

Confession and Absolution

A Sermon

(No. 216)

Delivered on Sabbath Morning, October 3, 1858, by the

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at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens

“And the publican, standing afar off would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.”—[Luke 18:13](#).

THE HEROES OF OUR Saviour's stories are most of them selected to illustrate traits of character entirely dissimilar to their general reputation. What would you think of a moral writer of our own day, should he endeavor in a work of fiction, to set before us the gentle virtue of benevolence by the example of a Sepoy? And yet, Jesus Christ has given us one of the finest examples of charity in the case of a Samaritan. To the Jews, a Samaritan was as proverbial for his bitter animosity against their nation, as the Sepoy is among us for his treacherous cruelty, and as much an object of contempt and hatred; but Jesus Christ, nevertheless, chose his hero from the Samaritans, that there should be nothing adventitious to adorn him, but that all the adorning might be given to the grace of charity. Thus, too in the present instance, our Saviour, being desirous of setting before us the necessity of humiliation in prayer, has not selected some distinguished saint who was famed for his humility, but he has chosen a tax-gatherer, probably one of the most extortionate of his class, for the Pharisee seems to hint as much; and I doubt not he cast his eye askance at this publican, when he observed, with selfgratulation, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.” Still, our Lord, in order that we might see that there was nothing to predispose in the person, but that the acceptance of the prayer might stand out, set even in a brighter light by the black foil of the publican's character, has selected this man to be the pattern and model of one who should offer an acceptable prayer unto God. Note that, and you will not be surprised to find the same characteristic exhibited very frequently in the parables of our Lord Jesus Christ. As for this publican, we know but little of his previous career, but we may, without perilling any serious error, conjecture somewhat near the truth. He may have been, and doubtless he was a Jew, piously brought up and religiously trained, but, perhaps like Levi, he ran away from his parents, and finding no other trade exactly suited to his vicious taste, he became one of that corrupt class who collected the Roman taxes, and, ashamed to be known as Levi any longer, he changed his name to Matthew, lest anyone should recognize in the degraded cast of the publican, the man whose parents feared God, and bowed their knees before Jehovah. It may be that this publican had in his youth forsaken the ways of his fathers, and given himself up to lasciviousness, and then found this unworthy occupation to be most accordant with his

vicious spirit. We cannot tell how often he had ground the faces of the poor, or how many curses had been spilled upon his head when he had broken into the heritage of the widow, and had robbed the friendless, unprotected orphan. The Roman government gave a publican far greater power than he ought to possess, and he was never slow to use the advantage for his own enrichment. Probably half of all he had was a robbery, if not more, for Zaccheus seems to hint as much in his own instance, when he says—"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor and if I have gotten anything of any man by false accusation, I restore it unto him four-fold." It was not often that this publican troubled the temple; the priests very seldom saw him coming with a sacrifice; it would have been an abomination, and he did not bring it. But so it happened, that the Spirit of the Lord met with the publican; and had made him think upon his ways, and their peculiar blackness: he was full of trouble, but he kept it to himself, pent up in his own bosom, he could scarcely rest at night nor go about his business by day, for day and night the hand of God was heavy upon him. At last, unable to endure his misery any longer, he thought of that house of God at Zion, and of the sacrifice that was daily offered there. "To whom, or where should I go," said he, "but to God?—and where can I hope to find mercy, but where the sacrifice is offered." No sooner said than done. He went; his unaccustomed feet bent their steps to the sanctuary, but he is ashamed to enter. Yon Pharisee holy man as he appeared to be, goes up unblushingly to the court of the Israelites. he goes as near as he dare to the very precincts, within which the priesthood alone might stand; and he prays with boastful language. But as for the publican, he chooses out for himself some secluded corner where he shall neither be seen nor heard, and now he is about to pray, not with uplifted hands as yonder Pharisee, not with eyes turned up to heaven with a sanctimonious gaze of hypocrisy, but fixing his eyes upon the ground, the hot tears streaming from them, not daring to lift them up to heaven. At last his stifled feelings found utterance; yet that utterance was a groan, a short prayer that must all be comprehended in the compass of a sigh: "God be merciful to me a sinner." It is done; he is heard; the angel of mercy registers his pardon, his conscience is at peace; he goes down to his house a happy man, justified rather than the Pharisee, and rejoicing in the justification that the Lord had given to him. Well then, my business this morning is to invite, to urge, to beseech you to do what the publican did, that you may receive what he obtained. There are two particulars upon which I shall endeavor to speak solemnly and earnestly: the first is *confession*, the second is *absolution*.

I. Brethren, let us imitate the publican, first of all in his CONFESSION. There has been a great deal of public excitement during the last few weeks and months about the confessional. As for that matter, it is perhaps a mercy that the outward and visible sign of Popery in the Church of England has discovered to its sincere friends the inward and spiritual evil which had long been lurking there. We need not imagine that the confessional, or priestcraft, of which it is merely an offshoot, in the Church of England is any novelty: it has long been

there, those of us who are outside her borders have long observed and mourned over it, but now we congratulate ourselves on the prospect that the Church of England herself will be compelled to discover her own evils; and we hope that God may give her grace and strength to cut the cancer out of her own breast before she shall cease to be a Protestant Church, and God shall cast her away as an abhorred thing. This morning, however, I have nothing to do with the confessional. Silly women may go on confessing as long as they like, and foolish husbands may trust their wives if they please to such men as those. Let those that are fools show it; let those that have no sense do as they please about it; but as for myself, I should take the greatest care that neither I nor mine have ought to do with such things. Leaving that, however, we come to personal matters, endeavoring to learn, even from the errors of others, how to act rightly ourselves.

Note the publican's confession; *to whom was it presented?* "God be merciful to me a sinner." Did the publican ever think about going to the priest to ask for mercy, and confessing his sins? The thought may have crossed his mind, but his sin was too great a weight upon his conscience to be relieved in any such way, so he very soon dismissed the idea. "No," saith he, "I feel that my sin is of such a character that none but God can take it away; and even if it were right for me to go and make the confession to my fellow creature, yet I should think it must be utterly unavailing in my case, for my disease is of such a nature, that none but an Almighty Physician ever can remove it." So he directs his confession and his prayer to one place, and to one alone—"God be merciful to me a sinner." And you will note in this confession to God, that it was *secret*: all that you can hear of his confession is just that one word—"a sinner." Do you suppose that was all he confessed? No, beloved, I believe that long before this, the publican had made a confession of all his sins privately, upon his knees in his own house before God. But now, in God's house, all he has to say for man to hear, is—"I am a sinner." And I counsel you, If ever you make a confession before man, let it be a general one but never a particular one. You ought to confess often to your fellow creatures, that you have been a sinner, but to tell to any man in what respect you have been a sinner, is but to sin over again, and to help your fellow creature to transgress. How filthy must be the soul of that priest who makes his ear a common sewer for the filth of other men's hearts. I cannot imagine even the devil to be more depraved, than the man who spends his time in sitting with his ear against the lips of men and women, who, if they do truly confess, must make him an adept in every vice, and school him in iniquities that he otherwise never could have known. Oh, I charge you never pollute your fellow creature; keep your sin to yourself, and to your God. He cannot be polluted by your iniquity; make a plain and full confession of it before him; but to your fellow creature, add nothing to the general confession—"I am a sinner!"

This confession which he made before God, was *spontaneous*, There was no question put to this man as to whether he were a sinner or no; as to whether he had broken the seventh

commandment, or the eighth, or the ninth, or the tenth; no, his heart was full of penitence and it melted out in this breathing—"God be merciful to me a sinner." They tell us that some people never can make a full confession, except a priest helps them by questions. My dear friends, the very excellence of penitence is lost, and its spell broken, if there be a question asked: the confession is not true and real unless it be spontaneous. The man cannot have felt the weight of sin, who wants somebody to tell him what his sins are. Can you imagine any man with a burden on his back, who, before he groaned under it, wanted to be told that he had got one there? Surely not. The man groans under it, and he does not want to be told—"There it is on your back," he knows it is there. And if, by the questioning of a priest, a full and thorough confession could be drawn from any man or woman, it would be totally useless, totally vain before God, because it is not spontaneous. We must confess our sins, because we cannot help confessing them; it must come out, because we cannot keep it in; like fire in the bones, it seems as if it would melt our very spirit, unless we gave vent to the groaning of our confession before the throne of God. See this publican, you cannot hear the abject full confession that he makes; all that you can hear is his simple acknowledgment that he is a sinner; but that comes spontaneously from his lips; God himself has not to ask him the question but he comes before the throne, and freely surrenders himself up to the hands of Almighty Justice, confessing that he is a rebel and a sinner. That is the first thing we have to note in his confession—that he made it to God secretly and spontaneously; and all he said openly was that he was "a sinner."

Again: *what did he confess?* He confessed, as our text tells us that he was a sinner. Now, how suitable is this prayer for us! For is there a lip here present that this confession will not suit—"God be merciful to me a sinner?" Do you say,—*"the prayer will suit the harlot, when, after a life of sin, rottenness is in her bones and she is dying in despair—that prayer suits her lips?"* Ay, but my friend, it will suit thy lips and mine too. If thou knowest thine heart, and I know mine, the prayer that will suit her will suit us also. You have never committed the sins which the Pharisee disowned; you have neither been extortionate, nor unjust, nor an adulterer; you have never been even as the publican, but nevertheless the word "sinner" will still apply to you; and you will feel it to be so if you are in a right condition. Remember how much *you* have sinned against light. It is true the harlot hath sinned more openly than you, but had she such light as you have had? Do you think she had such an early education and such training as you have received? Did she ever receive such checkings of conscience and such guardings of providence, as those which have watched over your career? This much I must confess for myself—I do, and must feel a peculiar heinousness in my own sin, for I sin against light, against conscience, and more, against the love of God received, and against the mercy of God promised. Come forward, thou greatest among saints, and answer this question,—dost not this prayer suit thee? I hear thee answer, without one moment's pause—"Ay, it suits me now; and until I die, my quivering lips must often repeat the petition,

‘Lord have mercy upon me a sinner.’ ” Men and brethren, I beseech you use this prayer to-day, for it must suit you all. Merchant, hast thou no sins of business to confess? Woman, hast thou no household sins to acknowledge? Child of many prayers, hast thou no offense against father and mother to confess? Have we loved the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength; and have we each loved our neighbor as ourself. Oh, let us close our lips as to any boasting, and when we open them, let these be the first words that escape from them, “I have sinned, O Lord; I have broken thy commandments; Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner.” But mark, is it not a strange thing that the Holy Spirit should teach a man to plead his sinnership before the throne of God? One would think that when we come before God we should try to talk a little of our virtues. Who would suppose that when a man was asking for mercy he would say of himself, “I am a sinner?” Why surely reason would prompt him to say, “Lord have mercy upon me; there is some good point about me: Lord have mercy upon me; I am not worse than my neighbors: Lord have mercy upon me. I will try to be better.” Is it not against reason, is it not marvellously above reason, that the Holy Spirit should teach a man to urge at the throne of grace, that which seems to be against his plea, the fact that he is a sinner? And yet, dear brethren, if you and I want to be heard, we must come to Christ as sinners. Do not let us attempt to make ourselves better than we are. When we come to God’s throne, let us not for one moment seek to gather any of the false jewels of our pretended virtues; rags are the garments of sinners. Confession is the only music that must come from our lips; “God be merciful to ME—a sinner;” that must be the only character in which I can pray to God. Now, are there not many here who feel that they are sinners, and are groaning, sighing, and lamenting, because the weight of sin lies on their conscience? Brother, I am glad thou feelest thyself to be a sinner, for thou hast the key of the kingdom in thy hands. Thy sense of sinnership is thy only title to mercy. Come. I beseech thee, just as thou art—thy nakedness is thy only claim on heaven’s wardrobe; thy hunger is thy only claim on heaven’s granaries, thy poverty is thy only claim on heaven’s eternal riches. Come just as thou art, with nothing of thine own, except thy sinfulness, and plead that before the throne—“God be merciful to me a sinner.” This is what this man confessed, that he was a sinner, and he pleaded it, making the burden of his confession to be the matter of his plea before God.

Now again, *how does he come?* What is the posture that he assumes? The first thing I would have you notice is that he “stood afar off.” What did he do that for? Was it not because he felt himself a separated man? We have often made general confessions in the temple, but there never was a confession accepted, except it was particular, personal, and heartfelt. There were the people gathered together for the accustomed service of worship; they join in a psalm of praise, but the poor publican stood far away from them. Anon, they unite in the order of prayer, still he could not go near them. No, he was come there for himself, and he must stand by himself. Like the wounded hart that seeks the deepest glades of the forest

where it may bleed and die alone in profound solitude, so did this poor publican seem to feel he must be alone. You notice he does not say anything about other people in his prayer. “God be merciful to *me*,” he says. He does not say “one of a company of sinners,” but “a sinner,” as if there were not another sinner in all the world. Mark this, my hearer, that thou must feel thyself solitary and alone, before thou canst ever pray this prayer acceptably. Has the Lord ever picked thee out in a congregation? Has it seemed to you in this Hall as if there were a great black wall round about you, and you were closed in with the preacher and with your God, and as if every shaft from the preacher’s bow was levelled at *you*, and every threatening meant for *you*, and every solemn upbraiding was an upbraiding for *you*? If thou hast felt this, I will congratulate thee. No man ever prayed this prayer aright unless he prayed alone, unless he said “God be merciful to *me*,” as a solitary, lonely sinner. “The publican stood afar off.”

Note the next thing. “He would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven.” That was because he dare not, not because he would not; he would have done it if he dared. How remarkable it is that repentance takes all the daring out of men. We have seen fellows very dare-devils before they were touched by sovereign grace, who have become afterwards, the most trembling and conscientious men with the tenderest conscience that one could imagine. Men who were careless, bragging and defying God, have become as humble as little children, and even afraid to lift their eyes to heaven, though once they sent their oaths and curses there. But why did he not dare to lift his eyes up? It was because he was dejected in his “spirit,” so oppressed and burdened that he could not look up. Is that thy case my friend this morning? Are you afraid to pray? Do you feel as if you could not hope that God would have mercy on you, as if the least gleam of hope was more light than you could possibly bear; as if your eyes were so used to the darkness of doubt and despondency, that even one stolen ray seemed to be too much for your poor weak vision? Ah! well, fear not, for happy shall it be for thee; thou art only following the publican in his sad experience now, and the Lord who helps thee to follow him in the confession, shall help thee to rejoice with him in the absolution.

Note what else he did. He smote upon his breast. He was a good theologian he was a real doctor of divinity. What did he smite his breast for? Because he knew where the mischief lay—in his breast. He did not smite upon his brow as some men do when they are perplexed, as if the mistake were in their understanding. Many a man will blame his understanding, while he will not blame his heart, and say, “Well, I have made a mistake. I have certainly been doing wrong, but I am a good-hearted fellow at the bottom.” This man knew where the mischief lay, and he smote the right place.

“Here on my heart the burden lies.”

He smote upon his breast as if he were angry with himself. He seemed to say, “Oh! that I could smite thee, my ungrateful heart, the harder, that thou hast loved sin rather than

God.”” He did not do penance, and yet it was a kind of penance upon himself when he smote his breast again and again, and cried “Alas! alas! woe is me that I should ever have sinned against my God”—“God be merciful to a sinner.” Now, can you come to God like this, my dear friend? Oh, let us all draw near to God in this fashion. Thou hast enough, my brother, to make thee stand alone for there have been sins in which thou and I have stood each of us in solitary guilt. There are iniquities known only to ourselves, which we never told to the partner of our own bosom, not to our own parents or brothers, nor yet to the friend with whom we took sweet counsel. If we have sinned thus alone, let us go to our chambers, and confess alone, the husband apart, and the wife apart, the father apart, and the child apart. Let us each one wail for himself. Men and brethren, leave off to accuse one another. Cease from the bickerings of your censoriousness. and from the slanders of your envy. Rebuke yourselves and not your fellows. Rend your own hearts, and not the reputation of your neighbors. Come, let each man now look to his own case, and not to the case of another, let each cry, “Lord, have mercy upon me, as here I stand alone, a sinner.” And hast thou not good reason to cast down thine eyes? Does it not seem sometimes too much for us ever to look to heaven again. We have blasphemed God, some of us, and even imprecated curses on our own limbs and eyes; and when those things come back to our memory we may well be ashamed to look up. Or if we have been preserved from the crime of open blasphemy—how often have you and I forgotten God! how often have we neglected prayer! how have we broken his Sabbaths and left his Bible unread! Surely these things as they flash across our memory, might constrain us to feel that we cannot lift up so much as our eyes towards heaven. And as for smiting on our breast, what man is there among us that need not do it? Let us be angry with ourselves, because we have provoked God to be angry with us. Let us be in wrath with the sins that have brought ruin upon our souls, let us drag the traitors out, and put them at once to a summary death; they deserve it well; they have been our ruin; let us be their destruction. He smote upon his breast and said, “God, be merciful unto me a sinner.”

There is one other feature in this man’s prayer, which you must not overlook. *What reason had he to expect that God would have any mercy upon him?* The Greek explains more to us than the English does, and the original word here might be translated—“God be *propitiated* to me a sinner.” There is in the Greek word a distinct reference to the doctrine of atonement. It is not the Unitarian’s prayer—“God be merciful to me,” it is more than that—it is the Christian’s prayer, “God be propitiated towards me, a sinner.” There is, I repeat it, a distinct appeal to the atonement and the mercy-seat in this short prayer, Friend, if we would come before God with our confessions, we must take care that we plead the blood of Christ. There is no hope for a poor sinner apart from the cross of Jesus. We may cry, “God be merciful to me,” but the prayer can never be answered apart from the victim offered, the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. When thou hast thine eye upon the

mercy-seat, take care to have thine eye upon the cross too. Remember that the cross is, after all “the mercy seat; that mercy never was enthroned, until she did hang upon the cross crowned with thorns. If thou wouldst find pardon, go to dark Gethsemane, and see thy Redeemer sweating, in deep anguish, gouts of gore. If thou wouldst have peace of conscience, go to Gabbatha, the pavement, and see thy Saviour’s back flooded with a stream of blood. If thou wouldst have the last best rest to thy conscience, go to Golgotha; see the murdered victim as he hangs upon the cross, with hands and feet and side all pierced, as every wound is gaping wide with misery extreme. There can be no hope for mercy apart from the victim offered—even Jesus Christ the Son of God. Oh, come; let us one and all approach the mercy-seat, and plead the blood. Let us each go and say, “Father, I have sinned; but have mercy upon me, through thy Son.” Come, drunkard, give me thy hand; we will go together. Harlot, give me thy hand too; and let us likewise approach the throne. And you, professing Christians, come ye also, be not ashamed of your company. Let us come before his presence with many tears, none of us accusing our fellows, but each one accusing himself; and let us plead the blood of Jesus Christ, which speaketh peace and pardon to every troubled conscience.

Careless man, I have a word with thee before I have done on this point. You say, “Well, that is a good prayer, certainly, for a man who is dying. When a poor fellow has the cholera, and sees black death staring him in the face, or when he is terrified and thunderstruck in the time of storm, or when he finds himself amidst the terrible confusion and alarm of a perilous catastrophe or a sudden accident, while drawing near to the gates of death, it is only right that he should say, Lord have mercy upon me.” Ah, friend, the prayer must be suitable to you then, if you are a dying man; it must be suitable to you, for you know not how near you are to the borders of the grave. Oh, if thou didst but understand the frailty of life and the slipperiness of that poor prop on which thou art resting, thou wouldst say, “Alas for *my* soul! if the prayer will suit me dying, it must suit me now; for I am dying, even this day, and know not when I may come to the last gasp.” “Oh,” says one, “I think it will suit a man that has been a very great sinner.” Correct, my friend, and therefore, if you knew yourself; it would suit you. You are quite correct in saying, that it won’t suit any but great sinners; and if you don’t feel yourself to be a great sinner, I know you will never pray it. But there are some here that feel themselves to be what you ought to feel and know that you are. Such will, constrained by grace, use the prayer with an emphasis this morning, putting a tear upon each letter, and a sigh upon each syllable, as they cry, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” But mark, my friend, thou mayest smile contemptuously on the man that makes this confession, but he shall go from this house justified, while thou shalt go away still in thy sins, without a hope, without a ray of joy to cheer thy unchastened spirit.

II. Having thus briefly described this confession, I come more briefly still to notice the ABSOLUTION which God gave. Absolution from the lips of man I do believe is little short of blasphemy. There is in the Prayer Book of the Church of England an absolution which

is essentially Popish, which I should think must be almost a verbatim extract from the Romish missal. I do not hesitate to say, that there was never anything more blasphemous printed in Holywell Street, than the absolution that is to be pronounced by a clergyman over a dying man; and it is positively frightful to think that any persons calling themselves Christians should rest easy in a church until they have done their utmost to get that most excellent book thoroughly reformed and revised, and to get the Popery purged out of it. But there is such a thing as absolution, my friends, and the publican received it. “He went to his house justified rather than the other.” The other had nought of peace revealed to his heart, this poor man had all, and he went to his house justified. It does not say that he went to his house, having eased his mind; that is true, but more: he went to his house “justified.” What does that mean? It so happens that the Greek word here used is the one which the apostle Paul always employs to set out the great doctrine of the righteousness of Jesus Christ—even the righteousness which is of God by faith. The fact is, that the moment the man prayed the prayer, every sin he had ever done was blotted out of God’s book, so that it did not stand on the record against him; and more, the moment that prayer was heard in heaven, the man was reckoned to be a righteous man. All that Christ did for him was cast about his shoulders to be the robe of his beauty, that moment all the guilt that he had ever committed himself was washed entirely away and lost for ever. When a sinner believes in Christ, his sins positively cease to be, and what is *more* wonderful they *all* cease to be, as Kent says in those well known lines—

“Here’s pardon for transgressions past,
It matters not how black their cast,
And, O my soul with wonder view
For sins to come here’s pardon too.”

They are all swept away in one solitary instant; the crimes of many years; extortions, adulteries, or even murder, wiped away in an instant; for you will notice the absolution was instantaneously given. God did not say to the man—“Now you must go and perform some good works, and then I will give you absolution.” He did not say as the Pope does, “Now you must swelter awhile in the fires of Purgatory, and then I will let you out.” No, he justified him there and then; the pardon was given as soon as the sin was confessed. “Go, my son, in peace; I have not a charge against thee; thou art a sinner in thine own estimation, but thou art none in mine; I have taken all thy sins away, and cast them into the depth of the sea, and they shall be mentioned against thee no more for ever.” Can you tell what a happy man the publican was, when all in a moment he was changed? If you may reverse the figure used by Milton, he seemed himself to have been a loathsome toad, but the touch of the Father’s mercy made him rise to angelic brightness and delight; and he went out of that house with his eye upward, no longer afraid. Instead of the groan that was on his heart, he had a song upon his lip. He no longer walked alone, he sought out the godly and he said, “Come and

hear, ye that fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for my soul.” He did not smite upon his breast, but he went home to get down his harp, and play upon the strings, and praise his God. You would not have known that he was the same man, if you had seen him going out, and all that was done in a minute. “But,” says one, “do you think he knew for certain that all his sins were forgiven? Can a man know that?” Certainly he can. And there be some here that can bear witness that this is true. They have known it themselves. The pardon which is sealed in heaven is re-sealed in our own conscience. The mercy which is recorded above is made to shed its light into the darkness of our hearts. Yes, a man may know on earth that his sins are forgiven, and may be as sure that he is a pardoned man as he is of his own existence. And now I hear a cry from some one saying, “And may I be pardoned this morning? and may I know that I am pardoned? May I be so pardoned that all shall be forgotten—I who have been a drunkard, a swearer, or what not? May I have all my transgressions washed away? May I be made sure of heaven, and all that in a moment?” Yes, my friend, If thou believest in the Lord Jesus Christ, if thou wilt stand where thou art, and just breathe this prayer out, “Lord, have mercy! God be merciful to me a sinner, through the blood of Christ.” I tell thee man, God never did deny that prayer yet; if it came out of honest lips he never shut the gates of mercy on it. It is a solemn litany that shall be used as long as time shall last, and it shall pierce the ears of God as long as there is a sinner to use it. Come, be not afraid, I beseech you, use the prayer before you leave this Hall. Stand where you are; endeavor to realize that you are an alone, and if you feel that you are guilty. now let the prayer ascend. Oh, what a marvellous thing, it from the thousands of hearts here present, so many thousand prayers might go up to God! Surely the angels themselves never had such a day in Paradise, as they would have to-day, if every one of us could unfeignedly make that confession. Some are doing it; I know they are; God is helping them. And sinner, do you stay away? You, who have most need to come, do you refuse to join with us. Come, brother come. You say you are too vile. No, brother, you cannot be too vile to say, “God be merciful to *me*.” Perhaps you are no viler than we are; at any rate, this we can say—we feel ourselves to be viler than you, and we want you to pray the same prayer that we have prayed. “Ah,” says one, “I cannot; my heart won’t yield to that; I cannot.” But friend, if God is ready to have mercy upon thee, thine must be a hard heart, if it is not ready to receive his mercy. Spirit of God, breathe on the hard heart, and melt it now! Help the man who feels that carelessness is overcoming him—help him to get rid of it from this hour. You are struggling against it; you are saying, “Would to God I could pray that I could go back to be a boy or a child again, and then I could; but I have got hardened and grown grey in sin, and prayer would be hypocrisy in me. No, brother, no, it would not. If thou canst but cry it from thy heart, I beseech thee say it. Many a man thinks he is a hypocrite, when he is not, and is afraid that he is not sincere, when his very fear is a proof of his sincerity. “But,” says one, “I have no redeeming trait in my character at all.” I am glad you think so; still you may use the

prayer, “God be merciful to me.” “But it will be a useless prayer,” says one. My brother, I assure thee not in my own name, but in the name of God, my Father and your Father, it shall not be a useless prayer. As sure as God is God, him that cometh unto Christ he will in no wise cast out. Come with me now, I beseech thee; tarry no longer; the bowels of God are yearning over thee. Thou art his child, and he will not give thee up. Thou hast run from him these many years, but he has never forgotten thee; thou hast resisted all his warnings until now, and he is almost weary, but still he has said concerning thee, “How shall I make thee as Admah; how shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.”

“Come humbled sinner, in whose breast
A thousand thoughts revolve;
Come with thy guilt and fear oppressed,
And make this last resolve:
I’ll go to Jesus; though my sin
Hath like a mountain rose,
I know his courts; I’ll enter in,
Whatever may oppose.
Prostrate I’ll lie before his face,
And there my sins confess;
I’ll tell him I’m a wretch undone,
Without his sov’reign grace.”

Go home to your houses: let everyone—preacher, deacon, people, ye of the church, and ye of the world, everyone of you, go home, and ere you feast your bodies, pour out your hearts before God, and let this one cry go up from all our lips, “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

I pause. Bear with me.

I must detain you a few moments. Let us use this prayer as our own *now*. Oh that it might come up before the Lord at this time as the earnest supplication of every heart in this assembly! I will repeat it,—not as a text, but as a prayer,—as my own prayer, as your prayer. Will each one of you take it personally for himself? Let everyone, I entreat you, who desires to offer the prayer, and can join in it, utter at its close an audible “Amen.”

Let us pray,

“GOD-BE-MERCIFUL-TO-ME-A-SINNER.”

[And the people did with deep solemnity say] “AMEN.”

P.S.—The preacher hopes that he who reads will feel constrained most solemnly to do likewise.