what was that to them? They were strangers. It had never crossed their mind that they should be interfered with at all in the matter of worshipping Jehovah, and so they lived altogether carelessly and indifferently. How many there are that are doing the same to-day: many who are thoughtless altogether about divine things: taken up with trifles: occupied only with the things of this life. It does not seem to enter into their heads that they are immortal—that they will have to live in another state. As to their having a Creator and one who daily preserves them in life, no doubt they believe it, but they are not concerned about it. Practically they say, “Who is the Lord that we should obey his voice?” That was the condition of these Samaritans at the first. They were altogether indifferent to the matter. It never troubled them at all.

*They had no fear of God.* They may have heard of some that trembled at Jehovah, but they never trembled. Perhaps they heard

that he was a God whose worship was very troublesome, whose laws were very strict, whose subjects often had to mourn because they rebelled, and hence they did not want to know too much about him, lest they should be drawn into the same exercise of heart and have to confess the same sins and fall into the same sorrows. They knew not and they did not want to know. They were not troubled.

I should not wonder that when they began to hear something about him *they even ridiculed Jehovah*. Had not their gods overcome the God of the land? Had they not taken possession of these fair cities? Had not the hosts of Assyria scattered, like clouds before the wind, all the companies that the men of Israel could bring against them? So they would have a sneer for the Israelites, and the men of Judah, for their God and their worship. Any religion they had only went as far as to lead them to despise the only true religion and to meet it with jest and sarcasm: that was all. "They feared not the Lord."

Yet there was this point. *They had come to live near a people that did fear the Lord*, for, at that time, the people of Judah were in a great measure right towards the Lord God of Hosts. Hezekiah, I suppose, was then upon the throne, a king who in all things walked before the Lord and sought to uphold, in singleness of heart, the worship of the one only God. These strangers coming into the neighbourhood where the ancient faith of God's people prevailed must have found it dangerous to their indifference and perilous to their scepticism and their false belief. So have I known men without religion or the fear of God, or any respect whatever for divine things, who have been brought, in the order of providence, into a society where there have been true piety and fervent religion. That always means trouble for their impiety, and disturbance for their indifference. They receive some sparks from that fire into their souls, and who knows whether the sparks may not light a fire that will burn down the wood and the hay and the stubble that are within their spirits? It ought to be a very hard thing for a man to live near us, my dear brothers and sisters, and to remain indifferent to religion. The preacher ought so to preach that it shall be almost an impossibility for his hearer to be altogether careless. You Christian people should set such an example in your households, that it should be next door to an impossibility for son or daughter or servant to remain at peace while they remain out of God and out of Christ in a state of sin. These people feared not the Lord; but the point that would be sure to bring them difficulty was that they had come near to the people of Judah that did fear God—near to a commonwealth that was presided over by Hezekiah, who feared the Lord with all his heart and all his soul.

II. Now, secondly, we come to THEIR CONVERSION. In the 33rd verse we read, "They feared the Lord," but there is a very ugly "and" after it which shows that it was a sham conversion. "They feared the Lord and served their own gods." Still, it was a sort of conversion; it meant at any rate an outward change.

How came it about? If you read the chapter, as we have done just now, you will find that *their conversion was caused entirely by*

*terror.* The country had been devastated. War had raged all over it for years. The cities and villages had become uninhabited, and consequently the wild beasts had come down from the mountains, and had so multiplied that lions became a terror throughout the land. Imagining that every country had a different god these people said, "The god of the land must have sent these lions among us." Yea, and the sacred writer does not hesitate to say that God did send the lions among them, for even common things which can be readily accounted for in the order of nature must nevertheless be ascribed to God. He did send lions among them, and it was these lions that converted them. Their teeth and fangs and fiery eyes and the thunders of their roars—these converted them. They must have a god to deliver them: they could not bear the lions, therefore they must fear the Lord who could send lions, and who perhaps would cease to send them. Now, dear friends, always be somewhat diffident of your own conversion if you can trace it only and solely to motives of terror. Here is one man who never would have feared God if disease had not come into the house, if a child had not died, then another and another: it seemed as if they would all sicken, and so he became religious. Another went into business, and for a while he was very prosperous, but the tide turned and he lost his money; bankruptcy stared him in the face; he made a second effort, only to fail again, and then he seemed to feel as if the lions were out against him, so he turned religious. Another had seen his children grow up, and having trained them for the world they went to the world; his son almost broke his heart: his daughter so acted as well nigh to bring his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave: everything seemed to go badly with him, and so he said he would go to church or go to the meeting or something. He turned religious because the lions were out. Still another who had been a very hale, healthy, strong man, and had never thought about religion at all—he had an accident, he had a fit, or he was attacked with a complaint of which he had warning that in all probability it would be fatal by and by, and there did not seem any cure for it. He got worse and worse, and so—well, he thought he would be religious. There was something sensible in the resolution: nay, it was a most proper resolution had it been but carried out rightly and in the way of truth. But you see in all these cases there was no sense of having done wrong. There was no desire to do right. It was the lions, the lions, the lions, the lions. If there had been no lions there would have been no religion. If there had been no lions there would have been no seeking the Lord. If there had been no lions there would have been no wanting to know the manner of the god of the land. Such men have no desire after God, nothing of the kind. The thing that drives them is just that awful lion: the dread of death is upon them, and the dread of something after death, the judgment to come—nothing else. Now some are really brought to God by terrors, but many are only brought into a condition of sham conversion; the root of their religion has been nothing else but the lions.

Now, notice that *their conversion was attended with gross*

*ignorance.* What little sincerity there was—and there was a measure of since *j*—was, nevertheless, dimmed by lack of knowledge, its eyes were put out by an utter ignorance. They did not really know God at all. They looked on Jehovah as if he were but the same as the gods of Cuth and Ava and Sepharvaim, as if he were a petty god of that district, too powerful for them to venture to withstand—nothing more than that. They did not want to know him you notice, for their request to the king of Assyria was not that they might know about God, but that they might know “the manner” of the god of the land. Ay, and there are lots of people who when they desire conversion wish only to know the manner of the people who are converted. What way ought a religious man to behave? What is wanted to satisfy outward decencies? What are the sacraments? What are the doctrines? Their thought is altogether of externals. They only want to know the manner of the god of the land. When a man is really awakened by the Holy Spirit his cry is, “I will arise and go to my Father”; but when it is not the Spirit of God, but only fear which rouses him, his cry is, “I will arise and hide in my Father’s house. I want to get into some secret chamber of his abode. The desire is not for God himself, you see, not for himself, but for his “manner.” I know many who are converted just this way—converted to a profession, converted to a creed, converted to sacraments, to forms. But as the Lord liveth you must be turned to God himself or else ye are not turned aright; ignorance of God is a fatal ignorance. Not to know him or to seek to know him, but only to know the manner and the mode of worshipping him, is a poor desire; yet many rest satisfied with that and nothing more.

Further, these people were not only led to their conversion by fear: not only was their conversion marred by ignorance; but probably also *they were instructed by an unfaithful priest.* The king of Assyria sent them one of the priests that he might teach them the religion. One of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel and taught them how they should fear the Lord. It looks very suspicious, that dwelling in Bethel. I suspect he taught them worship of the calves of Bethel; and you know that the worshippers of the calves of Bethel were the Romanists of that day, just as the pure worshippers of God in Judah were the Protestants of the day. The worshippers of the calves of Bethel did not perhaps worship the calves: they worshipped God under the image of an ox, and they said that image of an ox signifies power and strength. “So we do not worship *it*,” they would have said, “we worship God in it.” They were symbol-users—worshippers of emblems; and this priest was one of them. Well it is a poor conversion which is helped on by a blinded priest. O brethren, take heed how ye hear, and take heed what ye hear; we ought not to entrust ourselves to every person who professes to be a spiritual instructor. “Try the spirits whether they be of God.” One good test I will give you; see whether they search and probe you; rest assured that the Lord has not sent those that speak smooth words and never trouble your conscience or make you search yourselves. “If thou take forth the precious from

the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth," saith the Lord to his prophets, but not else. So this man came and he taught them, I dare say, in his own easy way. He would say, "Well, my dear fellows, you see you have all got your own gods, and I am no sectarian, so long as you worship the true God I do not mind. You may worship Nergal and Ashima and Tartak and Adrammelech, and all the rest of them, just whenever you like. I am teaching you, you see; this is to be the recognized state religion for the time present, and I will teach it to you. But do not afflict yourselves over much: it will be all right." That is the way these got converted. No wonder that they came over so easily, seeing they had such a nice comforting minister who never troubled them at all about any vital change.

Being thus converted *they adopted a good many outward ceremonies.* "So they feared the Lord, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them priests of the high places, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places." They went in for doing the thing thoroughly. As it was a matter of form, when they had found out how to do it—why, they would do it. One priest would not be enough: they would make a great many, and they made as many as ever they could get, and as the lowest of the land would probably be the cheapest they selected them. Men generally have an eye to business even in these things. They set to work worshipping on every high hill though God had said that he was to have sacrifices offered nowhere but at Jerusalem. He would have one altar only, but they took every high place and consecrated it, and they began with great form and pomp and show to go in for the worship of Jehovah. Generally the more show the less reality, and it was so in this case.

You see then that this conversion, though it looked very fine, was radically unsound. Let me emphasize the reasons for this.

It was so, first, *because there was no repentance.* You do not find these people confessing that they had been wrong in worshipping every man his own god. They are quite willing to worship Jehovah, to have sacrifices and do the right thing, but as to any confession of sin making the place a Bochim—a place of weeping, because they had transgressed against the only living and true God—there is not a word of it. Now, my hearer, let me speak to you about your own conversion. If you have skipped the first page of the book, namely, repentance, go back and begin again, for that faith which has a dry eye and never wept for sin is not the faith of God's elect. There must be repentance: it is an essential grace; no man is truly saved who has not a hatred of the sin he loved before, who has not made a confession of it before God with an earnest prayer for pardon.

Notice, again, *these converts had no expiatory sacrifice.* The true believer—the man of Judah—had a day of atonement once every year, and there were great sacrifices of sin-offerings whenever there had been special sin. But there is no mention of trespass-offering or sin-offering among these colonists, they had no sacrifice, no blood of expiation. Ah, sirs, that religion that does not begin with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is a religion that will soon come to an end, and the sooner it comes to the end the better, that ye may begin

again on a surer foundation. A religion without the blood of Christ in it is a lifeless religion. A religion without the atonement and reconciliation by the blood of the covenant has missed the most essential part of true godliness. There was a radical unsoundness in the conversion of these people, for there was no repentance and no sacrifice.

Moreover, *there was no putting away of the false gods.* They did not mind worshipping Jehovah, but every man worshipped his own god too. This is not a true nor worthy service. "I will trust Christ," says one. Yes, and you mean to trust your baptismal regeneration too. That is a false god. You will serve God, but you must indulge some secret sin too. That is another false god which cannot be tolerated. If we are converted to God we must take the hammer and smash the idols. Dagon and Nergal and Adrammelech must not stand in the same temple where stands Jehovah's ark. All the false gods can live comfortably together, but when the living God comes, he is a jealous God, and they must all fall before him. You worship not God at all if you do not worship God alone. There must be an image-breaking in the soul if the conversion is really true. There was none of it here.

In fact, *there was no love to God* in these Samaritans. They were afraid of the lions, but their hearts did not go out to the God who could deliver them from the lions.

I wonder whether I could pick out any characters, among those present, that are like that, some of the Samaritan breed who are trying the fear of the Lord and serving other gods. I have known a man of this kind; he came to a place of worship, and if he had been allowed he would have joined the church and come to the communion-table. At the same time he was a great worshipper of Bacchus—a great lover of what he called "a little drop," though I question whether you could not have made a very considerable number of drops out of what he took. I was speaking the other day to a clergyman who said that there was a man in his parish who told him that he did not know how it was, but he never felt more spiritually minded than when he had had four or five glasses of beer. There are people of that sort about. They fear the Lord and they serve their own gods. Only think of such a thing as a Christian drunkard. Can there be such a thing? Your common sense shall answer: I need not.

I have known also such a thing as this: a man—such an *excellent* man; his guinea was always ready for the cause of God, he had a very prominent pew, and was very well known in connection with religion, but if you had known that he had a second house beside his own, and known the way in which he lived, you would have held him up to execration. Yet he dared to come into the house of God, and if he did not actually unite himself with the church, he was prominently identified with it. At the same time he was living in the lusts of the flesh and professing to be a servant of God—fearing the Lord—keeping a bit of religion, because he was afraid of the lions: that was all: and all the while he was worshipping his own god as well.

You know the thing is done in business also. There is a man that can sing a hymn most beautifully and he can pray in the prayer meeting. But he can prey upon you as well. His mode of business is such that he takes advantage, cheats, and sails wonderfully near the wind; yet he has the name of being a very good man. He is a religious scoundrel. Oh, that God would save our churches from this kind of people who are to be met with so often. The lions make them fear God. They are such cowards that they must be religious, and yet all this while they are worshipping other gods.

I have known a woman, too—I think I may truthfully say a woman in this instance—and she has been, oh, such a dear Christian soul, only there was nobody's character safe within seven miles of her tongue—she was always ready to slander the character of the best that lived. She was a slandering saint, a gossiping mother in Israel. God save us from such.

I cannot describe all the characters that may be suggested by those Samaritans, nor am I intending to hit anybody I know to be here just now, but if I do, I pray you take the cap and wear it and keep it on until it does not fit you any longer. Although you smile, these inconsistencies are very serious matters, and, what is more, they are very common matters. Sham conversion is a thing that may be met with all over the world. Oh, we have got it on a large scale in this "Christian" England of ours which fears the Lord and yet sells opium, fears the Lord and is the most drunken nation under heaven. God save us from such national hypocrisy! God save us too from similar hypocrisy on a minor scale in all ranks and classes and conditions of men who attempt to fear the Lord and to serve their own gods! Such double religion will not run: it is no use: it will not work. If God be God, serve him; and if the devil be God, serve him; but the attempt to join the two together will never succeed, either in this world or in that which is to come.

Such is the pattern of the sham conversion which these people experienced.

III. Now, lastly, we have got before us THEIR REAL STATE AND GOD'S VERDICT UPON IT. He says, "They feared not the Lord."

No. *They insulted the Lord.* They did not fear him. The men who worshipped God and worshipped Baal too, worshipped God and Adrammelech too, were impiously daring. The Lord's claim is that he only is God, and he would have us know that the gods of the heathens are no gods. Our God made the heavens, but as for these they are the work of men's hands. One of the Roman emperors was willing to put up a statue of Christ in the Pantheon amongst all the rest of the gods, and there were some that thought that that showed a kindly spirit. But what an insult to set up Christ by the side of lustful Jupiter, and infamous Venus, and all the rest of these horrible gods, which were only fit for a reformatory, the very best of them. And for the Samaritans to mention the name of Jehovah side by side with those cruel, bestial gods which they worshipped was not to do him honour, but was to insult his sacred majesty. Even so, gentlemen, to try and keep religion, and yet to keep your sins, is not to fear God, but to insult him. "Unto the wicked God

saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth." Keep clear of such trickery. If you must sin, do not add to your sins this needless and unnecessary one, of making a hypocritical pretence of fearing the living God. Save yourself that superfluity of naughtiness.

These people did not fear God for *they did not really obey him*. Obey him? Why, had they obeyed him they would have broken their gods to pieces at once. But no, they only wanted to know "the manner" of the God. They were willing to fall in with that, but as to really asking what his mind and will were, and being willing to do it—that was foreign to them. Therefore they feared not God.

*They were not in covenant relation with God*, as were the Israelites. They were under his old covenant of works, but they were not under the covenant of grace, neither did they know anything of it. God had not brought them up out of Egypt with a high hand and an outstretched arm. He had never redeemed them by blood and set them apart to be his people. They did not know anything about that. There are multitudes of professed converts to religion to-day who know nothing about the covenant of grace—nothing about redemption by blood: they cannot sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. No, they simply keep an outward ceremonial observance of the manner of the God of the land, and they are content with that, but into the very vitals of religion they have not come, therefore they fear not God.

*These people soon acted so as to prove this*. You know what they did a few years afterwards when God had brought back his servant Ezra, together with a company of people, to begin to build the temple. These persons first of all came and said that they would like to join in the work. But Ezra and Nehemiah looked at them very sternly and said, "We have nothing to do with you. You cannot trace your pedigree to Abraham: you do not belong to the covenant seed. You know nothing about it. Go about your business." Then these people showed the old spirit, they wrote letters to the various kings that were then in authority, and so the building of the temple was stayed several times, and they even tried afterwards to attack the people of Jerusalem and put an end to the building of the temple. There are no people in the world that turn out, generally, to be such haters of real religion and of genuine Christianity as those people who are scared into a nominal religion by the lions and yet are abiding in their sins. When the Methodists first began to preach, you know what an outcry there was against them. The great and heinous crime that they were committing was that they were insisting upon regeneration and upon holy lives. So crowds of people all over the country said, "Why we are as religious as people can be. It is true we drink and we do all sorts of things, but you really cannot set up anything like a pure and perfect church in the world. To talk of that is mere cant, you know. There cannot be such a thing; we cannot all be consistent in our profession, and there cannot be anybody that always is; it is all lies and hypocrisy to suppose that any people can be

holy or can walk only in the fear of God ; ” and so they began to pelt the pioneer Methodists with mud and to put them into prison and to oppose them in all sorts of ways. I say it again, it is Ishmael that hates Isaac because though he is not in the line of succession he is very near akin to him. It is Esau that hates Jacob because though Esau does not get the blessing he is very near akin to Jacob, and comes of the same parents. There is no enmity like the enmity of the Samaritan to the Jew—no enmity like that of the mere moralist or the mere hypocritical professor to the man that has vital godliness, that has received the grace of God into his soul.

Perhaps you will think that I have spoken somewhat severely, but I have spoken to myself as well as to you with this earnest desire that we may be right before the living God. There are many of us here that profess to be Christians. Are we really so? Have we real faith in Christ? Does our life prove that it is the living faith—the faith that produceth good works? Brethren, if we be indeed what we say we are, we have only one God. All other aims, objects and designs are secondary. We seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. If we are indeed Christians we have broken a great many idols, we have still some more to break, and we must keep the hammer going till they are all broken.

“The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate’er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from thy throne  
And worship only thee.”

If we are real Christians we have one only trust; we hang all our weight on Jesus, and all other trusts have been flung to the bats and the moles long ago. If we are really the servants of God, we are trying to get rid of sin; we are not harbouring any lust or any false way. Though we are not perfect, yet we want to be, we long to be. There is not a wilful sin that we would keep. God helping us, we desire to steer clear of everything that is contrary to his holy mind. May God grant us this thoroughness, this depth of sincerity, this real change of heart, that we be not among the Samaritan trimmers, but that of us it may be said, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.”

God bless you for Christ’s sake. Amen.

### Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

EXODUS XX. 1—17; AND 2 KINGS XVII. 23—41.

Exodus xx. Verses 1—3. *And God spake all these words saying, I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*

God is the only God, and no other object of worship is to be tolerated for a moment.

4—6. *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve*