

Forgiveness and Fear

"But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared." Psalm 130:4.

The exercise of **pardon** is the exclusive and the highest prerogative of the crown, the richest and most brilliant gem in the diadem of an earthly Sovereign. This applies to God. It is no marvel, then, that He-the sin-pardoning God, should have guarded this, His divine right and most gracious act, with a jealousy so great, and have linked it with conditions so solemn. "Who is a God like unto You, that pardons iniquity?" "There is forgiveness with You."

As **pardon** is God's most divine and gracious act, it follows, then, that we could know nothing of it but by *revelation*. No light of nature could disclose it, no effort of reason could discover it. It could not possibly be known by the research of man, and it must be exclusively revealed by the mercy of God. That God had the power of pardoning none could doubt; that power being supremely lodged in His hand, in whom the legislative, judicial, and executive authority of the universe met. But from what oracle in *nature* could we expect the announcement that God would exercise His prerogative of pardoning, and exercise it by a mode and with conditions the most stupendous and marvelous, such as could never have entered into the mind of angels or men to have conceived? All nature would be dumb. God, then, must be the Revealer of His *power, will, and mode* of pardoning. And how gloriously and clearly has He done it!

Recall the scene that appeared to Moses in the mount. "And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord God, merciful and gracious, patient, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, FORGIVING iniquity, transgression, and sin." Thus on the mount Sinai, amid its thunder, and fire, and smoke-emblems of His majesty and holiness- God revealed His character and purpose as a sin forgiving God.

We turn to mount Calvary, and amid its darkness and trembling- the sun draped in sackcloth, the earth quaking, the rocks rending- tokens of His grace and love- we learn the wonderful mode of His pardoning. "Who is a God like unto You, that PARDONS iniquity?" "There is FORGIVENESS with You." How priceless and precious to us should be that inspired volume which reveals this glorious fact, that there is forgiveness with God! How gratefully should we receive it, how firmly believe it, how valiantly defend it, and how zealously and generously diffuse it, sending it forth, borne upon the crest of every wave, and upon the wings of every wind, to the remotest limits of the earth. "The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

Aided by the power of contrast, we purpose, in the further unfolding of this subject, to place side by side **man's** forgiveness and **God's**; in other words, forgiveness as exercised by a human government, and forgiveness as exercised by a Divine government. Take the first point of contrast which

forgiveness involves- honor to the law broken, and security to the government offended. The considerations which induce a *human* executive to pardon are totally different from those which move the Divine-and here God and man stand in marked and diametrical opposition one to the other. How great the contrast!

There is nothing in the pardon of a human government to sustain the majesty of law, and to meet the claims of equity. No attempt is made to harmonize the claims of *righteousness* with the pleadings of *mercy*; to reconcile the act of pardon with the demands of holiness. No atonement is made, no satisfaction is offered, no penalty is executed; the law is dishonored, justice is outraged, and the government from where the act emanates is weakened, and its authority lowered in the eyes of the nation; in a word, the criminal is pardoned, and the crime is condoned!

Contrast this with the Divine pardon of sin. God rests His plan of forgiveness upon a basis which magnifies the law, whose violation He pardons; which executes the sentence, while He remits the penalty; which strengthens the government and lends luster to its administration, while He spares the sinner who has ignored its authority and rebelled against its commands. God thus takes the matter of 'satisfaction of justice' in His own hands- assumes the responsibility, arranges the preliminaries, and bears the entire cost of the plan- a cost which the infinite resources of Deity alone could meet. It will at once be seen that the great problem of His moral government which He engaged to solve -and He solved it was, the *harmony of the respective claims of justice and mercy, of pardon and holiness, the dignity of the offended government with the forgiveness of the offender*. To adjust these conflicting interests, and to harmonize their jarring attributes, was the great work in which Deity embarked- a work in all respects worthy of God. Through the Incarnation of the Son of God, by the *preceptive obedience* of His life, and by the *atoning sufferings* of His death, He so completely magnified the Divine Law, and so fully satisfied Divine justice, as rendered it righteous and honorable on the part of God to pardon, justify, and save the vilest sinners. Thus clearly the Apostle puts this great truth: "In whom [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the FORGIVENESS of sins, according to the riches of His grace." "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the OBEDIENCE of one shall many be made righteous." And now, the chief of sinners may approach boldly the throne of grace and obtain mercy, since he has not only mercy to appeal to, but the merits of Christ to plead. *Justice* is satisfied, while *pardon* is extended, and God's character suffers no dishonor; and His government no injury in forgiving and justifying the most unworthy. We plead a sacrifice all the more acceptable because it is another's; we bring a righteousness all the more worthy because not our own. If God should fail to accept us- and most justly might He refuse- yet He will not fail to accept Christ, who obeyed and suffered, died and rose again, in our stead; and all the more because it is His own plan and provision for pardoning and saving the very chief of sinners.

And what human government pardons the criminal at so vast a cost and so

great a sacrifice to Himself as God does? The process is facile and quick. It is but a word, a signature, and the criminal is pardoned, and his life is spared. But, at what a cost and by what a sacrifice does God pardon the guilt of sin and justify the person of the sinner! He "spared not His own Son, but gave Him up for us all." "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." How vast the cost! How immeasurable the sacrifice! "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." It cost God the surrender of His own dear Son, sent into the world poor, despised, and insulted, and at last to endure on the cross the indescribable tortures of a condemned malefactor, the ignominious death of a Roman slave. "Who is a God like unto You?"

But at what a cost to Jesus Himself was our forgiveness procured! Oh, what human thought can conceive, what moral arithmetic compute it? It distances all imagination, defies all research. The stoop of His Deity to humanity- His assumption of our nature in its lowest form of poverty and lowliness; free from all moral taint, yet subjected to all physical evil; sinless, yet bearing sin; innocent, yet suffering as guilty; His Divine soul swimming in the ocean of infinite blessedness, His human soul bowed to the lowest dust in woe, "sorrowful even unto death." In a word, it cost Him the sacrifice of Himself- His last drop of blood, His last breath of life- to purchase for us the Divine forgiveness, which remits entirely all our sins, and cancels to the utmost and forever all our guilt. "You are bought with a price"-a price which Heaven alone could find, which Deity alone could pay. Oh the love the redeeming, dying love of Christ, which passes knowledge!

"What shall we pay the Eternal Son,
That left the Heavens of His abode,
And to this wretched earth came down,
To bring us wanderers back to God?"

"It cost Him death to save our lives;
To buy our souls, it cost His own;
And all the unknown joys He gives
Were bought with agonies unknown.

"Our everlasting love is due
To Him who ransomed sinners lost,
And pitied rebels when He knew
The vast expense His love would cost."

Take another point of contrast- **the moral effect** of a human and Divine forgiveness. In nothing is the weakness of a human pardon more conspicuous than in this. The moral reformation of our criminals has long been a problem baffling the most astute philosopher and the most benevolent philanthropist. It is true that the modern 'Reformatory' is an institution resulting from an attempt to supply a solution of the perplexing problem; but the plan, which as yet contemplates but the juvenile portion

of our criminal population, is still an experiment: the great mass of our released criminals remain unreached. In most cases the guilt-steeped and hardened criminal is pardoned, only to relapse more deeply into crime; is released, but to go forth with one hand bearing aloft the rescript of his pardon, and with the other repeating, under more aggravated circumstances, and in a form more appalling, the identical crime which the Sovereign had but just graciously remitted. *Pardon has, in most cases, not only failed to weaken the force of his depravity, to reform his vicious life, and secure his loyal obedience, but has proved a stimulus to a bolder conception and a more awful commission of crime.* We now turn to the Divine forgiveness of the sinner. In no case has God ever been disappointed in the moral effects of pardon in the sinners pardoned. To extend the full and free remission of sin to the soul is at once certainly and forever to receive that soul's willing and loving obedience to His law. The slave of sin has become His loving servant, and the rebel against His authority His obedient child. Never has God regretted the extension of His forgiveness to the vilest sinner. Not only has the grace of pardon conquered him, but the sweet, holy source of pardon has supplied him with motives to believe the most touching and irresistible. The softening, melting, sanctifying influence of the cross has dissolved the corrosive power of sin-so to speak-in the heart, which now beats more freely and throbs more intensely with life and love to God, to Christ and holiness. The grace of pardon has been attended not only with an emancipating, but also with subduing effect; it not only has cancelled the guilt, but it has conquered the power of sin; it has not only deposed, but it has slain the tyrant. *With an eye moist with tears and beaming with love, the pardoned soul gazes upon the cross of Jesus, and exclaims, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against such suffering, such forgiveness, such love?" "He will subdue our iniquities." "Who is a God like unto You?"* Another and most important point of contrast, refers to the character of the sins and the number of sinners to whom the forgiveness of God extends. There is, and necessarily must be, a limit to the extension of pardon by the *human* sovereign, both as to the nature of the crime and the number of the criminals. The prerogative of mercy among men is extended with fear. There are some violations of the law so aggravated and enormous, some criminals of so desperate and incorrigible a character, that not only would justice be palpably outraged, but a serious injury would be inflicted upon the community, by the extension of mercy to such. A selection from a number of criminals is made, and the degree of mercy is graduated to the nature and guilt of the crime. Not so is it with the Divine government. God promises pardon to every sinner, and for every sin, but this only on condition of sincere repentance, humble acknowledgment, and true faith in Christ Jesus. 'All manner of sin shall be forgiven unto men.' For this marvellous, boundless display of His forgiving mercy He has made ample provision in the Person and work of His only and beloved Son. The Atonement of the Incarnate God, the righteous obedience of His life, and the sacrificial nature of His death, have not only made a way for the outflow of His mercy to the chief of sinners, but have rendered it infinitely just and holy on the part of God to pardon iniquity, transgression, and sin of the deepest hue of guilt, and more countless in number than the stars.

"Come now, and let us reason together, says 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." Again, what earthly sovereign ever pardoned the criminal at such an expense to himself as God does? What would be thought of a proposal issuing from the Government that the Queen of the realm, in order to extend her royal clemency to the greatest felon that ever stood at the bar, should take one of her offspring- perhaps her only son whom she loved- and sacrifice him as a substitute to the majesty of the law, and as a satisfaction to the requirements of justice? Would not a proposal so unparalleled, so unheard of and astounding, awake throughout the nation the deepest and loudest echoes of execration and dismay? Would not the nation a thousand times prefer that the criminal should go free, and that law and justice be trodden in the dust, rather than that the royal mercy should be extended on such terms, and be bought at such a price? And yet God- the sin-pardoning, sinner-saving God, has done all this! The language of inspiration can alone justify this stupendous truth. Listen to the astounding declaration! "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." "Christ died for the ungodly." "He spared not His own Son, but gave Him up for us all." What more can we add? Is not this enough to vindicate the character of God, to set forth His great love, and to assure the vilest sinner that "there is forgiveness with God" for every degree of sin and for every contrite sinner- for every species of crime and for every penitent criminal?

Yet another point of contrast. What would be the nation's thought of the goodness and grace of the sovereign who, to the royal act of pardon, should bestow upon the criminal the noblest relation and the richest estate? And yet the sin-forgiving God does all this to the sinner whom He fully and freely pardons. He not only pardons, but justifies; not only justifies, but adopts, and with adoption confers upon His child "an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away." "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father." Such is the divine relation, and such the heaven of glory, to which the forgiveness of God raises. If sin is pardoned, if the soul is justified, we stand in a relation to God nearer than angels, and shall occupy a mansion and a throne in heaven to which Gabriel himself might in vain aspire. "Who is a God like unto You, that pardons?"

But there remains a clause in this verse of the psalm pregnant with the deepest and holiest instruction: "There is forgiveness with You, that You may be FEARED." How can this be? exclaims the unreflecting mind. Fear, the fruit and effect of pardon! It is an incongruity- a paradox! And yet such is the word of God, and as such we believe and accept it. How, then, are we to interpret the clause? A holy, filial, loving fear of God is ever the

effect of His full and free forgiveness of sin; it is the natural, spontaneous and blessed result. All fear, if apart from a sense of pardoned sin, is legal, servile, and slavish; it is not the fear of a forgiven sinner, of a pardoned child. The pardoned soul sees in the grace of the act, such a display of God's holiness and hatred of sin, such an unfolding of His grace and love, as at once inspires a holy, reverential, and child-like fear of offending Him. Never did the believing soul see sin's exceeding sinfulness, love's amazing greatness, and grace's fulness and freeness, as when first it saw and felt it in a sense of God's pardon. Oh, there is no human act which has such a tendency to melt, subdue, and win the whole being as that of forgiveness, be it judicial or parental, human or Divine. A heart that has become hardened in crime and steeped in sin, whom no reasoning could convince and no discipline could subdue, has at length been melted by mercy, conquered by forgiveness, and enchained by love. I quote an illustration of this truth. A soldier was brought before his commanding officer for a misdemeanor frequently committed and as frequently punished. He had been tried, flogged, and imprisoned; but, imperative and stern as military discipline is, all to no purpose. He was an old and incorrigible offender, whom no threats could dismay, and no infliction reform. As the officer was about to repeat his punishment, the sergeant stepped forward, and, apologizing for the liberty he took, said, "Sir, there is one thing which has never been done with him yet." "What is that?" enquired the officer. "He has never been forgiven." Surprised at the suggestion, and yet struck with its force, the officer meditated for a moment, then ordered the culprit before him. "What have you to say to the charge?" "Nothing, sir, only I am sorry for what I have done." "Well, we have decided to inflict no punishment on this occasion, but to try what forgiveness will do." The criminal, struck dumb with astonishment, burst into tears, and sobbed like a child. And what was the effect? From that moment he was another and a changed man. No longer the inveterate and hardened offender- a plague to his regiment and a dishonor to the service he became one of the most well-behaved and orderly men that ever wore the uniform or bore the standard of his sovereign. Forgiven, he became loyal and obedient: respect for military rule, and the fear of dishonoring the service and degrading himself, henceforth became to him a law and a shield. A similar incident in the life of Dr. Doddridge illustrates the same truth. Believing that there were extenuating circumstances in the case of a condemned criminal awaiting execution in Northampton Jail, Dr. Doddridge waited upon George III, and petitioned for his life. It was granted. Hastening back to his cell, he read the king's order of reprieve. The pardoned criminal rose, fell at his feet, and, clasping his person, exclaimed, "Oh, Sir! I am your servant, your slave for life! For you have purchased every drop of my blood." And shall a human forgiveness thus conquer, thus win, and thus inspire the fear of offending? O Lord, "there is forgiveness with You; for You have cast all my sins behind Your back, that I may serve You with reverence and godly fear all the days of my life, and henceforth to be Your servant, Your child forever!" Oh what a corrective of sin, what a motive to fear, what an incentive to obedience is God's forgiveness! "There is FORGIVENESS with You, that You may be FEARED." That which gives us the clearest, deepest, and most solemn view and conviction of God's

holiness and love, inspires the most effectually a holy, filial, loving fear to offend Him. And where shall we find such an awful display of His holiness, and such overpowering demonstration of His love, as in the cross of Christ? Men do not fear God because they have no view of His holiness, no sense of His mercy, and no experience of His love. But God's forgiveness of sin furnishes the believer with the most convincing argument and with the most persuasive motive to live a pure, a holy, and a godly life. "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ."

Some suggestive reflections grow out of this subject.

Let no penitent soul despair of God's forgiveness. "There is *forgiveness* with Him" for the vilest sinner, and *pardon* for the greatest sin. Listen to the divine exhortation and the promise: "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*." See how reasonable and easy the conditions of the divine forgiveness! No, these conditions are privileges. What are they? To repent of your sins, to forsake your evil ways, to relinquish your rebellious 'thoughts' of God, your unbelieving 'thoughts' of Christ, your infidel 'thoughts' of Christianity, your skeptical 'thoughts' of the Bible, and to return to the Lord, and accept as the free gift of His grace His abundant pardon, and henceforth to do that which makes angels happy- love and serve Him! Do you not pronounce these conditions of the highest boon God can bestow or you receive, reasonable and righteous? Why then should you not be pardoned? Is there any difficulty but that which you yourself create? Is there any necessity why you should be lost, but that which your own persisted impenitence and unbelief render absolute? You allege that you cannot keep the law- Christ has kept it! That you cannot meet the claims of justice- Christ has answered them! That your sins are red like crimson, and countless as the stars- "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from ALL sin." That you have no merit, and no worthiness with which to come before the Lord- "Ho, every one that thirsts, come to the waters, and he that has no money; come, buy, and eat; yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Then why will you die? How unnecessary, we repeat, that you should be lost! The violated law does not require it, incensed justice does not demand it, rejected mercy does not will it, and God, the great, the holy Lord God, has said, "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn, turn from your evil ways; for why will you die?" PARDON, or PUNISHMENT? Choose! "WHO IS A GOD LIKE UNTO YOU, THAT PARDONS INIQUITY, TRANSGRESSION, AND SIN?"

Thus much for Divine forgiveness. But is there not a great practical precept based upon the doctrine of God's forgiveness of man, teaching and enforcing the duty and the privilege of man's forgiveness of his fellow-

man? Most assuredly! "Be imitators of God as dear children" is the apostolic exhortation, and in no feature or act of God may we more closely resemble Him than in the full and frank forgiveness of injury and wrong, real or imaginary, inflicted by our fellows. There are few divine precepts around which there clusters so rich an accumulation of argument and exhortation, enforced by motives and appeals more solemn and pungent than that of human forgiveness- man's forgiveness of man. How pointed and impressive our Lord's own words: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Who can read these words and not tremble at the thought of harboring in the heart an unforgiving spirit? And, then, touching the limit of human forgiveness, how emphatic the command of Christ: "Then came Peter to Him, and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times? Jesus said unto him, I say not unto you, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven." And then follows the Savior's illustration of the royal forgiveness of the servant, in contrast with that same servant's unforgiving conduct towards his fellow-servant, concluding with these remarks: "So likewise shall my Heavenly Father do also unto you, if you from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses." We admit that, apart from divine grace, the last and hardest work of man is to forgive and forget a wrong, a wound, an injury inflicted by another; but, as it has been well observed, "He that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself; for every man has need to be forgiven."

Not less pointed is the teaching of the epistles on this precept of forgiveness. "Be kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you. Be you therefore followers (imitators) of God, as dear children." Again, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, affections of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do you."

What need we more? Who can have felt the power and have tasted the sweetness of God's forgiving love, the "ten thousand talents" all forgiven, and then go his way and refuse to forgive the one hundred pence" owing him from his fellow-servant? It is in vain for you to expect, it is impudent for you to ask, of God forgiveness on your own behalf, if you refuse to exercise this forgiving temper with respect to others. There is an old English proverb by which even the Christian may be instructed, "Forgiveness and a smile are the best revenge." Forgiveness of an injury is the odor which flowers breathe when trampled upon; and a sweeter fragrance- more akin to the divine- nowhere exhales.

But the truest definition of forgiveness is the inspired one: "Overcome evil with good." And that this divine precept is designed as much to regulate our bearing towards unbelievers as believers is conclusive from the context: "Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath....

Therefore if your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing you shall heap coals of fire on his head." That there is a lamentable defect in the religion of many professors touching this divine precept of forgiveness of injury affords no slight evidence of the general unpractical character of the Christianity of the day. The deficiency of love among God's people, and of true hearty Christian union and co-operation in the Lord's work among members of different Christian communions, goes far to invalidate the claim which many assert to the discipleship of Christ. If a disciple of the loving, forgiving Savior, we have a right to enquire, "Where is your badge?" and if the response be, "What badge?" we reply in the words of the Lord Himself: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another." With these words chiming on the ear, let us cease to cherish in our hearts an unforgiving, uncharitable, unforgetful spirit towards any who, intentionally or unwittingly, may have wronged and wounded us; confiding our character and vindication to Him of whom it is said, "Commit your way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass. And He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your Judgment as the noonday." "Our Father who is in heaven; forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The grace of Christ and the prayer of faith will enable us to obtain this glorious and holy victory over ourselves.

Let your daily litany be: "From envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness, good Lord, deliver us."