

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

PETER'S PRAYER.

A Sermon

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“ When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”—Luke v. 8.

THE disciples had been fishing all night. They had now given over fishing; they had left their boats, and were mending their nets. A stranger appears. They had seen him, probably, once before, and they remembered enough of him to command respect. Beside, the tone of voice in which he spoke to them, and his manner, at once ruled their hearts. He borrowed Simon Peter's boat and preached a sermon to the listening crowds. After he had finished the discourse, as though he would not borrow their vessel without giving them their hire, he bade them launch out into the deep and let down their nets again. They did so, and, instead of disappointment, they at once took so vast a haul of fish that the boats could not contain all, and the net was not strong enough, and began to break. Surprised at this strange miracle, overawed probably by the majestic appearance of that matchless One, who had wrought it, Simon Peter thought himself quite unworthy to be in such company, and fell on his knees, and cried this strange prayer, “ Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” So I desire that, first of all, we shall hear:—

I. THE PRAYER IN THE WORST SENSE WE CAN GIVE TO IT.

It is always wrong to put the worst construction on anyone's words, and therefore we do not intend so to do, except by way of licence, and for a few moments only, to see what might have

been made out of these words. Christ did not understand Peter so. He put the best construction upon which he said, but if a caviller had been there, a wrong interpretation would have been to this sentence: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

The ungodly virtually pray this prayer. When the gospel comes to some men, and disturbs their conscience, they say, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a more convenient season, I will send for thee." When some troublesome preacher tells them of their sins, when he puts a burning truth into their conscience, and rouses them so that they cannot sleep or rest, they are very angry with the preacher, and the truth that he was constrained to speak. And if they cannot bid him get out of their way, they can at least get out of his way, which comes to the same thing, and the spirit of it is, "We do not want to give up our sin; we cannot afford to part with our prejudices, or with our darling lusts, and therefore depart, go out of our coasts; let us alone; what have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? Art thou come to torment us before our time?" Peter meant nothing of this sort, but there may be some here who do, and whose avoidance of the gospel, whose inattention to it, whose despite to it, and hatred of it, all put together virtually make up this cry, "Depart from us, O Christ."

Alas! I fear *there are some Christians* who do in fact, I will not say in intention, really pray this prayer. For instance: if a believer in Christ shall expose himself to temptation, if he shall find pleasure where sin mingles with it, if he shall forsake the assemblies of the saints, and find comfort in the synagogue of Satan; if his life shall be inconsistent practically, and also he shall become inconsistent by reason of his neglect of holy duties, ordinances, private prayer, the reading of the Word, and the like—what does such a Christian say but, "Depart from me, O Lord"? The Holy Spirit abides in our hearts, and we enjoy his conscious presence if we are obedient to his monitions; but if we walk contrary to him, he will walk contrary to us, and before long we shall have to say:—

"Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?"

Why does the Holy Spirit withdraw the sense of his presence? Why, but because we ask him to go? Our sins ask him to go; our unread Bibles do, as it were, with loud voices ask him to be gone. We treat that sacred guest as if we were weary of him, and he takes the hint, and hides his face, and then we sorrow, and begin to seek him again. Peter does not do so, but we do. Alas! how often ought we to say, "Oh! Holy Spirit, forgive us, that we so vex thee, that we resist thy admonitions, quench thy promptings, and so grieve thee! Return unto us, and abide with us evermore."

This prayer in its worst is *sometimes practically offered by Christian churches*. I believe that any Christian church that becomes divided

in feeling, so that the members have no true love one to another, that want of unity is an act of horrible supplication. It does as much as say, "Depart from us, thou Spirit of unity! Thou only dwellest where there is love: we will not have love: we will break thy rest: go from us!" The Holy Spirit delights to abide with a people that is obedient to his teaching, but there are churches that will not learn: they refuse to carry out the Master's will, or to accept the Master's Word. They have some other standard, some human book, and in the excellencies of the human composition they forget the glories of the divine. Now, I believe that where any book, whatever it may be, is put above the Bible, or even set by the side of it, or where any creed or catechism, however excellent, is made to stand at all on an equality with that perfect Word of God, any church that does this, in fact, say, "Depart from us, O Lord," and when it comes to actual doctrinal error, particularly to such greivous errors as we hear of now-a-days, such as baptismal regeneration, and the doctrines that are congruous thereto, it is, as it were, an awful imprecation, and seems to say, "Begone from us, O gospel! Begone from us, O Holy Ghost! Give us outward signs and symbols, and these will suffice us; but depart from us, O Lord; we are content without thee." As for ourselves, we may practically pray this prayer as a church. If our prayer-meetings should be badly attended; if the prayers at them should be cold and dead; if the zeal of our members should die out; if there should be no concern for souls; if our children should grow up about us untrained in the fear of God; if the evangelisation of this great city should be given over to some other band of workers, and we should sit still; if we should become cold, ungenerous, listless, indifferent—what can we do worse for ourselves! How, with greater potency, can we put up the dreadful prayer, "Depart from us: we are unworthy of thy presence: begone, good Lord! Let 'Ichabod' be written on our walls; let us be left with all the curses of Gerizim ringing in our ears."

I say, then, the prayer may be understood in this worst sense. It was not so meant: our Lord did not so read it: we must not so read it concerning Peter, but let us, oh! let us take care that we do not offer it thus, practically concerning ourselves.

But now in the next place we shall strive to take the prayer as it came from Peter's lips and heart:—

II. A PRAYER WE CAN EXCUSE, AND ALMOST COMMEND.

Why did Peter say, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" There are three reasons. First, *because he was a man*; secondly, *because he was a sinful man*; and again, *because he knew this, and became a humble man*.

So, then, the first reason for this prayer was that *Peter knew that he was a man*, and therefore, being a man, he felt himself amazed in the presence of such an one as Christ. The first sight of God, how amazing to any spirit, even if it were pure! I suppose God never did reveal himself completely, could never have revealed him-

self completely to any creature, however lofty in its capacity. The Infinite must overwhelm the finite. Now, here was Peter, beholding probably for the first time in his life in a spiritual way the exceeding splendour and glory of the divine power of Christ. He looked at those fish, and at once he remembered that night of weary toil, when not a fish rewarded his patience, and now he saw them in masses in the boat, and all done through this strange man who sat there, having just preached a still stranger sermon, of which Peter felt that never man spake like that before, and he did not know how it was, but he felt abashed; he trembled, he was amazed in the presence of such an one. I do not wonder, if we read that Rebecca, when she saw Isaac, came down from her camel and covered her face with her veil; if we read that Abigail, when she came to meet David, alighted from her ass and threw herself upon her face, saying, "My Lord, David!"; if we find Mephiboseth depreciating himself in the presence of King David, and calling himself a dog—I do not wonder that Peter, in the presence of the perfect Christ, should shrink into nothing, and in his first amazement at his own nothingness and Christ's greatness, should say he scarcely knew what, like one dazed and dazzled by the light, half-distraught, and scarcely able to gather together his thoughts and put them connectedly together. The very first impulse was as when the light of the sun strikes on the eye, and it is a blaze that threatens to blind us. "Oh! Christ, I am a man; how can I bear the presence of the God that rules the very fishes of the sea, and works miracles like this?" His next reason was, I have said, *because he was a sinful man*, and there is something of alarm, mingled with his amazement. As a man he stood amazed at the outshining of Christ's Godhead: as a sinful man he stood alarmed at its dazzling holiness. I do not doubt that in the sermon which Christ delivered there was such a clear denunciation of sin, such laying of justice to the line, and righteousness to the plummet such a declaration of the holiness of God, that Peter felt himself unveiled, discovered, his heart laid bare: and now came the finishing stroke. The One who had done this could also rule the fishes of the sea: he must, therefore, be God, and it was to God that all the defects and evils of Peter's heart had been revealed and thoroughly known, and almost fearing with a kind of inarticulate cry of alarm, because the criminal was in the presence of the Judge, and the polluted in the presence of the Immaculate, he said, "Depart from me, for I am *a sinful man*, O Lord."

But I have added that there was a third reason, namely, that *Peter was a humble man*, as is clear from the saying, because he knew himself, and confessed bravely that he was a sinful man. You know that sometimes there have been persons in the world who have suddenly found some king or prince come to their little cottage, and the good housewife, when the king himself was coming to her hut has felt as if the place itself was so unfit for him that, though she would do her best for his majesty, and was glad in

her soul that he would honour her hovel with his presence, yet she could not help saying, "Oh! that your majesty had gone to a worthier house, had gone on to the great man's house a little ahead, for I am not worthy for your majesty should come here." So Peter felt as if Christ lowered himself almost in coming to him, as if it were too good a thing for Christ, too great, too kind, too condescending a thing, and he seems to say, "Go up higher, Master; sit not down so low as this in my poor boat in the midst of these poor dumb fishes; sit not down here, for thou hast a right to sit on the throne of heaven, in the midst of angels that shall sing thy praises day and night; Lord, do not stop here; go up; take a better seat, a higher place; sit among more noble beings, who are more worthy to be blessed with the smiles of thy Majesty." Don't you think he meant that? If so, we may not only excuse his prayer, but even commend it, for we have felt the same. "Oh!" we have said, "does Jesus dwell with a few poor men and women that have come together in his name to pray? Oh! surely, it is not a good enough place for him; let him have the whole world, and all the sons of men to sing his praises; let him have heaven, even the heaven of heavens: let the cherubim and seraphim be his servants, and archangels loose the latches of his shoes: let him rise to the highest throne in glory, and there let him sit down, no more to wear the thorn-crown, no more to be wounded and despised, and rejected; but to be worshipped and adored for ever and ever." I think we have felt so, and, if so, we can understand what Peter felt, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Now, brethren and sisters, there are times when these feelings, if they cannot be commended in ourselves, are yet excused by our Master, and have a little in them, at any rate, which he looks upon with satisfaction. Shall I mention one?

Sometimes a man is *called to an eminent position of usefulness*, and as the vista opens before him, and he sees what he will have to do, and with what honour his Master will be pleased to load him, it is very natural, and I think it is almost spiritual for him to shrink and say, "Who am I that I should be called to such a work as this? My Master, I am willing to serve thee, but oh! I am not worthy." Like Moses, who was glad enough to be the Lord's servant, and yet he said, and he meant it so heartily, "Lord, I am slow of speech; I am a man of unclean lips, how can I speak for thee?" Or, like Isaiah, who was rejoiced to say, "Here am I, send me," but who felt, "Woe is me, for I am a man of uncircumcised lips; how shall I go?" Not like Jonah, who would not go at all, but must needs go off to Tarshish to escape working at Nineveh; yet perhaps with a little seasoning of Jonah's bitters, too, but mainly a sense of our own unworthiness to be used in so great a service, and we seem to say, "Lord, do not put me upon that; after all, I may slip, and dishonour thee; I would serve thee, but lest by any means I should give way under the strain, excuse thy servant, and give him a humbler post of service." Now, I say we

must not pray in that fashion, but still, while there is some evil there, there is a sediment of good which Christ will perceive, in the fact that we see our own weakness and our own unsuitableness. He won't be angry with us, but, riddling the chaff from the wheat, he will accept what was good in the prayer, and forgive the ill.

Sometimes, again, dear friends, this prayer has been almost on our lips *in times of intense enjoyment*. Some of you know what I mean, when the Lord draws near unto his servants, and is like the consuming fire, and we are like the bush that seemed to be altogether on a blaze with the excessive splendour of God realised in our souls. Many of God's saints have at such times fainted. You remember Mr. Flavel tells us that riding on horseback on a long journey to a place where he was to preach, he had such a sense of the sweetness of Christ and the glory of God, that he did not know where he was, and sat on his horse for two hours together, the horse wisely standing still, and when he came to himself he found that he had been bleeding freely through the excess of joy, and as he washed his face in the brook by the roadside he said he felt then that he knew what it was to sit on the doorstep of heaven, and he could hardly tell that if he had entered the pearly gates he could have been more happy, for the joy was excessive. To quote what I have often quoted before, the words of Mr. Welsh, a famous Scotch divine, who was under one of those blessed deliriums of heavenly light and rapturous fellowship, and exclaimed, "Hold, Lord! hold: it is enough! Remember, I am but an earthen vessel, and if thou give me more, I die!" God does sometimes put his new wine into our poor old bottles; and then we are half inclined to say, "Depart, Lord: we are not ready yet for thy glorious presence." It does not come to saying that: it does not amount to all that in words, but still, the spirit is willing, and the flesh is weak, and the flesh seems to start back from the glory which it cannot bear as yet. There are many things which Christ would tell unto us, but which he will not, because we cannot bear them now.

Another time, when this has passed over the mind, not altogether rightly, not altogether sinfully, like the two last, is *when the sinner is coming to Christ*, and has indeed in a measure believed in him, but when at last that sinner perceives the greatness of the divine mercy, the richness of the heavenly pardon, the glory of the inheritance which is given to pardoned sinners. Then many a soul has started back and said, "It is too good to be true; or if true, it is not true to me." Well do I remember a staggering fit I had over that business. I had believed in my Master, and rested in him for some months, and rejoiced in him, and one day, while revelling in the delights of being saved, and rejoicing in the doctrines of election, final perseverance, and eternal glory, it came across my mind, "And all this for *you*, for such a dead dog as you—how can it be so?" and for awhile it was a temptation stronger than I could overcome. It was just saying spiritually, "Depart

from me; I am too sinful a man to have thee in my boat, too unworthy to have such priceless blessings as thou dost bring to me." Now, that, I say, is not altogether wrong, and not altogether right. There is a mixture there, and we may excuse, and somewhat commend, but not altogether. There are other times in which the same feeling may come across the mind, but I cannot stay now to specify them. It may be so with some here, and I pray them not to concern themselves utterly, nor yet to excuse themselves completely, but to go on to the next teaching of this prayer:—

III. A PRAYER THAT NEEDS AMENDING AND REVISING.

As it stood it was not a good one: now, let us put it in a different way, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Would it not be better to say, "*Come nearer to me*, for I am a sinful man, O Lord?" It would be a braver prayer, and a tenderer prayer withal: more wise, and not less humble, for humility takes many shapes. "I am a sinful man," here is humility. "*Come nearer to me*," here is faith, which prevents humility from degenerating into unbelief and despair. Brethren, that would be a good argument, for see: "Since, Lord, I am a sinner, I need purifying; only thy presence can truly purify, for thou art the Refiner, and thou dost purify the sons of Levi: only thy presence can cleanse, for the fan is in thy hand, and thou alone canst purge thy floor. Thou art like a refiner's fire, or like fuller's soap: come nearer to me, then, Lord, for I am a sinful man, and would not be always sinful; come, wash me from mine iniquity that I may be clean, and let thy sanctifying fire go through and through my nature till thou burn out of me everything that is contrary to thy mind and will." Dare you pray that prayer? It is not natural to pray it; if you can, I would say to you, "Simon Bar-jona, blessed art thou, for flesh and blood hath not taught thee this." Flesh and blood may make you say, "Depart from me"; it is the Holy Ghost alone that, under a sense of sin, can yet put a divine attraction to you in the purifying fire, and make you long, therefore, that Christ should come near to you.

Again, "Come near to me, Lord, since I am a man, and being a man am weak, and nothing can make me strong but thy presence. I am a man, so weak that if thou depart from me, I faint, I fall, I pine, I die; come near to me, then, O Lord, that by thy strength I may be encouraged and be fitted for service. If thou depart from me, I can render thee no service whatever. Can the dead praise thee? Can those with no life in them give thee glory? Come near me, then, my God, though I am so feeble, and as a tender parent feeds his child, and the shepherd carries his lambs, so come near to me."

Do you not think he might have said, "Come near to me, Lord, and abide with me, for I am a sinful man," in the recollection of how he had failed when Christ was not near? All through that night he had put the net into the sea with many a splash, and had drawn it up with many an eager look as he gazed through the

moonlight, and there was nothing that rewarded his toil. In went the net again, and now when Christ came, and the net was full to bursting, would it not have been a proper prayer, "Lord, come near to me, and let every time I work I may succeed: and if I be made a fisher of men, keep nearer to me still, that every time I preach thy Word, I may bring souls into thy net, and into thy Church that they may be saved" ?

What I want to draw out from the text—and I shall do so better if I continue bringing out these different thoughts—is this: that it is well when a sense of our unworthiness leads us, not to get away from God, in an unbelieving, petulant despair, but to get nearer to God. Now, suppose I am a great sinner. Well, let me seek to get nearer to God for that very reason, for there is great salvation provided for great sinners. I am very weak, and unfit for the great service which he has imposed upon me; let me not, therefore, shun the service or shun my God, but reckon that the weaker I am the more room there is for God to get the glory. If I were strong, then God would not use me, because then my strength would get the praise for it, but my very unfitness and want of ability, and all that I lament in myself in my Master's work, is but so much elbow-room for omnipotence to come and work in. Would it not be a fine thing if we could all say, "I glory not in my talents, not in my learning, not in my strength, but I glory in infirmity, because the power of God doth rest upon me; men cannot say, "That is a learned man, and he wins souls because he is learned"; they cannot say, "That is a man whose faculties of reasoning are very strong, and whose powers of argument are clear, and he wins sinners by convincing their judgments"; no, they say, "What is the reason of his success? We cannot discover it; we see nothing in him different from other men, or perhaps only the difference that he hath less of gift than they." Then glory be to God; he has the praise more clearly and more distinctly, and his head who deserves it wears the crown.

See, then, what I am aiming at with you, dear brethren and sisters. It is this—do not run away from your Master's work, any of you, because you feel unfit, but for that reason do twice as much. Do not give up praying because you feel you cannot pray, but pray twice as much, for you want more prayer, and instead of being less with God, be more. Do not let a sense of unworthiness drive you away. A child should not run away from its mother at night because it wants washing. Your children do not keep away from you because they are hungry, nor because they have torn their clothes, but they come to you just because of their necessities. They come because they are children, but they come oftener because they are needy children, because they are sorrowful children. So let every need, let every pain, let every weakness, let every sorrow, let every sin, drive you to God. Do not say, "Depart from me." It is a natural thing that you should say so, and not a thing altogether to be condemned, but it is a glorious thing, it is a God-

honouring thing, it is a wise thing, to say, on the contrary, "Come to me, Lord; come nearer to me still, for I am a sinful man, and without thy presence I am utterly undone."

I shall say no more, but I would that the Holy Spirit would say this to some who are in this house, that have long been invited to come and put their trust in Jesus, but always plead as a reason for not coming, that they are too guilty, or that they are too hardened, or too something or other. Strange, that what one man makes a reason for coming, another makes a reason for staying away! David prayed in the Psalms, "Lord have mercy, and pardon mine iniquity, for it is great." "Strange argument," you will say. It is a grand one. "Lord, here is great sin, and there is something now that is worthy of a great God to deal with. Here is a mountain sin; Lord, have omnipotent grace to remove it. Lord, here is a towering Alp of sin; let the floods of thy grace, like Noah's flood, come twenty cubits over the top of it. I, the chief of sinners am; here is room for the chief of Saviours." How strange it is that some men should make this a reason for stopping away! This cruel sin of unbelief is cruel to yourselves; you have put away the comfort you might enjoy. It is cruel to Christ, for there is no pang that ever wounded him more than that unkind, ungenerous thought, that he is unwilling. Believe, believe that he never is so glad as when he is clasping his Ephraim to his breast, as when he is saying, "Thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee." Trust him. If you could see him, you could not help it. If you could look into that dear face, and into those dear eyes once red with weeping over sinners that rejected him, you would say, "Behold, we come to thee; thou hast the words of eternal life; accept us, for we rest in thee alone; all our trust on thee is stayed"; and that done, you would find that his coming to you would be like rain on the mown grass, as the showers that water the earth, and, through him, your souls should flourish; your sackcloth should be taken away, and you should be girt about with gladness, and rejoice in him world without end. The Lord himself bring you to this. Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

LUKE XV. 1—27.

We shall read to-night a chapter which, I suppose, the most of us know by heart. But as often as I have read it, I do not remember ever reading it without seeing some fresh light in it. May it be so to-night.

Verse 1. *Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.*

A rare crowd they must have been, when it is said *all* the publicans and sinners. All sorts of sinners came in such numbers that it seemed as if the city had sent out all its hosts of sinners. And these drew near—came as close as ever they could, for fear of losing a single word. They made the inner ring about the Saviour. He had a bodyguard of sinners, and certainly there are none that will ever glorify him as these people will do.