

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

TRUE AND NOT TRUE.

A Sermon

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"Now we know that God heareth not sinners."—John ix. 31.

I HAVE taken my text out of its connection, for a certain purpose. Part of the purpose will be answered immediately if I say how wrong it is to take any passage of Scripture away from that which comes before it, and that which follows after it; for you may, if you are so inclined, prove anything you like from the Bible if you wrench a line from its context, and hold it up by itself. You can, indeed, act in the same way with any other book. You may take an expression from any human being's writings, as some people do from these divine writings, and make the author say what he never meant. That is how many treat the Word of God. For instance, a man may say that he can prove from Scripture that God hath forsaken and forgotten his people. By turning to Isaiah xlix. 14, we find that Zion, in an unbelieving fainting fit said, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me." It was not true, but was one of the falsehoods of unbelief. If you take from their connection the words in Psalm xiv. 1, "There is no God," you will have the opposite of what David wrote, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." If you pick out a sentence from the New Testament, without the context, you may say that Scripture declares that our Lord Jesus Christ was a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, because his enemies falsely said so; and you may declare that it is your duty to worship the devil, because Matthew records that he said to Christ, "Fall down and worship me." You see at once the absurdity and wickedness of wresting the Scriptures in that fashion.

Now take the words that I have chosen for my text, "We know that God heareth not sinners." Who said that? A man who was born blind, to whom Christ had given sight. And who believed it? A set of still blinder Pharisees. He was arguing with them, and he wished to convince them, so he used an argument which was

specially suitable to them. It was their Pharisaic belief that God would not hear sinners. "Very well," he said; "but God has heard Christ; therefore, according to your own belief, Jesus Christ, who has opened my eyes, cannot be a sinner." It was a capital *argumentum ad hominem*, as we say, an argument to the men themselves. But we are not going to accept everything that this man said. We are not bound to do so, for he did not speak under any sort of inspiration. The evangelist was inspired to record what the man said, but we should be very foolish if we believed all that he said, shrewd as he proved himself to be.

Is it true that "God heareth not sinners"? *It is true, and it is not true.* It is true, most true as this man meant it; but it is utterly false in the sense in which some persons have understood it. So I am going to speak, first, upon *how it is true that God heareth not sinners*; and, secondly, upon *how it is not true.*

I. First, then, IT IS TRUE THAT GOD HEARETH NOT SINNERS IN THE SENSE IN WHICH THIS MAN USED THE EXPRESSION, namely, that, *if Christ had been an impostor, it is not possible to conceive that God would have listened to his prayer, and given him the power to open the blind man's eyes, for that would have been for God, the just and the true, to set his seal to a lie, and that cannot be.* The man was quite accurate in arguing, "If this Jesus of Nazareth is a deceiver, how is it that" (as the man supposed) "he has asked God to open the eyes of one born blind, and God has done it, thereby as good as saying that this deceiver was true?" It is not supposable that the Most High could have done anything of the kind. It can never be believed that God will listen to the prayers of men who ask him to support their falsehoods, and assist them in the propagation of that which is contrary to his own kingdom. That was the primary sense in which, I have no doubt, the man meant his statement, and in that sense it is true. God will back up the right and the true, and stand by the Christ whom he himself hath sent; but he will not support imposture and falsehood.

In another sense it is true that "God heareth not sinners;" that is to say, *he will hear none of us,—no sinner among us, (and who among us is not a sinner?) in and of ourselves.* If heard, it must be through the interposition of the Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, for up to the immediate presence of the thrice-holy God the guilty sinner cannot come by himself. The fire of the divine holiness would burst forth, and utterly destroy the presumptuous rebel who might attempt such an intrusion; but Jesus meets us just where we are, we give our prayers into his hand, and he perfumes them and cleanses us with his own most precious blood, and then he presents both ourselves and our prayers before his Father's face. God could not hear those prayers of ours, neither could he have respect unto us or to our offering, apart from the mediation of Christ. He must—to use the language of one of our hymn-writers,—*"look through Jesu's wounds"* on us, and then, but not till then, can he regard us favourably. As a matter of absolute justice, irrespective of the Mediator, God could not and would not hear any prayer from any sinful being in the universe.

Our text is also quite true if we read it as meaning that *God heareth not wicked prayers*. Perhaps someone asks, "What are wicked prayers?" There are many sorts, but I will only mention one or two kinds now. Those are wicked prayers which men offer formally; I mean such as we often hear when solemn sounds are evidently uttered by thoughtless tongues,—when men bow their heads in the posture of devotion, but their hearts are gadding abroad after vanity,—when they bend the knee, morning and night, and repeat a form, but there is no heart in it. All that is an insult and a mockery to the Most High. What should we think if somebody presented to us a petition, and asked us to listen to it, yet did not mean it, but merely mocked us with empty sounds? Unless your heart is in your prayer, it is a wicked one, and God will not answer it. He must hear it, but it will be only in indignation, and he will say to you, "What have I done that you should thus provoke me to my face, and bring to me mere empty shells when the kernel of the heart is altogether absent?"

That is also a wicked prayer which a man offers simply because it is the custom to offer it, and there is something to be gained by it. All attendance upon religious ordinances, for the sake of thereby getting pecuniary profit or social position, must be abominable in the sight of God, yet there are many who have a keen eye for the loaves and fishes that Christ or his apostles have to distribute, and they say a prayer for what they can get, and they would swear an oath for twice as much, or perhaps for half as much, equally satisfied whichever they might do so long as the wages were pretty sure and liberal. It is detestable that religion should ever be a stalking-horse for gain or for position. We know that God hears not such prayers as those. Sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal must be more musical in his ears than the mere chattering of formalists, or the pretended prayers of those who hope to gain thereby. He hears not prayers in which men sin as they pray, and insult him when they appear to be devout.

It is quite certain, as you will see from various passages of Scripture which I will presently quote to you, that God does not, and will not hear the prayers of those who continue in their sins even while they pray. There are thousands of persons who would very much like to go to heaven, and they are dreadfully afraid of going to hell; but, then, if they do go to heaven, they would like to take their sins with them,—at least, most of the way. They would cut their acquaintance just a few yards before the brink of the river of death; but they feel that they must keep those sweet sins of theirs, and yet they hope to go to heaven! If this is what any of you are doing, be you sure of this, that God will not hear your prayers. He will hear your supplications if you repent of and forsake your sins; but if you come before him arm in arm with your sinful lusts, he will drive you from his presence. A man prays for forgiveness, yet continues to drink to excess; can God answer a prayer of that kind? It cannot be; he will never pander to our base passions by allowing us to indulge in sin, and yet to hope for mercy. I believe that there are many persons who

do pray, after a fashion, for grace, and Christ, and heaven; they have never obtained an answer yet, and they never will as long as they continue to dally with their beloved sins. These must be given up; even if they were like their right arms, they must be cut off, or like their right eyes, they must be plucked out, for it is utterly impossible to keep sin and yet go to heaven. In this sense, "God heareth not sinners."

Do you wish to be saved from sin? Do you pray to be saved from intemperance, from dishonesty, from falsehood, from unchastity? Do you ask to be saved from everything that makes you unlike your God? Then he will hear such prayers as those; but to pray for pardon, yet continue to rebel,—to pray for forgiveness, yet still go on to provoke him,—such a prayer as that must be a stench in the nostrils of the Most High. You will find, in Isaiah's first chapter, 15th verse, that the Lord says, "When ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood." There is a similar passage in Jeremiah xiv. 12, where the Lord says concerning the people who would not turn from their evil ways, "When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence." "Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the Lord doth not accept them; he will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins."

Another true meaning may be attached to this passage, "God heareth not sinners;" that is to say, *God does not hear hypocrites*. Job knew this, and so did his friends; it hardly needs a revelation to make us know that it is true. If a man tries to play fast and loose with God,—if he pretends to be the Lord's servant, and all the while he is the servant of sin,—God will not grant the request that is made by his double tongue. Listen to these words of Job: "What is the hope of the hypocrite, though he hath gained, when God taketh away his soul? Will God hear his cry when trouble cometh upon him? Will he delight himself in the Almighty? will he always call upon God?" No; hypocrites will not always call upon God, and God will not always hear them when they do call upon him; I may truly say that he will never hear them, for he abhors the sacrifice that is presented to him without the devout heart of the offerer.

We have further proof that our text has much truth in it if we think of *another class of sinners that God will not hear, namely, the unforgiving*. When we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us," we expressly ask that God will not forgive us till we have forgiven our fellow-men. You may kneel till your knees grow to be part of the very floor; you may weep till you make your bed to swim; but no answer of peace shall ever come from God to you as long as you retain one black malicious thought against your fellow-man, however much he may have offended you. Perhaps this explains why some of you, who have been awakened of late, have not been able to find peace with God. If it is so with thee, my friend, thou must first take thy

hand from the throat of thy brother, who owes thee that little debt, and then mayest thou hope that God will suffer thee to find mercy at his hands concerning thy far greater debt to him. Bring not thy sacrifice unto the Lord, pollute not his altar with it; nay, dishonour not the floor of God's house by treading upon it while thou dost cherish an unforgiving spirit; but go home to thy brother, and say unto him, "I freely forgive thee for the wrong thou hast done to me. Let this quarrel be ended, for I cannot meet my God till first I can meet thee;" for "he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"

I may here remark, by the way, that *God will not hear even his own people when they are living in known sin*. You must have noticed that remarkable declaration in Psalm lxvi. 18, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Have you not found it so, my brethren and sisters who have been favoured with the presence of God? When you have backslidden, when you have grieved the Spirit of God, have not your prayers returned empty to you? You used to ask and receive; when you kept up constant, familiar intercourse with the Most High, you had but to express your desire, and it was granted unto you. But you grew cold, worldly, careless; and now, when you pray, it is like speaking into a brazen cauldron; your words reverberate, they resound in your own ears, but they do not reach the ears of God. You go to the mercy-seat, and groan, but you bring your wants away with you; they are not supplied, and so, groaning, and groaning, and groaning yet again, prayer has become a toilsome task with you, for no answer follows your supplication. Ask the Lord to cleanse your heart, my brother; then your power in prayer will come back to you. If you walk contrary to God, he will walk contrary to you, and your power in prayer will fail you when you in any way give place to sin. I do not think that the blind man, who had been cured by Christ, meant that, but it is true, and it is necessary that I should mention it.

There is another class of sinners whom God will not hear. In Proverbs xxviii. 9, we read, "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination." That is to say, *if a man will not hear God, God will not hear him*. You have a Bible, but you will not read it; then, when you pray, you must not expect God to give you audience. You will not attend the means of grace when you might do so; if anybody tries to explain the gospel to you, you tell him to hold his tongue, for you are determined not to know anything about the way to heaven. Well then, friend, you may say what you like about praying, but while God's gospel is treated by you with such disrespect as this, you cannot expect that God will grant your requests. Shut your ear to God, and he will shut his ear to you; but incline your ear, and come unto him, and, sinner as you are, your soul shall live, for God will hear you.

Further, *God will not hear those who continue to harden their hearts against him*. There are some people who have often been impressed, and they have had great difficulty in throwing off those

impressions. The battering-ram of the gospel has been hammering at the doors of some of your hearts, and it has given such tremendous blows that you have thought that the door must be wrenched from its hinges, and the posts must be torn from their sockets; yet you have managed to strengthen your inside defences, and to keep up the barrier. Soul, let me solemnly warn you that you may do that once too often; you may put one bolt too many on that door; and, one of these days, the Lord will turn away from you, and say, "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh." The Lord will not always strive with men. He waits long in matchless patience, but he will not always wait; and the day shall come when the refusers shall cry, "Lord, Lord, open unto us," but he will say, "Depart from me; I never knew you;" and they will hear the fatal sentence, "Too late; too late; ye cannot enter now." We know that God heareth not sinners when once they depart out of this life. Once driven by death beyond the verge of mercy, once shut up in hell, this man's words will be most emphatically true concerning them, "We know that God heareth not sinners."

II. Having thus shown you that there are some senses in which this declaration is true, I am going into the other side of the question, and shall show you that **THERE ARE SENSES IN WHICH THIS TEXT IS NOT TRUE**, but the very reverse of true.

First, it is not true that God hears not those who have been, and still are, in a measure, sinful; because, my brethren, *if he did not hear sinners, he would not hear any human being*, for "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Solomon truly said, "There is no man that sinneth not;" and David wrote, under the inspiration of the Spirit, "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." We have all erred, and gone astray from the right road; and when we approach God in prayer, we must feel this, and confess it. It is not true, therefore, that the Lord does not hear those who have sinned,—those who still call themselves sinners, though they are saved by sovereign grace. Look at the long line of his people, and note how he has heard their prayers. Many beside David have said, "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." Even after his people have gone astray from him, he has heard them when they have repented, and returned unto him. The 51st Psalm is a sinner's prayer, is it not? Yet how graciously the Lord listened to it, and restored his penitent servant to his favour. If I thought that God did not hear sinners, that is to say, those who have any sin, then would it be of no use for me to open my lips in prayer, or to lift my eyes to heaven. But, blessed be his name, not only has he heard some of us, sinners though we are, but he has washed us from our sins, clothed us with the righteousness of Christ, and we are "accepted in the Beloved;" and now, when we plead with him, we prevail; we delight ourselves in him, and he gives us the desire of our heart. We dare not say that we are not sinners still; for,

though we strive after perfection, and shall never be satisfied with anything short of it, and believe that we shall assuredly have it through Jesus Christ our Lord, yet we have not at present obtained it. We labour after it, not as though we had attained it, or were already perfect, for we still confess that there is iniquity about our holy things, unholiness in our holiness, unbelief in our faith, and something to be repented of in our repentance. Yet the Lord graciously heareth us, blessed be his name, so that it is not true absolutely that God heareth not sinners.

Neither is it true that God does not sometimes hear and answer the prayers of unregenerate men. I am going to speak upon a subject as to which there may be a difference of opinion, but I cannot help that; I am merely relating what I regard as facts. While I was but a child, and knew not the Lord in a saving sense, I was taught by my parents that God heard prayer; and I distinctly remember, as a boy, offering a prayer upon a very unimportant matter. If I were to tell you what it was, it would make you smile; but to me, as a child, it was a very great matter, and I prayed to God many times about it. I know that I was not then born again, neither had I true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but I did devoutly believe that God would hear me in that matter, and I asked him again and again, and he gave me my desire. The result upon my mind was wonderfully beneficial, for it confirmed my belief in the existence of God, and helped to arm me against any doubts of the infidel kind that might afterwards assail me, for the first, and what was to me a very remarkable, answer to my prayers, always anchored me fast. On one occasion, in my early ministry, I mentioned this circumstance when I was addressing some Sunday-school children in a chapel where the brethren were of the "very sound" sort; they believed in Calvinistic doctrine, not as I do, reckoning sixteen ounces to the pound, but allowing eighteen or nineteen ounces, and those extra ounces were not good for the people to feed upon. While I was speaking to the children, upstairs in the gallery were some of these divines, and this remark of mine quite shocked them. They considered me to be as bad as Andrew Fuller, and to them he was, doctrinally, about the most horrible person that could be; so, outside the chapel gate, I was assailed with questions about God hearing the prayers of unregenerate people. I was very young at the time, and was rather bothered by those old fellows, but I found a very valiant defender. A poor woman, wearing a red cloak, pushed her way into the throng, and addressed the old men thus, "Fools, and slow of heart to believe what the Holy Spirit has written in the Word." I looked in astonishment at her, wondering what she was going to say. "Did you never read," she said, "that God feedeth the young ravens which cry? Are they regenerate? Do they pray spiritual prayers? Is it not the most natural prayer in the world that comes from a hungry young raven; and if God hears them, and satisfies their desire, do you not think that he will hear a man who is made in his own image, even though he is unregenerate?" The woman won the day for me, and I went away rejoicing.

I know that God hears the sincere and earnest prayers even of unregenerate persons concerning common things. I read, yesterday, a story of Mr. Samuel Medley, of whose hymns we have many in our hymn-books, especially that one about God's lovingkindness. Mr. Medley, in his younger days, was an officer on board one of his majesty's men-of-war. There was a very sharp fight, in which a number of French vessels were destroyed, and young Medley was busy taking the minutes upon the quarter deck. One of the officers, passing by the place where he was sitting, said, "Mr. Medley, you are wounded." He had not perceived it, but the blood was streaming down his leg, and he had to be taken down to the cockpit. After the surgeon had examined him, he said to him, "You will have to lose your leg. I am afraid you cannot live unless amputation takes place." Now Mr. Medley had a godly mother and father, and other gracious people in his family, but he himself was a godless, Christless sinner, as wild as he could be; yet he turned his face to the wall of his little bedroom, and besought the Lord to spare him that leg. When the doctor came to him, the next morning, he said, "I never saw such a case as this before; there has been more healing done, in the last twelve hours, than I ever knew to take place in a leg in my life. I think you will not need to have it off, after all." That remarkable answer to prayer made a deep impression on young Medley's heart, and I believe that biographies will show that, in many cases, God has heard the prayers of unregenerate persons because he meant eventually to save them; and hearing their prayers led them to believe in him, and helped them to exercise that real spiritual faith which brought salvation to their souls.

Let me say, however, that *God sometimes hears the prayers of intensely wicked men out of no love to them.* You remember how he heard the cry of the children of Israel when they said, "Who shall give us flesh to eat?" The Lord sent them quails in great abundance; but "while the flesh was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord smote the people with a very great plague." Again and again, the Lord granted the requests of Pharaoh, cruel Pharaoh, hard-hearted, proud Pharaoh, who was afterwards destroyed in the Red Sea. Jehovah removed one plague after another from him, thus giving him (oh, dreadful thought!) an opportunity to exhibit the hardness of his heart, and to increase it by sinning against the answered prayer. I beseech any man or woman here, who, though not yet converted, has asked God for something, and has received an answer to that petition, not to abuse that answer. I pray you to follow it up. It may be that there are designs of matchless love in store for you, and that, loving you with an amazing love, even while you are dead in sin, God has given you a token that it is even so. But if, after having presented your request to the Lord, and had it granted, you continue to be his enemy, and even grow worse, it may be that the next communication from God to you will be the fatal sentence out of the lips of infinite justice, "You did pray to me, but you never sought anything but temporal things;

and now, since you have rejected me, and have not sought the treasures of my grace, and have sinned against light and knowledge, I will depart from you, and leave you to that final hardness of heart which will irrevocably seal your doom."

Finally,—and here I want to throw the whole force of my message,—*it is not true that God will not hear sinners when they pray to him for mercy, confessing their sins, and believing in Jesus Christ his Son.* I have known three or four persons, quite recently, who have been perplexed with this idea. They have said, "It is no use for us to pray, for God heareth not sinners." My dear friend, how can you, in the teeth of God's Word, believe that statement, understanding it in the sense you give to it? For, if it were so, we should be under the law, not under the gospel; and it would be necessary for us to be righteous before we could ask God for anything; and that is the teaching of Sinai, not of Calvary. It is the glory of the gospel that God does hear sinners, and that he does grant their requests. For you to say that he will not hear a sinner, when he confesses his sin, and forsakes it, and cries to him for mercy, is to contradict the gospel, which is not sent to the righteous, but to sinners,—is not meant for the good, but for the bad, for those who are unrighteous, ungodly, in fact, "sinners."

Look, for instance, at Manasseh, who "made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen." The Lord rebuked him, yet he would not hearken; but when he was carried away to Babylon, in his affliction, "he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom." Look also at the dying thief upon the cross, and let not the thought that God heareth not sinners ever enter into your heads. There was a sinner dying as a malefactor, yet he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom;" and Jesus said unto him, "To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Never say that God heareth not sinners. Have you not read the parable of the publican who "would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner"? God did hear him, but he did not hear the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not as other men were. Do you say that God heareth not sinners? Read again the familiar story of the prodigal son. Here he comes, fresh from the swine-trough, filthy without and within, ragged, disgraced; but he has scarcely had time to say, "Father, I have sinned," before he is heard even more fully than he has prayed, and the kiss of acceptance is on his lip, and the best robe has covered him. It is a lie, concocted in the bottomless pit, to say that "God heareth not sinners." If they do but cry, "O God, forgive us, for Jesus' sake," he must hear them; it would be contrary to his nature to turn away from them. Why, sirs, to deny this is to fly in the face of all the invitations and promises of the Word of God. Take this one, for instance, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his

thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." What does that mean but that God invites sinners to pray to him, and bids them come to him, plainly implying that he will not reject them? Then there is that gracious invitation, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Does that mean that God will not hear sinners? Why, my Lord Jesus came into the world on purpose to hear sinners,—he came here to seek and to save sinners.

Last Friday night, I was speaking at Moody and Sankey's meeting at Bow Road Hall, and I used an illustration which I will use here now. I said that, if somebody were to ring at my bell at one or two o'clock in the morning, and I put my head out of the window, and asked, "What do you want?" and the answer came, "My wife is very ill, and I have come to ask you to take her case into your hands," I should say, "Bless you, good man! I am not a doctor; why have you come to me?" The man would not be welcome at all, for it is not my business to prescribe for the sick; but there is another house, not very far from mine, where there is a red lamp over the door, for there is a doctor living there. If the man will ring the bell at that house, and say what he wants, he will be welcome, and the doctor will say, "I will be there directly, for it is my business to try to heal the sick." Now, my Lord Jesus Christ has, as it were, a red lamp over his door. He is the Physician for sin-sick souls; it is his business to cure them. A doctor, who never had any patients, would be a poor doctor, would he not? And Jesus Christ (I say this with the utmost reverence,) could not be a great Saviour if there were no great sinners; and he could not be a great Saviour if there were not a great many sinners to be saved. Anybody, who is not a sinner, cannot help Christ in this business. A man, who is not ill, would have to say to a doctor, "I do not need your skill, for there is nothing the matter with me;" but the man who is ill is the one the doctor wants; and the more ill he is, the more does he add to the fame of the physician if a cure is wrought upon him. As for you who think yourselves very good people, Christ does not want you; you do not want him, and he does not want you. But you sinful people, you who know that you are sinners, you who, when I read my text, said, "Ah! that is a death-blow to all our hopes," you are the very people whom Jesus Christ wants. He came into the world to save sinners,—just the sort of people that you are; and let the news be published over the whole earth, that whosoever believeth on him is not condemned. He has shed his precious blood for those who are condemned through sin, that the condemnation might pass away from them through their believing on him. It is gloriously true that God heareth sinners, all sinners who come unto him through Jesus Christ his Son. Let the blind man say what he likes, we have tried it, and proved it for ourselves, and I hope that hundreds of you will prove, at this very moment, that he does hear sinners, for he has heard you.