

Sin Immeasurable

A Sermon

(No. 299)

Delivered on Sabbath Morning, February 12th, 1860, by the

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At Exeter Hall, Strand.

“Who can understand his errors?”—[Psalm 19:12](#).

WHAT WE KNOW IS AS NOTHING when compared with what we know not. The sea of wisdom has cast up a shell or two upon our shore, but its vast depths have never known the footstep of the searcher. Even in natural things we know but the surface of matters. He that has traveled the wide world over, and has descended into its deepest mines, must yet be aware that he has viewed but a part of the mere crust of this world; that as for its vast center, its mysterious fires and molten secreta, the mind of man hath not as yet conceived them. If you will turn your eyes above, the astronomer will tell you that the undiscovered stars, that the vast mass of worlds which form the milky way, and the abundant masses of nebulae—that those vast clusters of unknown worlds, as infinitely exceed the little that we can explore, as a mountain exceeds a grain of sand. All the knowledge which the wisest men can possibly attain in a whole life-time, is no more than what the child may take up from the sea with his tiny cup, compared with the boundless waters which fill their channels to the brim. Why, when we are at the wisest, we have but come to the threshold of knowledge, we have taken but one step in that race of discovery which we may have to pursue throughout all eternity. This is equally the case with regard to things of the heart, and the spiritual things which concerns this little world called man. We know nothing but the surface of things. Whether I talk to you of God, of his attributes, of Christ, of his atonement, or of ourselves and our sin, I must confess that as yet we know nothing but the exterior; that we cannot comprehend the length, the breadth, the height of any one of these matters.

The subject of this morning—our own sin, and the error of our own hearts, is one which we sometimes think we know, but of which we may always be quite sure that we have only begun to learn, and that when we have learned the most we shall ever know on earth, the question will still be pertinent, “Who can understand his errors?”

Now, this morning I propose first of all, very briefly indeed, to *explain the question*; then at greater length to *impress it upon our hearts*; and lastly we will *learn the lessons which it would teach us*.

I. First, then, let me EXPLAIN THE QUESTION.—“Who can understand his errors?”

We all acknowledge that we have errors. Surely we are not so proud as to imagine ourselves to be perfect. If we pretend to perfection we are utterly ignorant, for every profession of human perfection arises from perfect ignorance. Any notion that we are free from

sin should at once discover to us that we abound in it. To vindicate my boast of perfection, I must deny the Word of God, forget the law, and exalt myself above the testimony of truth. Therefore, I say, we are willing to confess that we have many errors, yet who amongst us can understand them? Who knows precisely how far a thing may be an error which we imagine to be a virtue? Who among us can define how much of iniquity is mingled with our uprightness—how much of unrighteousness with our righteousness? Who is able to detect the component parts of every action, so as to see the proportion of motive which would constitute it right or wrong? He were indeed a crafty man who should be able to unmask an action and divide it into essential motives which are its component parts. Where we think we are right, who knows but what we may be wrong? Where even with the strictest scrutiny we have arrived at the conclusion that we have done a good thing, who among us is quite sure that he has not been mistaken? May not the apparent good be so marred with internal motive as to become a real evil?

Who again can understand his errors, so as always to detect a fault when it has been committed? The shades of evil are perceptible to God, but not always perceptible to us. Our eye has been so blinded and its vision so ruined by the fall, the absolute black of sin we can detect, but the shades of its darkness we are unable to discern. And yet the slightest shadow of sin is perceptible to God, and that very shade divides us from the Perfect One, and causes us to be guilty of sin. Who amongst us has that keen method of judging himself, so that he shall be able to discover the first trace of evil? “Who can understand his errors?” Surely no man will claim a wisdom so profound as this. But to come to more common matters by which perhaps we may the more understand our text. Who can understand the *number* of his errors? the mightiest mind could not count the sins of a single *day*. As the multitude of sparks from a furnace, so innumerable are the iniquities of one day. We might sooner tell the grains of sand on the sea-shore, than the iniquities of one man’s life. A life most purged and pure is still as full of sin as the sea is full of salt. And who is he that can weigh the salt of the sea, or can detect it as it mingles with every fluid particle? But if he could do this, he could not tell how vast an amount of evil saturates our entire life, and how innumerable are those deeds, and thoughts, and words of disobedience, which have cast us out from the presence of God, and caused him to abhor the creatures which his own hands have made.

Again, even if we could tell the number of human sins, who, in the next place, could estimate their *guilt*? Before God’s mind the guilt of one sin, and such an one as we foolishly call a little one—the guilt of one sin merits his eternal displeasure. Until that one iniquity be washed out with blood, God cannot accept the soul and take it to his heart as his own offspring. Though he has made man, and is infinitely benevolent, yet his sense of justice is so strong, and stern, and inflexible, that from his presence he must drive out his dearest child if one single sin should remain unforgiven. Who then amongst us can tell the guilt of guilt, the heinousness of that ungrateful rebellion which man has commenced and carried

on against his wise and gracious Creator. Sin, like hell, is a bottomless pit! Oh, brethren, there never lived a man yet who really knew how guilty he was; for if such a being could be fully conscious of all his own guilt, he would carry hell in his bowels. Nay, I often think that scarcely can the damned in perdition know all the guilt of their iniquity, or else even their furnace might be heated seven times hotter, and Tophet's streams must be enlarged to an unmeasurable depth. The hell which is contained in a single evil thought is unutterable and unimaginable. God only knows the blackness, the horror of darkness, which is condensed into the thought of evil.

And then again, I think our text would convey to us this idea. Who can understand the peculiar *aggravation* of his own transgression. Now, answering the question for myself, I feel that as a minister of Christ I cannot understand my errors. Placed where multitudes listen to the Word from my lips, my responsibilities are so tremendous, that the moment I think of them, a mountain presses upon my soul. There have been times, when I have wished to imitate Jonah and take ship and flee away from the work which God has thrust upon me; for I am conscious that I have not served him as I ought. When I have preached most earnestly, I go to my chamber and repent that I have preached in so heartless a manner. When I have wept over your souls, and when I have agonized in prayer, I have yet been conscious that I have not wrestled with God as I ought to have wrestled, and that I have not felt for your souls as I ought to feel. The errors which a man may commit in the ministry are incalculable. There is no hell methinks that shall be hot enough for the man who is unfaithful here. There can be no curse too horrible to be hurled upon the head of that man who leads others astray when he ought to guide them in the path of peace, or who deals with sacred things as if they were matters of no weight, and but of slight importance. I bring here any minister of Christ that lives, and if he be a man really filled with the Holy Spirit, he will tell you that when he is bowed down with the solemnity of his office, he would give up the work if he dare; that if it were not for something beyond, mysterious impulses that drive him forward, he would take his hand from the plough and leave the field of battle. Lord have mercy upon thy ministers, for, beyond all other men, we need mercy.

And now I single out any other member of my congregation, and whatever be your position in life, whatever your education, or the peculiar providences through which you have passed, I will insist upon it that there is something special about your case which makes your sin such sin, that you cannot understand how vile it is. Perhaps you have had a pious mother who wept over you in your childhood, and dedicated you to God when you were in your cradle. Your sin is doubly sin. There is about it a scarlet hue which is not to be discovered in an ordinary criminal. You have been directed from your youth up in the way of righteousness, and if you have gone astray, every step you have taken has been not a *step* to hell but a *stride* thither. *You* do not sin so cheaply as others. Other men's scores run up fast; but where there are pence put down for other sinners there are pounds put down for you, because

you know your duty but you do it not. He that breaks through a mother's bosom to hell goes to its lowest depths. There is in hell a degree of torture, and the deepest should surely be reserved for the man who leaps over a mother's prayers into perdition. Or you may never have this to account for; but you may have an equal aggravation. You have been at sea, sir. Many times you have been in danger of being shipwrecked. You have had miraculous escapes. Now every one of these shipwrecks has been a warning to you. God has brought you to the gates of death, and you have promised that if he would but save your wretched soul that you would lead a fresh life—that you would begin to serve your Maker. You have lied to your God. Your sins before you uttered that vow were evil enough; but now you break not only the law but your own covenant which you voluntarily made with God in the home of sickness. You have, some of you perhaps, been thrown from a horse, or have been attacked by fever, or in other ways have been brought to the very gates of the grave. What solemnity is attached to your life now! He that rode in the charge of Balaklava and yet came back alive—saved alive where hundreds die—should from that time consider himself to be a God's man, saved by a singular Providence for singular ends. But you too have had your escapes, if not quite so wonderful, yet certainly quite as special instances of God's goodness. And now, every error you commit becomes unutterably wicked, and of you I may say, "Who can understand his errors?"

But I might exhaust the congregation by bringing up one by one. Here comes the father. Sir, your sins will be imitated by your children. You cannot therefore understand your errors, because they are sins against your own offspring—sins against the children that have sprung from your own loins. Here is the magistrate. Sir, your sins are of a peculiar dye, because, standing in your position, your character is watched and looked up to, and whatever you do becomes the excuse of other men. I bring up another man who holds no office in the state whatever, and who perhaps is little known among men. But, sir, you have received special grace from God, you have had rich enjoyment of the light of your Savior's countenance; you have been poor, but he has made you rich—rich in faith. Now when you rebel against him, the sins of God's favourites are sins indeed. Iniquities committed by the people of God become as huge as high Olympus, and reach the very stars. Who among us, then, can understand his errors: their special aggravations, their number, and their guilty Lord, search thou us and know our ways!

II. I have thus tried briefly to explain my text; now I come to THE IMPRESSING OF IT ON THE HEART, as God the Holy Spirit shall help me.

Before a man could understand his errors there are several mysteries which he must know. But each one of these mysteries, methinks, is beyond his knowledge, and consequently the understanding of the whole depth of the guilt of his sin must be quite beyond human power. Now the first mystery that man must understand is *the fall*. Until I know how much all my powers are debased and depraved, how thoroughly my will is perverted and my

judgment turned from its right channel, how really and essentially vicious my nature has become, it cannot be possible for me to know the whole extent of my guilt. Here is a piece of iron laid upon the anvil. The hammers are plied upon it lustily. A thousand sparks are scattered on every side. Suppose it possible to count each spark as it falls from the anvil; yet who could guess the number of the unborn sparks that still lie latent and hidden in the mass of iron? Now, brethren, your sinful nature may be compared to that heated bar of iron. Temptations are the hammers; your sins the sparks. If you could count them (which you cannot do) yet who could tell the multitude of unborn iniquities—eggs of sin that lie slumbering in your souls? Yet must you know this before you know the whole sinfulness of your nature. Our open sins are like the farmer's little sample which he brings to market. There are granaries full at home. The iniquities that we see are like the weeds upon the surface soil; but I have been told, and indeed have seen the truth of it, that if you dig six feet into the earth, and turn up fresh soil, there will be found in that soil six feet deep the seeds of the weeds indigenous to the land. And so we are not to think merely of the sins that grow on the surface, but if we could turn our heart up to its core and center, we should find it as fully permeated with sin as every piece of putridity is with worms and rotteness. The fact is, that man is a reeking mass of corruption. His whole soul is by nature so debased and so depraved, that no description which can be given of him even by inspired tongues can fully tell how base and vile a thing he is. An ancient writer said once of the iniquity within, that it was like the stores of water which it is are hidden in the depths of the earth. God once broke up the fountains of the great deep, and then they covered the mountains twenty cubits upward. If God should even withdraw his restraining grace, and break up in our hearts the whole fountains of the great depths of our iniquity, it would be a flood so wondrous, that it would cover the highest tops of our hopes and the whole worm within us would be drowned in dread despair. Not a living thing could be found in this sea of evil. It would cover all, and swallow up the whole of our manhood. Ah! says an old proverb, "If man could wear his sins on his forehead, he would pull his hat over his eyes. That old Roman who said he would like to have a window into his heart that every man could see within it, did not know himself, for if he had had such a window he would soon have begged to have a pair of shutters, and he would have kept them shut up I am sure; for could he ever have seen his own heart, he would have been driven raving mad. God, therefore, spares all eyes but his own that desperate sight—a naked human heart. Great God, here would we pause and cry, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Thou desirest truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part thou shaft make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."

A second thing which it will be needful for us to understand before we can comprehend our errors is *God's law*. If I just describe the law for a moment, you will very readily see that you can never hope by any means fully to understand it. The law of God, as we read it in

the ten great commandments, seems very simple, very easy. When we come, however, to put even its naked precepts into practice, we find that it is quite impossible for us to keep them in the full. Our amazement, however, increases, when we find that the law does not mean merely what it says, but that it has a spiritual meaning, a hidden depth of matter which at first sight we do not discover. For instance, the commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," means more than the mere act—refers to fornication and uncleanness of any shape, both in act, and word, and thought. Nay, to use our Savior's own exposition of it, "He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her, committeth adultery already with her in his heart." So with every commandment. The bare letter is nothing, compared with the whole stupendous meaning and severe strictness of the rule. The commandments, if I may so speak, are like the stars. When seen with the naked eye, they appear to be brilliant points; if we could draw near to them, we should see them to be infinite worlds, greater than even our sun, stupendous though it is. So is it with the law of God. It seems to be but a luminous point, because we see it at a distance, but when we come nearer where Christ stood, and estimate the lair as he saw it, then we find it is vast, immeasurable. "The commandment is exceeding broad." Think then for a moment of the spirituality of the law, its extent and strictness. The law of Moses condemns for offense, without hope of pardon, and sin, like a millstone, is bound around the sinner's neck, and he is cast into the depths. Nay, the law deals with sins of thought,—the imagination of evil is sin. The transit of sin across the heart, leaves the stain of impurity behind it. This law, too, extends to every act,—tracks us to our bed-chamber, goes with us to our house of prayer, and if it discovers so much as the least sign of wavering from the strict path of integrity, it condemns us. When we think of the law of God we may well be overwhelmed with horror, and sit down and say, "God be merciful to me, for to keep this law is utterly beyond power; even to know the fullness of its meaning is not within finite capacity. Therefore great God cleanse us from our secret faults—save us by thy grace, for by the law we never can be saved."

Nor yet, even if you should know these two things, should you be able to answer this question; for, to comprehend our own errors, we must be able to understand *the perfection of God*. To get a full idea of how black sin is, you must know how bright God is. We see things by contrast. You will at one time have pointed out to you a color which appears perfectly white; yet it is possible for something to be whiter still; and when you think you have arrived at the very perfection of whiteness, you discover that there is still a shade, and that something may be found that is blanched to a higher state of purity. When we put ourselves in comparison with the apostles, we discover that we are not what we should be; but if we could bring ourselves side by side with the purity of God, O what spots! what defilements should we find on our surface! while the Immaculate God stands before us as the bright back-ground to set out the blackness of our iniquitous souls. Ere thou canst know thine own defilement those eyes must look into the unutterable glory of the divine character. Him

before whom the heavens are not pure—who chargeth the angels with folly—thou must know him before thou canst know thyself. Hope not, then, that thou shalt ever attain to a perfect knowledge of the depths of thine own sin.

Again: he that would understand his errors in all their heinousness must know the mystery of *hell*. We must walk that burning marl, stand in the midst of the blazing flame; nay, feel it. We must feel the venom of destruction as it makes the blood boil in each vein. We must find our nerves converted into fiery roads, along which the hot feet of pain shall travel, hurrying with lightning pace. We must know the extent of eternity, and then the unutterable agony of that eternal wrath of God which abides on the souls of the lost, before we can know the awful character of sin. You may best measure the sin by the punishment. Depend upon it, God will not put his creatures to a single pang more pain than justice absolutely demands. There is no such thing as sovereign torture or sovereign hell. God does not stretch his creature on the rack like a tyrant; he will give him but what he deserves, and, perhaps, even when God's wrath is fiercest against sin, he does not punish the sinner so much as his sin might warrant, but only as much as it demands. At any rate, there will not be a grain more of wormwood in the cup of the lost than naked justice absolutely requires. Then, O my God! if thy creatures are to be cast into a lake that burneth with fire and brimstone—if into a pit that is bottomless lost souls must be driven, then what a hideous thing sin must be. I cannot understand that torture, therefore I cannot understand the guilt that deserves it. Yet am I conscious that my guilt deserves it, or else God would not have threatened me with it, for he is just and I am unjust; he is holy and righteous, and good, and he would not punish me more for my sin than my sin absolutely required.

Yet once more—a last endeavor to impress this question of my text upon our hearts. George Herbert saith very sweetly:—“He that would know sin let him repair to Olivet, and he shall see a man so wrung with pain that all his head, his hair, his garments bloody be. Sin was that press and vice which forced pain to hunt its cruel food through every vein.” You must see Christ sweating as it were great drops of blood; you must have a vision of him with the spittle running down his cheeks, with his back torn by the accursed whip; you must see him going on his dolorous journey through Jerusalem; you must behold him fainting under the weight of the cross; you must see him as the nails are driven through his hands and through his feet; your tearful eye must watch the throes of the grim agonies of death; you must drink of the bitterness of wormwood mingled with the gall; you must stand in the thick darkness with your own soul exceeding sorrowful even unto death; you must cry yourself that awful earth-startling cry of “Lama sabachthani;” you too must, as he did, feel all that weighs of God's almighty wrath; you must be ground between the upper and nether millstones of wrath and vengeance; you must drink of the cup to its last dregs, and like Jesus cry—“It is finished;” or else you can never know all your errors, and understand the guilt of your sin. But this is clearly impossible and undesirable. Who wishes to suffer as the Savior

suffered, all the horrors which he endured? He, blessed be his name, has suffered for us. The cup is emptied now. The cross stands up no longer for us to die thereon. Quenched is the flame of hell for every true believer. Now no more is God angry with his people, for *he* has put away sin through the sacrifice of himself. Yet I say it again, before we could know sin we must know the whole of that awful wrath of God which Jesus Christ endured. Who, then, can understand his errors?

III. I hope to have your patient attention but a few moments longer while I make THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION, by touching upon the lessons which are drawn from such a subject as this.

The first lesson is—Behold then the folly of all hope of salvation by our own righteousness. Come hither, ye that trust in yourselves. Look to Sinai, altogether in a smoke, and tremble and despair. You say that you have good works. Alas your *good* works are evil, but have you no *evil* ones? Do you deny that you have ever sinned? Ah! my hearer, art thou so besotted as to declare that thy thoughts have all been chaste, thy desires all heavenly, and thine actions all pure? Oh, man, it all this were true, if thou hadst no sins of commission, yet, what about thy sins of omission? Hast thou done all that God and that thy brother could require of thee? Oh these sins of omission! The hungry that you have not fed, the naked that you have not clothed, the sick ones, and those that are in prison that you have not visited—remember it was for sins like these that the goats were found at the left hand at last. Not for what they did do, but for what they did not do—the things they left undone, these men were put into the lake of fire. Oh, my hearer, have done with thy boasting; pull out those plumes from thine helmet thou rebellious one, and come with thy glory dragging in the mire, and with thy bright garment stained, and now confess that thou hast no righteousness of thine own—that thou art all unclean, and full of sin.

If but this one practical lesson were learned, it were sufficient to repay this morning's gathering, and a blessing would be conveyed to every spirit that had learned it. But now we come to another—*how vain are all hopes of salvation by our feelings*. We have a new legalism to fight with in our Christian churches. There are men and women who think they must not believe on Christ till they feel their sins up to a most agonizing point. They think they must feel a certain degree of sorrow, a high degree of sense of need before they may come to Christ at all. Ah! soul, if thou art never saved till thou knowest all thy guilt, thou wilt never be saved, for thou canst never know it. I have shown thee the utter impossibility of thy ever being able to discover the whole heights and depths of thine own lost state. Man, don't try to be saved by thy feelings. Come and take Christ just as he is, and come to him just as thou art. "But, Sir, *may I come?* I am not invited to come." Yes you are, "Whosoever will, let him come." Don't believe that the invitations of the gospel are given only to characters; they are, some of them, unlimited invitations. It is the duty of every man to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is every man's solemn duty to trust Christ, not because of anything

that man is, or is not, but because he is commanded to do it. "This is the command of God, that ye believe on Jesus Christ whom he has sent."

"O, believe the promise true,
God to you his Son has given."

Trust now in his precious blood, you are saved, and you shall see his face in heaven. Despair of being saved by feeling, since perfect feelings are impossible and a perfect knowledge of our own guilt is quite beyond our reach. Come, then to Christ, hard-hearted as thou art, and take him to be the Savior of thy hard heart. Come, poor stony conscience, poor icy soul, come as thou art; he will warm thee, he will melt thee.

"True belief, and true repentance,
Every grace that brings us nigh;
Without money,
Come to Jesus Christ and buy."

But again. Another sweet inference—and surely this might well be the last—is this: what grace is this which pardons sin?—sin so great that the most enlarged capacity cannot comprehend its heinousness. Oh! I know my sins reach from the east even to the west—that aiming at the eternal skies they rise like pointed mountains towards hearer. But then, blessed be the name of God, the blood of Christ is wider than my sin. That shoreless flood of Jesus' merit is deeper than the heights of mine iniquities. My sin may be great, but his merit is greater still I cannot conceive my own guilt, much less express it, but the blood of Jesus Christ, God's dear Son, cleanseth us from all sin. Infinite guilt, but infinite pardon. Boundless iniquities, but boundless merits to cover all. What if thy sins were greater than heaven's breadth, yet Christ is greater than heaven. The heaven of heavens cannot contain him. If thy sins were deeper than the bottomless hell, yet Christ's atonement is deeper still, for he descended deeper than ever man himself as yet hath dived—even damned men in all the horror of their agony, for Christ went to the end of punishment, and deeper thy sins can never plunge. Oh! boundless love, that covers all my faults. My poor hearer, believe on Christ now. God help thee to believe. May the Spirit now enable thee to trust in Jesus. Thou canst not save thyself. All hopes of self-salvation are delusive. Now give up, have done with self, and take Christ. Just as thou art, drop into his arms. He will take thee; he will save thee. He died to do it, and he lives to accomplish it. He will not lose the spirit that casts itself into his hands and makes him his all in all.

I think I must not detain you longer. The subject is one which might command far larger mind than mine, and better words than I can gather now, but if it has struck home I am thankful to God. Let me echo again and again the one sentiment I wish for all to receive, which is just this. We are so vile that our vileness is beyond our own comprehension, but nevertheless, the blood of Christ hath infinite efficacy, and he that believeth in the Lord Jesus

is saved, be his sins ever so many, but he that believeth not must be lost, be his sins never so few.

God bless you all for Christ's sake.