A SERMON FOR THE WORST MAN ON EARTH

NO. 1949

A SERMON
DELIVERED ON LORD'S-DAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 20, 1887
BY C. H. SPURGEON
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

"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

IT was the fault of the Pharisee that, though he went up into the temple to pray, he did not pray. There is no prayer in all that he said. It is one excellence of the publican that he went up to the temple to pray, and he did pray—there is nothing but prayer in all that he said. "God be merciful to me a sinner" is a pure, unadulterated prayer throughout.

It was the fault of the Pharisee that when he went up to the temple to pray, he forgot an essential part of prayer, which is confession of sin—he spoke as if he had no sins to confess, but many virtues to parade. It was a chief excellence in the devotion of the publican that he did confess his sin, ay, that his utterance was full of confession of sin. From beginning to end it was an acknowledgment of his guilt, and an appeal for grace to the merciful God.

The prayer of the publican is admirable for its fullness of meaning. An expositor calls it *a holy telegram*—and certainly it is so compact and so condensed, so free from superfluous words—that it is worthy to be called by that name. I do not see how he could have expressed his meaning more fully or more briefly. In the original Greek the words are even fewer than in the English. Oh, that men would learn to pray with less of language and more of meaning! What great things are packed away in this short petition! God, mercy, sin, the propitiation, and forgiveness.

He speaks of great matters, and trifles are not thought of. He has nothing to do with fasting twice in the week, or the paying of tithes, and such second-rate things. The matters he treats of are of a higher order. His trembling heart moves among sublimities which overcome him, and he speaks in tones consistent therewith.

He deals with the greatest things that ever can be—he pleads for his life, his soul. Where could he find themes more weighty, more vital to his eternal interests? He is not playing at prayer, but pleading in awful earnest.

His supplication speeded well with God, and he speedily won his suit with heaven. Mercy granted to him full justification. The prayer so pleased the Lord Jesus Christ, who heard it, that He condescended to become a portrait painter, and took a sketch of the petitioner. I say the prayer in itself was so pleasing to the gracious Savior that He tells us how it was offered—"Standing afar off, he would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast."

Luke, who, according to tradition, was somewhat of an artist as well as a physician, takes great care to place this picture in the national portrait gallery of men saved by sovereign grace. Here we have the portrait of a man who called himself *the* sinner, who may yet be held up as a pattern to saints. I am glad to have the divine sketch of this man, that I may see the bodily form of his devotion. I am gladder still to have his prayer, that we may look into the very soul of his pleading.

My heart's desire this morning is that many here may seek mercy of the Lord as this publican did—and go down to their houses justified. I ask no man to use the same words. Let no man attach a superstitious value to them. Alas, this prayer has been used flippantly, and foolishly, and almost looked upon as a sort of charm!

Some have said—"We may live as we like, for we have only to say, 'God be merciful to me,' when we are dying, and all will be well." This is a wicked misuse of Gospel truth. Yea, it turns it into a lie. If you choose thus to pervert the grace of the Gospel to your own destruction, your blood must be on your own heads. You may not have space given you in which to breathe out even this brief sentence, or if you have, the words may not come from your heart, and so you may die in your sins.

I pray you, do not thus presume upon the forbearance of God. But if with the publican's heart, we can take the publican's attitude, if with the publican's spirit we can use the publican's words, then there will follow a gracious acceptance, and we shall go home justified. If such is the case, there will be grand times today, for angels will rejoice over sinners reconciled to God, and made to know in their own souls the boundless mercy of the Lord.

In preaching upon the text, I shall endeavor to bring out its innermost spirit. May we be taught of the Spirit, so that we may learn four lessons from it!

I. The first is this—THE FACT OF SINNERSHIP IS NO REASON FOR DESPAIR.

You need none of you say, "I am guilty, and therefore I may not approach God. I am so greatly guilty that it would be too daring a thing for me to ask for mercy." Dismiss such thoughts at once. My text and a thousand other arguments forbid despair.

For, first, *this man who was a sinner yet dared to approach the Lord*. According to our version, he said, "God be merciful to me *a* sinner," but a more accurate rendering is that which the Revised Version puts in the margin—"*the* sinner." He meant to say that he was emphatically *the* sinner.

The Pharisee yonder was *the* saint of his age, but this publican who stood afar off from the holy place was *the* sinner. If there was not another sinner in the world, he was one—and in a world of sinners he was a prominent offender—the sinner of sinners. Emphatically he applies to himself the guilty name. He takes the chief place in condemnation, and yet he cries, "God be merciful to me *the* sinner."

Now if you know yourself to be a sinner, you may plead with God, but if you mourn that you are not only a sinner, but *the* sinner with the definite article—the sinner above all others—you may still hope in the mercy of the Lord. The worst, the most profane, the most horrible of sinners may venture, as this man did, to approach the God of mercy.

I know that it looks like a daring action—therefore you must do it by faith. On any other footing but that of faith in the mercy of God, you who are a sinner may not dare to approach the Lord lest you be found guilty of presumption. But with your eye on mercy, you may be bravely trustful. Believe in the great mercy of God, and though your sins be abundant, you will find that the Lord will abundantly pardon. Though they blot your character, the Lord will blot them out. Though they are red like crimson, yet the precious blood of Jesus will make you whiter than snow.

This story of the Pharisee and the publican is intended as an encouraging example to you. If this man who was *the* sinner found forgiveness, so also shall you if you seek it in the same way. One sinner has speeded so well—why should not you? Come and try for yourself, and see if the Lord does not prove in your case that His mercy endures forever.

Next, remember that you may not only find encouragement in looking at the sinner who sought his God, but in the God whom he sought. Sinner, *there is great mercy in the heart of God*. How often did that verse ring out as a chorus in the temple song—

"For His mercy shall endure
Ever faithful, ever sure!"

Mercy is a specially glorious attribute of JEHOVAH, the living God. He is "the LORD God, merciful and gracious." He is "slow to anger and plenteous in mercy." Do you not see how this should cheer you? Sinners are needful if mercy is to be indulged. How can the Lord display His mercy except to the guilty? Goodness is for creatures, but mercy is for sinners. Towards unfallen creatures there may be love, but there cannot be mercy.

Angels are not fit recipients of mercy. They do not require it, for they have not transgressed. Mercy comes into exercise after law has been broken, not till then. Among the attributes it is the last which found scope for itself. So to speak, it is the Benjamin, and the darling attribute of God—"He delighteth in mercy."

Only to a sinner can God be merciful. Do you hear this, you sinner? Be sure that you catch at it! If there is boundless mercy in the heart of God, and it can only exercise itself towards the guilty, then you are the man to have it, for you are a guilty one. Come, then, and let His mercy wrap you about like a garment this day, and cover all your shame. Does not God's delight in mercy prove that sinnership is no reason for despair?

Moreover, *the conception of salvation implies hope for sinners*. That salvation which we preach to you every day is glad tidings for the guilty. Salvation by grace implies that men are guilty. Salvation means not the reward of the righteous, but the cleansing of the unrighteous. Salvation is meant for the lost, the ruined, the undone, and the blessings which it brings of pardoning mercy and cleansing grace must be intended for the guilty and polluted.

"The whole need not a physician." The physician has his eye upon the sick. Alms are for the poor, bread is for the hungry, pardon is for the guilty. O you that are guilty, you are the men that mercy seeks after! You were in God's eye when He sent His Son into the world to save sinners. From the very first inception of redemption to the completion of it, the eyes of the great God were set on the guilty, and not on the deserving. The very name of Jesus tells us that He shall save His people from their sins.

Let me further say that inasmuch as that salvation of God is a great one, it must have been intended to meet great sins. O sirs, would Christ have shed the blood of His heart for some trifling, venial sins which your tears could wash away? Think you God would have given His dear Son to die as a mere superfluity? If sin had been a small matter, a little sacrifice would have sufficed.

Think you that the divine atonement was made only for small offenses? Did Jesus die for little sins, and leave the great ones unatoned for? No, the Lord God measured the greatness of our sin, and found it high as heaven, deep as hell, and broad as the infinite, and therefore He gave so great a Savior. He gave His only begotten Son, an infinite sacrifice, an immeasurable atonement.

With such throes and pangs of death as never can be fully described, the Lord Jesus poured out His soul in unknown sufferings that He might provide a great salvation for the greatest of sinners. See Jesus on the cross, and learn that all manner of sin and of blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men. The fact of salvation, and of a great salvation, ought to drive away the very notion of despair from every heart that hears of it.

Salvation, that is for me, for I am lost. A great salvation, that is for me, for I am the greatest of sinners. Oh, hear my word this day! It is God's word of love, and it rings out like a silver bell. O my beloved hearers, I weep over you, and yet I feel like singing all the time, for I am sent to proclaim salvation from the Lord for the very worst of you.

The Gospel is especially, definitely, and distinctly addressed to sinners. Listen to it—"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."

The Gospel is like a letter directed in a clear and legible hand—and if you will read its direction, you will find that it runs thus—"TO THE SINNER." O sinners, to you is the word of this salvation sent. If you are a sinner, you are the very man for whom the Gospel is intended, and I do not mean by this a merely complimentary nominal sinner, but an out-and-out rebel, a transgressor against God and man.

O sinner, seize upon the Gospel with joyful alacrity, and cry unto God for mercy at once!

"'Twas for* sinners *that He suffer'd
Agonies unspeakable;
Canst thou doubt thou art a sinner?

If thou canst—then hope, farewell.

"But, believing what is written—
'All are guilty'—'dead in sin,'
Looking to the Crucified One,
Hope shall rise thy soul within."

If you will think of it again, there must be hope for sinners, for *the great commands of the Gospel are most suitable to sinners*. Hear, for instance, this word,—"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). Who can repent but the guilty? Who can be converted but those who are on the wrong track, and therefore need to be turned?

The following text is evidently addressed to those who are good for nothing—"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." The very word "repent" indicates that it is addressed to those who have sinned—let it beckon you to mercy.

Then you are bidden to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, salvation by faith must be for guilty men, for the way of life for the innocent is by perseverance in good works. The law says, "This do, and live." The Gospel talks of salvation by believing, because it is the only way possible for those who have broken the law, and are condemned by it.

Salvation is of faith that it might be by grace. Believe and live! Believe and live! Believe and live! This is the jubilee note of the trumpet of free grace. Oh, that you would know the joyful sound, and thus be blessed! Oh, that you that are sinful would hear the call as addressed to you in particular! You are up to your necks in the mire of sin, but a mighty hand is stretched out to deliver you. "Repent ye, and believe the gospel."

If you want any other argument—and I hope you do not—I would put it thus—*great sinners have been saved*. All sorts of sinners are being saved today. What wonders some of us have seen! What wonders have been wrought in this Tabernacle!

A man was heard at a prayer meeting pleading in louder tones than usual. He was a sailor, and his voice was pitched to the tune of the roaring billows. A lady whispered to her friend, "Is that Captain F….?" "Yes" said the other, "why do you ask?" "Because," said she, "the last time I heard that voice, its swearing made my blood run cold. The man's oaths were terrible beyond measure. Can it be the same man?"

Someone observed, "Go and ask him." The lady timidly said, "Are you the same Captain F____ that I heard swearing in the street, outside my house?" "Well," he said, "I am the same person, and yet, thank God, I am not the same!" O brethren, such were some of us, but we are washed, but we are sanctified! Wonders of grace to God belong.

I was reading the other day a story of an old shepherd who had never attended a place of worship. But when he had grown grey, and was near to die, he was drawn by curiosity into the Methodist chapel, and all was new to him. Hard-hearted old fellow as he was, he was noticed to shed tears during the sermon. He had obtained a glimpse of hope.

He saw that there was mercy even for him. He laid hold on eternal life at once. The surprise was great when he was seen at the chapel, and greater still when, on the Monday night, he was seen at the prayer meeting—yes, and heard at the prayer meeting, for he fell down on his knees and praised God that he had found mercy.

Do you wonder that the Methodists shouted, "Bless the Lord"? Wherever Christ is preached, the most wicked of men and women are made to sit at the Savior's feet, "clothed, and in their right minds." My hearer, why should it not be so with you? At any rate, we have full proof of the fact that sinnership is no reason for despair.

II. I must now advance to my second observation—A SENSE OF SINNERSHIP CONFERS NO RIGHT TO MERCY.

You will wonder why I mention this self-evident truth, but I must mention it because of a common error which does great mischief. This man was very sensible of his sin insomuch that he called himself THE SINNER. But he did not urge his sense of sin as any reason why he should find mercy. There is an ingenuity in the heart of man, nothing less than devilish, by which he will, if he can, turn the Gospel itself into a yoke of bondage.

If we preach to sinners that they may come to Christ in all their anguish and misery, one cries—"I do not feel myself to be a sinner as I ought to feel it. I have not felt those convictions of which you speak, and therefore, I cannot come to Jesus." This is a horrible twist of our meaning. We never meant to insinuate that convictions and doubts and despondencies conferred upon men a claim to mercy, and were necessary preparations for grace. I want you, therefore, to learn that a sense of sin gives no man a right to grace.

If a deep sense of sin entitled men to mercy, *it would be a turning of this parable upside down*. Do you dream that this publican was, after all, a Pharisee differently dressed? Do you imagine that he really meant to plead, "God be merciful to me because I am humble and lowly"? Did he say in his heart, "Lord, have mercy upon me because I am not a Pharisee, and am deeply despondent on account of my evil ways"? This would prove that he was in his heart of hearts a Pharisee.

If you make a righteousness out of your feelings, you are just as much out of the true way as if you made a righteousness out of your works. Whether it be work or feeling, anything which is relied upon as a claim for grace is an antichrist. You are no more to be saved because of your conscious miseries than because of your conscious merits. There is no virtue either in the one or in the other. If you make a Savior of convictions, you will be lost as surely as if you made a Savior out of ceremonies. The publican trusted in divine mercy, and not in his own convictions, and you must do the same.

To imagine that an awful sense of sin constituted a claim upon mercy would be *like giving a premium to great sin*. Certain seekers think, "I have never been a drunkard, or a swearer, or unchaste, and I almost wish I had been, that I might feel myself to be the chief of sinners, and so might come to Jesus."

Do not wish anything so atrocious. There is no good in sin in any shape or fashion. Thank God if you have been kept from the grosser forms of vice. Do not imagine that repentance is easier when sin is grosser—the reverse is true. Do believe that there is no advantage in having been a horrible offender. You have sins enough—to be worse would not be better. If good works do not help you, certainly bad works would not.

You that have been moral and excellent should cry for mercy, and not be so silly as to dream that greater sins would help you to readier repentance. Come as you are, and if your heart is hard, confess it as one of your greatest sins. A deeper sense of sin would not entitle you to the mercy of God—you can have no title to mercy but that which mercy gives you. Could your tears flow forever, could your grief know no respite, you would have no claim upon the sovereign grace of God, who will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

Then, dear friends, remember, if we begin to preach to sinners that they must have a certain sense of sin, and a certain measure of conviction, *such teaching would turn the sinner away from God in Christ to himself*. The man begins at once to say, "Have I a broken heart? Do I feel the burden of sin?" This is only another form of looking to self.

Man must not look to himself to find reasons for God's grace. The remedy does not lie in the seat of the disease—it lies in the Physician's hand. A sense of sin is not a claim, but a gift of that blessed Savior who is exalted on high to give repentance and remission of sins. Beware of any teaching which makes you look to yourself for help, but cling to that doctrine which makes you look only to Christ.

Whether you know it or not, you are a lost, ruined sinner, only fit to be cast into the flames of hell forever. Confess this, but do not ask to be driven mad by a sense of it. Come to Jesus just as you are, and do not wait for a preparation made out of your own miseries. Look to Jesus, and to Him alone.

If we fall into the notion that a certain sense of sin has a claim upon God, *we shall be putting salvation upon other grounds than that of faith*—and that must be a false ground. Now, the ground of salvation is—"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

A simple faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the way of salvation. But to say, "I shall be saved because I am horribly convicted of sin, and driven to desperation," is not to speak like the Gospel, but to rave out of the pride of an unbelieving heart. The Gospel is that you believe in Christ Jesus, that you get right out of yourself, and depend alone in Him.

Do you say, "I feel so guilty"? You are certainly guilty, whether you feel it or not. And you are far more guilty than you have any idea of. Come to Christ because you are guilty, not because you have been prepared to come by looking at your guilt. Trust nothing of your own, not even your sense of need. A man may have a sense of disease a long time before he will get healing out of it.

The looking-glass of conviction reveals the spots on our face, but it cannot wash them away. You cannot fill your hands by putting them into your empty pocket, and feeling how empty it is. It would be far wiser to hold them out, and receive the gold which your friend so freely gives you. "God be merciful to me a sinner" is the right way to put it, but not, "God be merciful to me because I sufficiently feel my sinnership, and most fittingly bewail it."

III. My third observation is this—THE KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR SINNERSHIP GUIDES MEN TO RIGHT ACTION.

When a man has learned of the Holy Spirit that he is a sinner, then by a kind of instinct of the new life, he does the right thing in the right way. This publican had not often been to the temple, and had not learned the orthodox way of behaving. It is easy to learn how we all do it nowadays in our temples—take off your hat, hold it in front of your face, and read the maker's name and address.

Then sit down and at the proper moment, bend forward and cover your eyes, and furthermore, stand up when the rest of the congregation do so. People get to do this just as if they were wound up by machinery—yet they do not pray when they are supposed to be praying, nor bow before the Lord when worship is being offered.

This publican is out of rank. He does not follow the rubric. He has gestures of his own. First, instead of coming forward, he stands afar off. He does not dare to come where that most respectable person, the Pharisee, is displaying himself, for he does not feel worthy. He leaves space between himself and God, an opening for a Mediator, room for an Advocate, place for an Intercessor to interpose between himself and the throne of the Most High.

Wise man thus to stand afar off. For by this means he could safely draw near in the person of Jesus. Furthermore, he would not lift so much as his eyes to heaven. It seems natural to lift up your hands in prayer, but he would not even lift his eyes. The uplifting of the eyes is very proper, is it not? But it was still more proper for "the sinner" not to lift his eyes. His downcast eyes meant much.

Our Lord does not say that he could not lift up his eyes, but he *would* not. He could look up, for he did in spirit look up as he cried, "God be merciful to me." But he would not because it seemed indecorous for eyes like his to peer into the heaven where dwells the holy God.

In the meanwhile, the penitent publican kept smiting upon his breast. The original does not say that he smote upon his breast once, but he smote and smote again. It was a continuous act. He seemed to say—"Oh, this wicked heart!" He would smite it. Again and again he expressed his intense grief by this Oriental gesture, for he did not know how else to set forth his sorrow.

His heart had sinned, and he smote it. His eyes had led him astray, and he made them look down to the earth. And as he himself had sinned by living far off from God, he banished himself far from the manifest Presence.

Every gesture and posture is significant, and yet all came spontaneously. He had no book of directions how to behave himself in the house of God—his sincerity guided him. If you want to know

how to behave yourselves as penitents, be penitents. The best rubrics of worship are those which are written on broken hearts.

I have heard of a minister who was said to cry in the wrong place in his sermons—and it was found afterwards that he had written in the margin of his manuscript, "Weep here." His audience could not see the reason for his artificial moisture. It must have had a ludicrous effect. In religion everything artificial is ridiculous, or worse.

But grace in the heart is the best "master of the ceremonies." He who prays aright with his heart will not much err with foot, and hand, or head. If you would know how to approach God, confess yourself a sinner, and so take your true place before the God of truth—throw yourself on divine mercy, and thus place God in His true position as your Judge and Lord.

Observe that this man, even under the weight of conscious sin, was led aright, for *he went straight away to God*. A sense of sin without faith drives us from God, but a sense of sin with faith draws us immediately to God. He came to God alone. He felt that it would be of no avail to confess his fault to a mortal, or to look for absolution from a man.

He did not resort to the priest of the temple, but to the God of the temple. He did not ask to speak to the good and learned man, the Pharisee, who stood on the same floor with him. His inquiry room was the secret of his own soul, and he inquired of the Lord. He ran straight away to God, who alone was able to help.

And when he opened his mouth, it was, "God be merciful to me a sinner." That is what you have to do, my dear hearer, if you would be saved—you must go distinctly and immediately to God in Christ Jesus. Forget all things else, and say, with the returning prodigal, "I will arise and go to my father." None but God can help us out of our low estate. No mercy but the mercy of God can serve our turn, and none can give us *that* mercy but the God of mercy. Let every broken-down sinner come to his God, against whom he has offended.

The publican did not look round on his fellow worshippers—he was too much absorbed in his own grief of heart. Specially is it noteworthy that he had no remarks to make upon the Pharisee. He did not denounce the pride, or the hypocrisy, or the hard-heartedness of the professor who so offensively looked down upon him. He did not return contempt for contempt, as we are all too apt to do.

No, he dealt with the Lord alone in the deep sincerity of his own heart—and it was well. My hearer, when will you do the same? When will you cease to censure others, and reserve your severity for yourself, your critical observations for your own conduct?

When he came to God, it was *with a full confession of sin*—"God be merciful to me a sinner." His very eyes and hands joined with his lips in acknowledging his iniquities. His prayer was wet with the dews of repentance. He poured out his heart before God in the most free and artless manner—his prayer came from the same fountain as that of the prodigal when he said, "Father, I have sinned," and that of David when he cried, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight." That is the best praying which comes from the lowliest heart.

Then he appealed to mercy only. This was wise. See how rightly he was guided. What had he to do with justice, since it could only condemn and destroy him? Like a naked sword, it threatens to sheathe itself in my heart—how can I appeal to justice? Neither power nor wisdom, nor any other quality of the great God could be resorted to—only mercy stretched out her wing. The prayer, "God be merciful," is the only prayer that you can pray who have been greatly guilty. If all your lives you have spurned your Savior, all you can now do is to cast yourselves upon the mercy of God.

The original Greek permits us to see that this man had an eye to the propitiation. I do not say that he fully understood the doctrine of atonement, but still his prayer was, "God be propitiated to me the sinner." He had seen the morning and the evening lamb, and he had heard of the sin-offering. And though he might not have known all about atonement, expiation, and substitution, yet as far as he did know, his eye was turned that way.

"O God, be propitiated, accept a sacrifice, and pardon me." If you know your sin, you will be wise to plead the propitiation which God has set forth for human sin. May the Spirit of God constrain you to trust in Jesus now! The new year is already gliding away—its second month is slipping from under us—how many months are to go before you, a guilty sinner, will come and ask mercy of God, the infinitely-gracious One? Great God, let this day be the day of Your power!

IV. I now close with my last head, which is this—THE BELIEVING CONFESSION OF SINNERSHIP IS THE WAY OF PEACE.

"God be merciful to me a sinner," was the prayer, but what was the answer? Listen to this—"This man went down to his house justified rather than the other".

In a few sentences let me sketch this man's progress. He came to God only as a sinner, nakedly as a sinner. Observe, he did not say, "God be merciful to me a *penitent* sinner." He was a penitent sinner, but he did not plead his penitence. And if you are ever so penitent and convicted of sin, do not mention it as an argument lest you be accused of self-righteousness.

Come as you are, as a sinner, and as nothing else. Exhibit your wounds. Bring your spiritual poverty before God, and not your supposed wealth. If you have a single penny of your own, get rid of it. Perfect poverty alone will discharge you from your bankruptcy. If you have a moldy crust in the cupboard of self-righteousness, no bread from heaven will be yours.

You must be nothing and nobody if God is to be your all in all. This man does not cry, "God be merciful to me the penitent," but "be merciful to me the sinner." He does not even say, "God be merciful to me the *reformed* sinner." I have no doubt he did reform, and give up his evil ways, but he does not plead that reformation.

Reformation will not take away your sinnership, therefore do not speak as if it could do so. What you are to be will make no atonement for what you have been. Come, therefore, simply as a sinner, not as a changed and improved sinner. Do not come because you *are* washed, but to be washed!

The publican does not say, "God be merciful to me a *praying* sinner." He was praying, but he does not mention it as a plea, for he thought very little of his own prayers. Do not plead your prayers—you might as well plead your sins. God knows that your prayers have sin in them. Why, man, your very tears of repentance need washing!

When your supplications are most sincere, what are they but the wailings of a condemned creature who cannot give a single reason why he should not be executed? Feel and own that you deserve condemnation—and come to God as a sinner. Off with your paltry finery, I mean your "filthy rags." Do not trick yourself out in the weeds of your own repentance, much less in the fig leaves of your own resolutions—but come to God in Christ Jesus in all the nakedness of your sin—and everlasting mercy will cover both you and your sins.

Next, notice that this man did nothing but appeal to mercy. He said, "God be merciful to me." He did not attempt to excuse himself, and say, "Lord, I could not help it. Lord, I was not worse than other publicans. Lord, I was a public servant, and only did what every other tax collector did." No, no. He is too honest to forge excuses. He is a sinner and he owns it.

If the Lord should condemn him out of his own mouth, and send him to hell, he cannot help it—his sin is too evident to be denied. He lays his head on the block, and humbly pleads, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Neither does this publican offer any *promises* of future amendment as a set-off. He does not say, "Lord, be merciful for the past, and I will be better in the future." Nothing of the sort. "Be merciful to me the sinner" is his one and only request.

So would I have you cry, "O God, be merciful to me! Although I am even now condemned, and deserved to be hopelessly damned by Your justice, yet have mercy upon me, have mercy on me now." That is the way to pray, and if you pray in that way God will hear you.

He does not offer to *pay* anything. He does not propose any form of self-paid ransom. He does not present to God his tears, his abstinence, his self-denial, his generosity to the church, his liberality to the

poor, or anything else—but simply begs the Lord to be propitiated, and to be merciful to him because of the great sacrifice. Oh, that all of you would at once pray in this fashion!

Now, I want to cheer your hearts by noticing that this man, through this prayer, and through this confession of sin, experienced a remarkable degree of acceptance. He had come up to the temple condemned—"He went down to his house justified." A complete change, a sudden change, a happy change was wrought upon him.

Heavy heart and downcast eyes were exchanged for glad heart and hopeful outlook. He came into that temple with trembling—he left it with rejoicing. I am sure his wife noticed the difference. What had come over him? The children began to observe it also. Poor father used to sit alone, and heave many a sigh, but all of a sudden he is so happy. He even sings Psalms of David out of the latter end of the book. The change was very marked. Before dinner he says, "Children, we must give God thanks before we eat this meal." They gather round, and wonder at dear father's happy face as he blesses the God of Israel.

He says to his friends, "Brethren, I am comforted. God has had mercy upon me. I went to the temple guilty, but I have returned justified. My sins are all forgiven me. God has accepted a propitiation on my behalf." What good would come of such a happy testimony!

This was a very sudden change, was it not? It was wrought in a moment. The process of spiritual quickening is not a matter of hours, but of a single second of time. The processes which lead up to it, and spring out of it, are long, but the actual reception of life must be instantaneous. Not in every case would you be able to put your finger upon that second of time, but the passage from death unto life must be instantaneous.

There must be a moment in which the man is dead, and another moment in which he is alive. I grant you, life would be very feeble at first—still, there must be a time in which it was not there at all. And again, there must have been an instant in which it begins. There can be no middle condition between dead and alive. Yet a man may not know *when* the change took place.

If you were going to the Cape you might cross the equator at dead of night, and know nothing about it, but still you would cross it. Some poor landsmen have thought that they would see a blue line right across the waves. But it is not perceptible, although it is truly there—the equator is quite as real as if we could see a golden belt around the globe.

Dear friends, I want you to cross the line this morning! Oh, that you might go out of this house saying, "Glory, glory, hallelujah! God has had mercy upon me." Though you feel this morning that you would not give two-pence for your life, yet if you come to God through Jesus Christ, you shall go away blessing God not only that you are alive, but that you shall live forever, happy in His love.

Once more, this man went away with a witness such as I pray we may all have. "He was justified." "But," you add, "how do I know he was justified?" Listen to these words. Our blessed Lord says, "*I tell you* that this man went down to his house justified rather than the other." "*I* tell you." Jesus, our Lord, can tell. Into our ear He tells it. He tells it to God, and the holy angels, and He tells it to the man himself.

The man who has cried from his heart, "God be merciful to me a sinner" is a justified man. When he stood and confessed his sin, and cast himself wholly upon the divine mercy, that man was unburdened, so that he went down to his house justified. We are all going down to our houses. Oh, that we might go down justified! You are going home. I want you to go home to God, who is the true home of the soul. "*He* went down to his house justified," and why should not you do the same?

Perhaps, my hearer, you have never been to the Tabernacle before. Possibly, my friend, you are one of those gentlemen who spend Sunday mornings in their shirt-sleeves at home reading the weekly paper. You have come here this morning quite by accident. Blessed be God! I hope you will go home "justified." The Lord grant it!

Perhaps you always come here, and have occupied a seat ever since the Tabernacle was built—and yet you have never found mercy. Oh, that you might find mercy this morning! Let us seek this blessing. Come with me to Jesus. I will lead the way. I pray you say with me this morning—"God be merciful to

me *the* sinner." Rest on the great propitiation—trust in Jesus Christ's atoning blood. Cast yourself upon the Savior's love, and you shall go down to your house justified.

Is it a poor cottage? Is it less than that—a back room up three flights of stairs? Are you very, very poor, and have you been out of work for a long time? Never mind. God knows all. Seek you His face. It will be a happy Sunday for you, if you this day begin a new life by faith in Jesus. You shall have joy, peace, and happiness if you seek and find mercy from the great Father.

I think I see you trudging home, having left your load behind you, but compassed about with songs of praise unto our God. So be it. Amen and Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—
PSALM 51 AND 32

HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—912, 202, 591

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.