

FORMED FOR MERCY

A SERMON

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“That they may receive forgiveness of sins.” Acts 26:18

IF we wish to be cast out not only by the profane, but by the empty professing world, there is no more effectual way of acquiring that honor than abiding fast by the mercy of God. The enemy well knows that nothing but mercy can suit the sinner's case in reality; therefore, he stirs up the minds of men not so much against the name of merry, but against that real, new covenant, true and eternal mercy of God by which alone we can be saved. There was not anything that brought more reproach from the carnal mind upon the Savior than his kindness and his mercy. Hence, they said to the disciples, “Why does your Mater eat with Publicans and sinners?” and you see what the Savior's answer was: “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go you and learn what that means, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice; for I am not come to call the righteous.” I am not come to call any man because he is righteous, for though a great many are righteous in their own eyes, the word of God bears testimony that “there is none righteous” “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” And hence you will generally find the Pharisaic world always quibbling about some little thing or another. Thus when the disciples plucked the ears of corn, “Why do your disciples do that which it is not lawful to do on the Sabbath day?” and the Savior then shows that whatever the necessities of the Lord's people are, those necessities must be met; and if there is a law that stands in the way of those necessities being met, that law must be set aside in order to meet their necessities. “Have you not read so much as this, what David did when himself was hunger, and they which were with him; how he went into the house of God, and did take and eat the shewbread, and gave also to them that were with him; which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests alone?” But then David and those with him were driven out for God's truth's sake: and they were in necessity, and so the ceremonial law must be laid aside and give way to their necessity. And then said the Savior, “If you had known what that means, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless.” So then, if we intend to get any good for our own souls, and to be of any use to others, if we intend or desire to glorify God, we must abide by the gospel of his eternal mercy; and the more we do so the better. You know if the Jews should be saved, it is to be through the mercy which is obtained by the Gentiles; they are to obtain mercy through our mercy, and “mercy rejoices against judgment.” And I will know that where this mercy is received it makes the man thoroughly willing in his own heart and soul, he goes on to serve the Lord. I would not give much for that servant that will work only when his

master's eye is upon him, or when he is under the lash; I would give but little for that religion that depends upon eternal force to make a man walk in the ways of the Lord. It is very different with those that are born of God. I read of the sheep of Christ that he puts them forth, and they follow him; that they know his voice, and that he gives unto them eternal life. In the 136th Psalm we are assured twenty-six times, in twenty-six verses, that the mercy of the Lord endures forever; it is all mercy from first to last; not mercy without the consideration, of course, of justice and law. God has so ordered matters that mercy rejoices against judgment; that mercy and truth have met together, in Christ; righteousness and peace embraced each other. Increasingly do I prize, and I hope you will too, the liberty of reading the Bible for yourselves, and judging for yourselves; for you will get very little elsewhere. We are all veering off into Pharisaism; it is all the doings of the creature, very little of the doings of the Lord. But still there must be a people that shall be of a different spirit, because there is a promise that "they shall abundantly utter the memory of your great goodness, and shall speak of your mighty acts."

I notice, in the first place, *personal preparation to receive the forgiveness of sins*. Secondly, *the nature of that forgiveness of sins*. Thirdly, as far as time permits, *some of the happy consequences of this forgiveness of sins*.

First, personal preparation to receive the forgiveness of sins. There is not a man under the canopy of heaven that is prepared for the reception of the forgiveness of sins, that forgiveness which the Lord bestows, but those whom the Lord prepares. We will take the apostle's words in the preceding part of the verse, together with some other scriptures, and see whether we are prepared to receive the forgiveness of sins. It is said concerning the lame man that he had faith "to be healed;" he was prepared to receive the blessing; there were many others there that were diseased like this man, but they were not prepared, they had not faith to be healed. And so, if you have not the faith of assurance that you are forgiven, if you have faith to receive the forgiveness, you are prepared. But let us look closely into this preparation. Now the apostle said that he was sent to the Gentiles "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins." Here is a threefold description of a preparation for the forgiveness of sins. First, to open their eyes. Shall I make use of the apostle Paul to instruct us in this matter? When he was spiritually blind, he saw not what a vile nature his was; he saw not nor felt what a desperately wicked and deceitful heart he had. He looked, at his ceremonies, at his Jewish extraction, and at his doings, as something like a covering for everything that was wrong. But when God set in by the power and majesty of his eternal law, and showed to Saul that all these righteousness's which he counted so much of, were but filthy rags, and which the apostle afterwards accounted dung, oh, what a different estimation that from what he put upon his own doings before his eyes were opened. And when his eyes were opened to see that the law entered into the thoughts and qualities of the heart, he said, "it wrought in me", not, of course, infused into him, but brought to light what there was in him, "all manner of concupiscence." His eyes were opened, and now he saw that he had nothing but sin to call his own, he stood before God as a sinner, he had nothing external, internal, original, or in prospect, but sin. If I live, I must sin; for it is utterly impossible for the natural man to live any other life than a life of sin. If the natural man reforms, and become as admirable in the eyes of men as an angel of light, nevertheless unconvinced of his condition, there is a pride and Pharisaism about him that makes that life which before men appears so admirable, nothing but sin before God. Therefore, it is a fact, that we have nothing but sin to call our own. And when a man's eyes are opened to see this, that is one step towards

preparation to receive the forgiveness of sins. Ah, happy the man that has got thus far, to test himself by the pure law of God, and to say from experience what the apostle said (and if you cannot say it from your own personal experience, then there is something lacking in your religion). "The law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin." Where there is this feeling, then when that hymn is given out your heart will go out with it, concerning coming to Christ,

"Nothing but sin I you can give,
Nothing but love shall I receive."

This enlightenment, then, by the Holy Spirit, is one step towards preparation for the forgiveness of sins. We cannot deceive the great Creator; he knows, when we profess to sigh after forgiveness, whether we are convinced of our depraved, sinful, and wretched condition or not; he knows whether we see and feel that as sinners we are poor, and blind, and wretched, and miserable; we cannot deceive him. He will make those of whom he is the teacher honest in this matter; and this is one part of the honesty of the man that is taught of God, to confess before God what he is. But not only to open their eyes to see their sad condition, there is something besides this, "to turn them from darkness to light;" because many have acquired just light enough to hate God's truth. Now, just notice the apostle's words, they are worthy of your prayerful and most solemn attention, to open their eyes first, and show them what they are; and then to show that there is life in the soul, "to turn them from darkness to light." What is the light to which the soul, if born of God, is sooner or later turned? Jesus Christ is that light. How does he become the light? By his being the end of darkness. Sin is our darkness, and Christ is the end of sin. Also, the law of God is shown at Sinai as a scene of darkness, and Jesus Christ is the end of that law for righteousness to everyone that believes. Jesus Christ is the end of death, and the end of Satan's power. This is the light to which the soul is turned. But this is not all, there is something else comes to light, that the people for whom Christ died were blessed with all spiritual blessings in him before the world was. And the man that is taught of God does not run away from this light. If your light is not real, some of these truths will offend you, election for instance; God's sovereignty in choosing and blessing a people with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ before the world was will become offensive, and you will run away; whereas, if the light is real, if the soul is born of God, you will lean more and more to it; you will say, it is not for a poor blind creature of a day like me to begin to question the prerogatives, the sovereignty, and the lofty perfections of my Maker; I am not to instruct him, but he is to instruct me. And light will come, one ray after another, until the whole plan of eternal salvation will be unfolded to you; and thus not only will your eyes be opened, but you will be turned from darkness to light; from everything contrary to God's truth, you will be turned to God's truth. There are plenty of professors that, like the moles, and bats, and owls, have just visual power enough to hate the light and avoid it; there are plenty of professors that hate God's truth; they have just light enough to hate and despise it; and they rejoice to see those who hold it, in some way or other cast out as evil. This has been the case in all ages, and will be the case. Whereas if you are taught of God there will be not only this enlightenment, but turning from darkness to light. And then look at the next phrase, "and from the power of Satan unto God." As you are aware, the word "Satan" signifies *an adversary*; and it is the business of this adversary to keep up in our minds an aversion to God's way of saving a sinner, But when the eyes are thus opened, and the sinner thus turned from darkness to the light of God's salvation and eternal truth, then the adversary is resisted. Satan can no longer hold such a one back. Let me give an instance or two of this from the word of God. take Joshua: you see he was prepared for the forgiveness of sins. There he stood before the

Lord, clothed with filthy garments; he felt and saw what a poor creature he was. You see that he was enlightened, you see that he was turned from darkness to light, that he was turned to the messenger of the everlasting covenant; and from the power of Satan; Joshua was delivered from the power of Satan before Satan was put under his feet. I consider that Joshua was delivered from the power of Satan even while Satan stood at his right hand to resist him; for while Satan stood there, he could not get Joshua away from the angel of the covenant, he could not get him away from where there was hope for a poor sinner. Then presently in comes the Lord, as you know; the Lord had thus prepared Joshua to receive this forgiveness of sin, therefore the Lord stepped in, put Satan under his feet, and ministered the mercy for which he had prepared him. Just so with Isaiah, the Lord showed him what he was as a sinner, made him feel what he was as a sinner, turned him from darkness to the light of God's eternal truth, and thus prepared him to receive forgiveness of sins. So, it was with the Publican, so it was with the thief on the cross; so, it was with numbers on the day of Pentecost, they were all prepared to receive the forgiveness of sins. So, it was with the poor palsied man; in what way he came into such affliction it is not for me to say; perhaps by profligacy, us many do in our day. How many young people are there in our day that are left to profligacy, and especially that of drink, which includes everything that is bad; their constitution is gone, and they bring themselves down into wretchedness. And for all I know, this man might have done the same. He was palsied. And he seemed to have no faith; he saw himself such a sinner that he seemed to have no confidence. But those who knew the Savior, and the mercy and ability of the Savior, they, as you are aware, four of them took the man up, and brought him to Christ; and though they had to take off a part of the roof of the house, and let the man down into the room where the Savior was, their faith did not fail. But the palsied man seems to have had no faith; you may almost imagine him saying, it's no use, there never was a sinner like me pardoned yet, and there never will be. I have brought myself into all this physical and mental agony by my own profligacy; and there never was a wretch like me saved, and never will be. He didn't seem to have a grain of faith. But "when Jesus saw their faith" not the poor man's faith, for he saw that he had none: but they had faith; and so, we who know the Savior, we have unbounded faith in his ability. Bless the Lord! I am never afraid of meeting a case too bad for him; when Jesus saw their faith, he said unto this poor man, for the man was well prepared for the message of mercy, he was well prepared for the forgiveness of sins, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." And when the Pharisees murmured at this mercy of the Lord, well, the Savior said, I will heal his body as well, "Take up your bed and walk." And so, the man was made both happy in his soul and healthy in his body; went off a new man in body and soul; and of course, he would go on all his days in body and soul glorifying a God of such mercy as this. Thus then, "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God;" without this they are not prepared to receive the forgiveness of sins. Hence it was the poor woman you read of, whom people have erroneously thought to be Mary Magdalene, which it certainly was not, because Mary Magdalene was altogether differently situated, I refer now to the woman in Simon's house; she was conscious of her state, she was well prepared to receive forgiveness of sins, and she had received that forgiveness before she went into Simon's house; it was the love of Christ which she felt in her soul that constrained her to go to the house where he was, and to wash his feet with her tears, to wipe them with the hairs of her head, and to anoint them with costly ointment. And when Simon the Pharisee questioned the propriety of the Savior's conduct, he renewed to her the assurance of forgiveness. "I say unto you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven her; and he said unto her, Your faith has saved you, go in peace." Ah! then it is the work of grace to prepare the soul to receive the forgiveness of sins. I cannot but just stop here for one moment to express, what shall I say? my

lamentation over our state by nature. Here we are, guilty, but utterly unconscious of the depth of our guilt; depraved, but utterly unconscious of the depth of that depravity; here we are, infinitely loathsome to divine purity and integrity, and God's eternal law, but seeking, if we seek at all, in a thousand wrong ways, to make ourselves pleasing to God and accepted of him. So, we live, and so we should die and be lost, but for that almighty mercy that interposed, opened our eyes, turned us from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. And I may just say that those who are thus brought into the light that shows them their real condition, and God's salvation and eternal mercy, such persons are prepared for heaven. If such persons were to die before they realized forgiveness, they would not be lost; for you know what is written, and a beautiful scripture it is, in the 1st of Colossians; I do not know that I ever so saw the beauty of the words as I did this morning, on looking at them in connection with our subject; where the apostle said, "Giving thanks unto the Father" why the apostle would not say that unless there were something solid, important, and valuable, "which has made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light." Then the question arises, how has he done this? Why, he "has delivered us from the power of darkness," as explained by the apostle to be in another place, "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine in unto them; but God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus;" and God's glory is eternal salvation; the eternal salvation of our souls is that which, above all other things, God glories in; there is not anything, no, not the creation, nor the whole of providence, that God has so much glory in as he has in the eternal salvation of our souls. We see this in the found piece of silver, we see it in the lost sheep found, we see it in the prodigal, and in all those that are saved. "Who has delivered us from the power of darkness, and has translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins." Here is the preparation then. How true it is that "the preparation of the heart in man," as well as "the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord." Is not this encouraging to some of us that experience a great deal of discouragement? If we have not yet realized forgiveness of sins, yet the Lord has brought us not only to know our need of it, but has reconciled us to the way in which it must come, it must come by faith in Jesus Christ, by the grout and eternal mercy of God, by his good pleasure; and if he has thus shown us our need, reconciled us to the way in which that mercy shall come, such never were lost, and never will be, I do not wonder at David tracing this matter out as he does; and I feel irresistibly tempted to say a few words upon that psalm, because it carries out our subject so nicely, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven." Ah I yes, if sin is not forgiven, it matters not what blessings you have; you may have health, and property, and friends, and a thousand things; but then, if you are an unforgiven sinner, and are still in the bond of iniquity and in the gall of bitterness, what are all these things? See how soon they are gone; what mere shadows they are. What is your life? It is but a vapor, that appears a little while, and then vanishes away. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven; whose sin is covered;" what a sweet scripture that is; "whose sin is covered." Christ has thrown his mediatorial work over all the sins of the people; so that those who are thus forgiven, their sins are never to be brought to light at the last great day; they may be sought for, but they shall not be found; for "I will pardon them whom I reserve." "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputes not iniquity, and in whose spirit, there is no guile." How was David himself prepared for this forgiveness? He tells us. He says, "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long." That is very strong similitude, that we are not in the habit of using, but of course the meaning is that he became in his own estimation a mere death

skeleton; “my bones waxed old;” all my strength was gone, and I felt I was all sin and sinfulness. And then notice something else: “For day and night your hand was heavy upon me.” Perhaps some of you may not know much of this, but it is a very solemn part of experience. “Day and night your hand was heavy upon me.” In what way? Like this: “Pay what you owe” Prepare to meet your God “Every idle word that man shall speak, he shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” He that offends in one point is guilty of the whole.” If you have run with the footmen and they have wearied you, how will you do in the swelling of Jordan?” Ah, when such scriptures as these press home upon the soul, they cut the sinner up root and branch; he is as miserable as any creature out of hell can be; as said the Psalmist in another place, “The sorrows of death compassed me about, the pains of hell got hold upon me.” “Day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my moisture is turned into the drought of summer;” meaning spiritually the same thing that is meant in the preceding verse, that all his creature comeliness, supposed strength, and goodness were all consumed, and he was left nothing, but, if I may so speak, a collection of ruins and wretchedness. This made the apostle say under the same experience, “O wretched man that I am.” Perhaps some of you will say, this is very doleful. Well, friends, but it prepares the heart; it prepares the soul to receive the great mercy, the great love, the great salvation, and the great provisions of the everlasting gospel of the blessed God. Now, said David, “in whose spirit there is no guile.” And where there is this experience, there will be no hypocrisy, no mere pretension. Such persons are in earnest with themselves, and in earnest with God. “For this shall every one that is godly pray unto you in a time when you may be found.” So then, if you have this preparation, and feel your need of this mercy, then there is the seed of life, you are born of an incorruptible seed, and you are called godly by the word before you can call yourself godly. You would not call yourself godly until you have received this heavenly forgiveness, and then you will rejoice that you will be reckoned among the godly, and not the ungodly. “For this shall every one that is godly pray unto you in a time when you may be found; surely in the floods of great waters they shall not come near unto him.” Just as a drowning world could not reach the ark when the flood came, so the lost world at the last great day can have no access to Christ. He will not come at the last day as a minister of mercy, as a minister of grace; that is, not as the gospel now comes, he shall then come as the Judge, to receive his own, and to pass the final and awful, yet, righteous sentence upon the others, “For this shall every one that is godly pray unto you in a time when you may be found.” Do you ask when that time is? Well, before you die; that is the time when he may be found; and if you have this preparation for this forgiveness, and are seeking him, he will be found; and if you do not find him until you come to die, well, then there is a promise to such that at evening time it shall be light. And that scripture in the 9th Psalm is a very important one, I do not know that I can mention it too often, because I know that many who are prepared, that is to say, that know their need of this mercy and this forgiveness, have not yet realized it; they go on faint in the ways of the Lord, and are sometimes exceedingly tempted to cast away what little confidence they have, and give it up altogether; but there is that beautiful scripture, “You Lord have not forsaken them that seek you.” We are apt sometimes to get almost out of patience with some of our brethren and sisters in the Lord, because they are such doubting ones, such fearful ones; we cannot see that they have any reason to doubt as they do, and we sometimes think we can by a little severity drive their doubts and fears away; but no, it is no use; and if we were to get out of patience and forsake them, the Lord will not forsake them; for “You, Lord, has not forsaken them that seek you.”

But I will hasten to the next part; *the nature of this forgiveness of sins*. First, it is the forgiveness of love. There can be no, what may be called, real forgiveness without love. We see a variety of

kinds of forgiveness among creatures. One says, Well, I will forgive you, but I will take care I will have no more to do with you. Now that is not the Lord's forgiveness. Another says, Well, I will forgive you this time; but mind this, if ever you do so again, I won't forgive you. Well, that is not the Lord's forgiveness. Another says, Well, I will forgive you, but I can't exactly forget it; well, that's not the Lord's forgiveness. We see these things among creatures, but it is not so with the Lord. His forgiveness is the forgiveness of intense, of endless, of infinite, of immutable love; so that you and I really cannot enter into the delight with which the Lord forgives. Why, he so loves the people, lay a fault to their charge, or leave one sin unforgiven! just look at Solomon's Song, and see what delight the Lord there expresses in constituting his people as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners. It is the forgiveness of love; and where that is, it is wonderful what it will do. Why, God the Father, that we might be forgiven, such was his wonderful plan, rather than our sins should not be forgiven, he gave his only begotten Son. This was love! not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. "As a father pities his children, so does the Lord pity them that fear him," and are thus brought to know their need of his forgiving mercy; "he knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass, as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting." Only think of it, how the father received the prodigal son. Why, the father wouldn't so much as mention one of his faults; the prodigal did say, "I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight;" but the father took no notice of it; the father had forgiven, and would forget it all. "I, even I, am he that blots out your transgressions, and will not remember your sins." It is the forgiveness, then, of intense and eternal love. Secondly, it is the forgiveness, shall I call it, of reconciliation; that is, it brings about reconciliation. As I just now hinted, you see among creatures, one will say, I will forgive you, but in future keep your distance. Well, perhaps, that is almost as good a forgiveness as you can expect from a creature; but not so with our God; it is the forgiveness of reconciliation; "reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." And how is it the forgiveness of reconciliation? Why, by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has obeyed the law, and there is nothing left to find fault with; he has suffered all the penalty of sin, put away sin by the sacrifice of himself; thus, he brings about reconciliation, God with us, having nothing against us. He hasn't our past sins against us, he hasn't our present sins against us, and he hasn't our future faults against us. "Who shall lay anything to the charge of Gods elect?" God is pleased, Christ is satisfied, prediction is fulfilled. the promises are fulfilled, and the language of the poor pardoned sinner is, "We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, even of your holy temple." It is then the forgiveness of love, the forgiveness of righteousness, because it is by the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ. "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake." If I am speaking to anyone ever so tried upon this, you really must not despair. Your sins are to be forgiven you for his name's sake. Now really will you adopt the position that Jesus Christ's name hasn't worthiness enough in it to take away your unworthiness? Will you hold that his atonement has not efficacy enough in it to atone for such sin as yours is? Will you hold that his righteousness has not glory enough in it to exempt you from such a condemnation as you deserve? and will you hold, while your sin has abounded, that his grace cannot much more abound? Ah, you may say, this is all very well, but that is not the point; I can receive all that, hold all that, but the point is, I can't think it is for me. But if you know your need of it, and are reconciled to God's way of ministering it, it is for you. If, however, you do not know your need of it, and are not reconciled to God a way of ministering it, I cannot say it is for you. What then? "Israel has not obtained that which he sought for; but the election has

obtained it, and the rest were blinded.” And how was it that Israel did not attain to the righteousness of the law, or how was it they did not attain unto this mercy and this forgiveness? Because they sought it not by faith, but by the works of the law. It is, then, the forgiveness of love, and the forgiveness of mediatorial righteousness: and I scarcely need say that this forgiveness, of course, is final. And what an infinite advantage and mercy this is for us, this forgiveness of sin. There is nothing without it. Cain thought to succeed without this forgiveness of sin; that is where his error was. Abel well knew he could not succeed without this forgiveness of sin, without this atonement for sin; therefore Abel, knowing his need, was reconciled to God’s way of mercy: but Cain was not reconciled to God’s way of mercy.

So, then, the great thing, after all, is to know our need of mercy, and to be reconciled to the way of mercy. The Savior cared not what men thought; eight woes he pronounced upon those religions that set his mercy aside. You pass over, he says, faith, judgment, and mercy, these weighty matters of the law of truth, and you are very punctilious in little things. There is only one remedy for error, the gospel; no human organization can do the slightest good; it must be the gospel. You know what the rule is in God’s word. that the Lord Jesus Christ shall consume the man of sin by the spirit of his mouth, and by the brightness of his coming. Now those who know their need of the forgiveness of sins, and are reconciled to the way of it, they receive that forgiveness in the testimony of it, abide by it. You, know there is forgiveness with God. then abide by the Lord. You know there is forgiveness in Christ, then abide by the Savior; you know there is forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, then abide by the gospel; and you know that forgiveness comes in the ways of the Lord, then abide in the ways of the Lord; and I am sure in thus abiding, you will not wait in vain; none ever did; for “the Lord has not said to the seed of Jacob, seek you me in vain.”

But some of the people of God are favored to receive the forgiveness of sins not only in the testimony of it, but in the sweet experience of it, the realization of it.