

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

STUMBLING AT THE WORD.

A Sermon

PUBLISHED ON THURSDAY, JULY 13TH, 1911,

DELIVERED BY

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNAACLE, NEWINGTON,

On Lord's-day Evening, March 6th, 1864.

"And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient."—1 Peter ii. 8.

YONDER is a wreck; after a terrible tempest, that is all that remains of a once fine vessel, and on the wreck, lashed to the mast, I see clinging a number of mariners, almost frost-bitten with the cold, and drenched through and through with brine. But there goes the lifeboat, so I trust they will soon all be rescued from their perilous position. I am absolutely certain of one thing with regard to all those who are clinging to that poor wreck of a ship, that there is not a man among them who will raise any objection to being saved. No; whatever may have been their previous position in life, or their habits, or tastes, or anything else, they will all be equally glad to welcome the friendly lifeboat, and to be taken on board the vessel of mercy. Yet is it not a strange thing, dear friends, that when poor humanity has become a total wreck, and poor souls are clinging to the sinking ship with hopes that must certainly be disappointed, and when Jesus Christ appears within hail, willing and able to save unto the uttermost, there are multitudes who raise all sorts of objections to being saved by him. He is not the sort of Saviour they would like to have, or his way of saving sinners is not the one that they approve, and there are all manner of difficulties which they invent, which they imagine to be evidences of their wisdom, but which are really only proofs of their folly and vanity. They prefer to be lost rather than to be saved by such a Saviour in such a way as he has ordained.

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Men in a dungeon do not take exception to the man who breaks open their prison, and sets them free; men who are dying do not generally object to the physician who is seeking to save their lives; a man who is condemned to death does not quarrel with the king who gives him a free pardon; and there is nothing which shows the strange infatuation of sin more than this, that a man quarrels with his best Friend, puts away from him the plan of salvation which God has made with infinite wisdom, and will not come unto Christ that he may have life. I want, as the Holy Spirit shall help me, to plead with all those in this assembly to whom Christ himself has hitherto been "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence," those who still "stumble at the Word, being disobedient."

I shall try, first, to *plead with you against your objections*; then I will endeavour to *plead with you for Christ*; and after that I will *plead with God's people for you, and ask them to plead with God on your behalf*.

I. First, then, let me PLEAD WITH YOU AGAINST YOUR OBJECTIONS.

What is it that makes you think so little of Christ, or that makes you think so badly of Christ? Shall I take the words out of your mouth? It may be that one reason of your quarrel is that *Christ's commands seem to you to be so strict*. He will have you pluck out your right eye and cut off your right arm if they would prevent you from entering into life. He lays the axe to the root of the tree, and not only condemns your overt acts of sin, but tells you that a look or a word is sufficient to condemn you. He would have you turn at once from all those pleasant but seductive things which will ruin your soul unless you forsake them. You do not like such strictness as this; if you could be permitted to keep some of your sins, if now and then you might be allowed some sinful indulgence and yet be saved, you would be quite content; but to give up all, to be separated at once from the world and from mammon, is more than you can endure. But, my dear hearer, is this objection of thine founded upon the belief that Christ denies thee anything that is really good and pleasant? Is it a good thing for a man even occasionally to do that which his Maker condemns? Does not God desire your happiness, and would he deny you anything which would be for your highest enjoyment? No, sirs, he is too good to do that; his very name is love. Why, if sin were for your eternal welfare, he would not only permit you to indulge in it, but he would command you to commit it; but knowing it to be a deadly poison, he forbids you to touch it. More fatal than an adder's sting is sin, more terrible than the conflagration which first devours the peasant's cottage, and then wraps a whole city in its fiery embrace; and God, in commanding you to forsake it, and Christ, in entreating you to leave it, do but consult your real welfare and lasting happiness.

After all, what is the gratification which you derive from sin that it should make you quarrel with Christ for taking it from you? How much sorrow does it bring you afterwards? What pleasant fruit have you had from sin up till now? Are you a happy man

or a happy woman? If you have so long sought the pleasures of sin, and have been in no wise the better for them, wherefore do you still pursue such a profitless course? Can it be worth while to sin yourselves into hell? Can there be any supposable pleasure that can ever compensate you for everlasting pain? If so, then choose the pleasures of sin for a season; but rest assured that, for all these things, God will bring you into judgment. But if, on the other hand, it be a wise decision to think more of eternity than you do of time, I pray you be not angry with my Master because he is willing to cure you of your fatal diseases, to pluck from your hand the poisoned cup, and to kill the venomous reptiles that would destroy you. Surely you can see abundant reason why you should drop your objection that Christ's commands are too strict; may the Holy Spirit enable you to drop it for ever!

Perhaps, however, you say that you do not so much object to the strictness of Christ's commands as to *the severity of his threatenings*. Well, I freely admit that my loving Master did say some of the sternest things that ever fell from mortal lips; none of his servants have ever uttered more terrible warnings than he did concerning the worm that never dies and the fire that cannot be quenched. But why are you angry with him for speaking thus? Is it not the duty of an honest and sincere friend to give warning of impending danger? Are you such fools as to wish to be flattered with falsehoods concerning your immortal souls and their eternal interests? Do you want men to come to you in soft raiment, and to use dulcet notes to charm you to the pit? Your own hearts will flatter you quite enough without my Master doing it. It is his great love that moves him to speak what you call harsh words; he foresees the ruin that awaits you if you continue in your present course of sin, so he is not angry with him because of his faithfulness. It pained him more to say those words than it can ever pain you to hear them; he never uttered a threatening without first feeling its force in his own heart. If you could have looked into his tearful eyes, if you could have gazed upon his sympathetic countenance as he pleaded with men, you would have seen and heard ineffable love speaking in every word that he uttered. O sinners, quarrel not with Christ for warning you of a hell from which he would fain preserve you! Be angry with yourselves, rather, for choosing the path to destruction; be vexed and wrathful with your own sins for dragging you down to ruin; but oh! be not angry with the loving Saviour for telling you, once for all, that you cannot escape if you neglect this great salvation. Let your objection to the severity of his threatenings drop for ever; that very severity ought to make you fly to him, and not drive you from him.

Possibly there is one here who says, "I do not like *the spirituality of Christ's teaching*. If he would tell me to take the sacrament, if he would bid me go to such-and-such a church so many times a day I would do it; but he tells me that all these things count for nothing unless I worship God in spirit and in truth; he tells me that I must be born again, and that the Holy Spirit must dwell

within me, or else I am none of his. Now, sir, all this kind of teaching is too difficult for me to grasp; it is a sort of invisible, impalpable thing, that I can neither see with my eyes nor touch with my hands, and this causes me to stumble at the Word." But, sinner, such talk as that is utterly unreasonable. If you will but think seriously for even a minute or two, you must see that no drops of water, no priestly incantations, no cups of wine, no loaves of bread, not even your own prayers can take away your sin.

"No outward forms can make you clean,
The leprosy lies deep within."

You know that it is a spiritual disease from which you are suffering; so why should you be angry because the great Physician prescribes a spiritual remedy for you? Suppose that, in Christ's teaching, there "are some things hard to be understood," they are well worth understanding, and it is quite possible for you to understand all that is necessary to make you wise unto salvation. Some very simple-minded persons have comprehended the meaning of the gospel message, and have been saved; many a man who never went to school has gone to heaven, and he who is willing to understand the gospel can understand it. Besides, the Holy Spirit is waiting and willing to instruct all who desire to be taught. It was he who inspired the apostle James to write, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him;" and the Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" It is your own fault if you remain in the darkness of ignorance when the Spirit is ready to illuminate you, and to guide you into all truth; may he graciously shine into your hearts now, and then you will welcome the spirituality of Christ's teaching instead of stumbling at it.

I hardly imagine that there is one here who will raise the objection that *the gospel is too simple*. Yet we do sometimes get people here who seem to think themselves much too important or too learned to listen to our simple story of the crucified Christ of Calvary; they want something more philosophical, something that ordinary people cannot comprehend, something that they can monopolize and keep to themselves. The gospel is too simple for such as these, who regard themselves as the *élite* of society; and, sometimes, those who have neither rank nor education get similar whims into their heads. They do not like to be told that they must come to Christ as guilty sinners needing to be washed in his blood, and as helpless sinners needing to receive everything from him. No; many of you want to do something, or to be something, you want to learn something mysterious; and that simple message, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,"—that plain, understandable gospel, "He that believeth and is baptized

shall be saved," is too easy, too ABC like, too childish for you. Now, sirs, why do you talk thus foolishly? Suppose the gospel had been of such a philosophical character that it could only have been understood by those who had high intellectual powers, what would have been the use of it to nine persons out of ten? Suppose it had consisted of some very recondite revelation, how would any of the poor and the simple-minded have been saved? We thank God that the way of salvation is so plain that "the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." The gospel is so simple that many, who have had but feeble intellects, have been able to understand it, and have been saved by it. I bless God that the gospel we have to preach is the gospel for the illiterate, the gospel for the poor, and that we can still say, as our Master did, "the poor have the gospel preached to them;" and that many of them have, through that gospel, become "rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which God hath promised to them that love him." Do not quarrel with my Master because of the simplicity of the gospel, lest your pride should hang you on a gallows as high as Haman's.

A more common objection, however, which is raised against Christ is on account of *the doctrine that he teaches*. Some do not like the doctrine of election, others do not like the doctrine of final perseverance. Some kick at one thing, and some at another, but one doctrine at which many stumble is the doctrine of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. They cannot see how it is possible for Christ to be a Substitute for sinners; they cannot understand how God can punish Christ in the place of men, and that men should be saved because Christ died in their stead. Well now, suppose I was in a burning building, and a man brought to the house a fire-escape of a very unusual shape, but one that he assured me had been the means of saving thousands of lives, do you think that I should object to trust myself to it because it was such a peculiar shape? Of course, I should not be so foolish; then why are sinners so foolish as to object to the shape of the fire-escape which God has designed to rescue them from everlasting burnings? What could be better than the divine plan of substitution? God must punish sin, he could not be God unless he did; it is a necessity of his nature that he should hate sin with an infinite hatred, and he must punish it. Yet, as he had loved his people with an everlasting love, how could he better show his love to them and his hatred of sin than by giving up his well-beloved Son to die instead of them, making him, who knew no sin, to be sin for them, that they might be made the righteousness of God in him? This seems to me to be the most beautiful thing I ever heard of, and it delights my soul to preach it. There is something so fresh about the gospel that, if I were to preach it every day in the week, I do not think I should grow weary of telling it over and over again. See what wisdom and love are here combined so that we have a just God and yet a Saviour; sin punished, and yet love magnified; mercy free to go about her gracious errands, and yet the faithfulness of God glorified to the highest degree. To my mind, the most glorious

work that God ever performed was when God incarnate died that sinners might live. You surely cannot object to that doctrine of substitution; if you do, and if you persist in that objection, let me tell you that you will perish, for he who rejects the Saviour who died upon the cross brings eternal ruin to his soul.

There are many who raise objections to Christ because of *the character of his people*. They say that there are so few of them, and that they are such a poor lot, and they are not all of them what they should be. So, sirs, you object to go to heaven because you think there are so few going there; but if you go to hell, it will be no relief to you to know that many are sharing the agony with you. It seems to me to be wisdom to be saved even if I were the only one, and eternal folly to be damned even though everyone else should be lost with me. So do not raise any objection because of the number of the saved; and as to their being poor, what of that? Would it not be better to go to heaven side by side with a poor old almshouse-woman, or a chimney-sweep, or a pauper from the workhouse, than to go to hell with a lord, a duke, or a millionaire? I can always find the best of company among the Lord's poor people. I am glad to be associated with all of you in your various works of faith and labours of love, but I have often learned more about Christ from the poor than from the rich. Besides, if Jesus Christ was willing to be reckoned amongst the poor, there is no man who needs to be ashamed of his poverty unless it is brought on by his own sin. I will not say more upon that point, for I can scarcely imagine that I have any simpletons in this congregation who are foolish enough to raise such an objection as this.

Some, however, object to Christ because, *if they take up with him, they will have to break off their friendship with others*. One of them says, "If I become a Christian, everybody will laugh at me." Well, who minds being laughed at when he is in the right? "But all my old companions will forsake me." It will be a good thing for you if they do unless they also will join you in following Christ. "But when I go to the workshop or the market, they will point me out as a Christian." I hope they will, or I hope you will be such an out-and-out Christian that they will not need to point you out. I trust that your life will be of such a character that, wherever you go, men will be compelled to say, "Yes, that man is a Christian." Why should you want, as it were, to sneak into heaven by some back way where nobody could see you? There is nothing in Christ of which you have any need to be ashamed; so I hope you will have the grace to say, "I will take my stand with Christ. If he is despised, I will be despised; if he is spit upon, I will be spit upon; if he bears the cross, I will bear the cross; I am not ashamed of him, and I pray that he may not have reason to be ashamed of me."

Now, though I hope some of your objections have been removed, I fear that the great objection, with which we began, still remains,—that is, *you stumble at Christ's word because he bids you repent*,

and turn from your sins. There are some of you of whom I almost begin to despair; you continue to come where the gospel is preached, but sometimes you sing the song of the drunkard, or you join the ranks of the profane, or indulge in other sins that I need not name, yet you would not like to give up the hope that you still cherish that some day you will be converted. O sirs, I implore you to delay no longer! Christ and your sins will never agree, so come to Christ, and leave your sins. However stern may be the conflict, draw the sword, and fling away the scabbard; let it be war to the death with sin, for Christ's sake and your soul's sake. May the Spirit of God, who alone can separate you from your sin, proclaim the divorce this very hour, that you may be saved now and saved for ever!

II. Having pleaded with you against your objections, I pray now for power from on high that I may PLEAD WITH YOU FOR CHRIST.

I have tried to show you that you have no reason to object to Christ; I want now, just for a minute or two, to remind you that you have many reasons for yielding to him. First of all, let me ask, *How is it that you are still alive?* If stern justice had dealt with you without the interposition of mercy, you would not now have been living upon the earth. You remember that long and serious illness from which you scarcely expected to recover, yet here you are in robust health and strength; why were you so wonderfully restored? You recollect that time when you were in the river, and you gave up all hope of being rescued, yet you were saved as if by a miracle; why was that? You have had many marvellous escapes from accidents in which others have been killed; why were you spared? It may be, soldier, that the bullets whistled close by your ear, yet you came back from the war unscathed. It may be, sailor, that your ship was almost gone, or possibly she was a total wreck, and you only escaped to tell the tale; why was that? Well, let this great mercy that you are still alive move you to repent of your sins, and trust in Christ as your Saviour; as he has been your Preserver, may he also be your Redeemer, your Lord, your All-in-all!

Then let me further ask, *How is it that you are in a place where the gospel is being preached?* Suppose that to-night, instead of a preacher of the gospel being on this platform, there had come here some stern prophet, like Moses or Elias, and that he had turned to you who are out of Christ, and had said to you, "The day of mercy is over, justice now reigns supreme. Hear, ye despisers, and wonder and perish; for God will rend you in pieces, and there shall be none to deliver you;" what could you have said in arrest of judgment? But this has not been the case; I have not pronounced a curse upon you, I have not spoken a hard word to you; but I have pleaded with you—oh, that the Lord would teach me how to plead with you more earnestly and more effectually!—to turn unto him, and live. "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." The fact that there is a proclamation of mercy still made to you ought to cause you to weep tears of penitence for your sin, and to move you to turn believingly unto him who died upon the cross, "the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God."

Then, again, should you not run to Jesus when you remember that *he tells you that he will hear your prayers?* What! will he hear your prayers, and yet will you refuse to pray unto him? He says to you, "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men," so will you not believe that your sin and your blasphemy shall be forgiven for his sake? Oh, that you really knew him! But you do not know how full of love and grace he is. I wish that you could hear his voice saying to you, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Whenever I repeat my Master's words, I feel vexed with myself because I cannot utter them as they ought to be uttered. I know that he must have spoken them with a majesty of tone and with a melting melody of earnestness that must have put more force in them than I can ever hope to do. He lived for sinners, he died for sinners, he rose again for sinners, he pleads in heaven for sinners, oh, how can you refuse to trust him, and love him, and serve him for ever?

III. Now I close by PLEADING WITH THE PEOPLE OF GOD FOR SINNERS.

I know that there are, in this assembly, not merely hundreds, but thousands who love the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is with them that I am now going to plead. Brethren and sisters in Christ, while I have been talking to those who stumble at the Word, have you not been reminded of what you used to do? I have been thinking of my own experience, for I also stumbled at the Word, being disobedient; and I feel some comfort in preaching to those to whom Christ is "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence," by reflecting that he who could save me can also save them; and as Christ has quickened you "who were dead in trespasses and sins," you cannot doubt his power to quicken others.

Probably most of you remember that, *when you were dead in sin, there were some who prayed for you.* My mother and father and many others prayed for me, and I feel that this is one of the many reasons why I should pray for others. Most of you had someone who thus cared for you, so ought you not to care for others in a similar fashion? I feel sure that you do care for others, there is in your heart an earnest longing to see them brought to the Saviour; may I therefore urge you to be more earnest than ever in prayer for the salvation of sinners? I rejoice that we are a praying church, but I am always jealous lest we should lose the spirit of prayer which the Lord has so graciously poured out upon us. Some of us recollect times when we have gripped the Angel of the covenant, and we would not let him go until he blessed us. Many of you were given to us in answer to those effectual fervent prayers,

and this makes me the more urgent in pleading with you to pray for others.

Nor must you be content with praying for them, for *others very earnestly sought to bring you to the Saviour*, and this encourages me in pleading with you to grow more completely devoted to the blessed work of winning souls for Christ. We must all be up and doing for our glorious Lord and Master. Members of this church, you will be ungrateful for all that the Lord has done for us in the past if you slacken your efforts in the future. In your homes, in your workshops, in your mission-rooms, in your street-preaching, in your tract-distribution, in your Bible-classes, in your Sunday-schools, wherever you are, anywhere and everywhere seek after souls as diligently as the hunter seeks his prey. There are many reasons why you should be earnest in bringing sinners to the Saviour. The terrible doom of the lost is reason enough by itself; but you can find abundant reasons in the back streets and alleys of this great city and in the sin that abounds in the splendour of the West End as much as in the squalor at the East End. Do you want arguments for soul-winning? Look up to heaven, and ask yourself how sinners can ever reach those harps of gold, and learn that everlasting song unless they have someone to tell them of Jesus who is "mighty to save." But the best argument of all is to be found in the wounds of Jesus. You want to honour him, you desire to put "many crowns" upon his head, and this you can best do by winning souls for him. These are the spoils that he covets, these are the trophies for which he fights, these are the jewels that shall be his best adornment. O Christian men and women, if any of you have been negligent of late in your Master's service, may the Holy Spirit make you more diligent! I would like to make a personal appeal to each one of you to consecrate yourselves and your substance more and more to the advancement of the cause and kingdom of Jesus Christ your Lord, so that you shall live wholly for him. To be a true Christian is something higher and nobler than simply sitting in our pews twice on the Sabbath, or even teaching in a Sunday-school or giving away tracts. It is the laying of one's whole self upon the altar, offering up body, soul, and spirit as a living sacrifice unto God, which is our reasonable service; so that, whether we live or whether we die, we shall be the Lord's, and live or die for him. I do plead with you, Christians,—and I wish I had more power to do it effectually,—for the sake of sinners, to stir yourselves up to pray for them, and to labour for them that, through the mighty working of the Spirit of God, they may no longer stumble at the Word, but may yield themselves to Christ, and be saved.
