

GOD'S TENDER MERCY

"The tender mercy of our God."

Luke 1:78

IT was a proof of great tenderness, on God's part, to think of His sinful creature, man, at all. When the created one had willfully set himself in opposition to his Creator, that Creator might at once have destroyed him, or have left him to himself—to work out his own destruction. It was Divine tenderness that looked on such an insignificant creature impudently engaging in so gross a revolt! It was also infinite tenderness which had, long before that, considered man so carefully as, practically, to frame a plan by which the fallen might be restored. It was a wonder of mercy that Infallible Wisdom should unite with almighty power to prepare a method by which rebellious man might be reconciled to his Maker. It was the highest possible degree of tenderness that God should give up His own Son, His only-begotten Son, that He might bleed and die in order to accomplish the great work of our redemption. It is also indescribable tenderness that God should, in addition to the gift of His Son, take such pity upon our weakness and our wickedness as to send the Holy Spirit to lead us to accept that "unspeakable Gift." It is Divine tenderness which bears with our obstinacy in rejecting Christ—Divine tenderness which plies us with incessant expostulation and invitation—all to induce us to be merciful to ourselves by accepting the immeasurable Gift which God's tender mercy so freely presents to us.

It was wonderful tenderness on God's part that when He thought of saving man, He was not content with lifting him up to the place which he had occupied before he fell, but he must lift him far higher than he was before, for, before the Fall, there was no man who could truly call himself the equal of the Eternal—but now, in the Person of Christ Jesus, manhood is united with Deity! And of all the creatures that God has made, man is the only one whom He has taken into union with Himself and set over all the works of His hands. There was infinite tenderness in God's first thoughts of love toward us and it has been Divine tenderness right through up till now! And that same tenderness will bring our souls into Heaven where we shall say with David, "Your gentleness has made me great."

I am going to speak of the tenderness of God's mercy towards sinners, in the fond hope that, perhaps, some of you who have never yet loved our God, may see how great has been His love to you and so may be enamored of Him—and trust in His dear Son, Jesus Christ—and so be saved!

1. And, first, I will try to show you that in the mercy of God THERE IS GREAT TENDERNESS IN ITS GREAT PROVISIONS.

There is a wounded soldier bleeding out his life upon the battlefield and here comes a friend, merciful and tender, who has brought him a refreshing draught which will help to bring him back to consciousness and open his half-glazed eyes again. He is covered with a clammy sweat, but there is cold water with which to wipe his fevered brow. His wounds are gaping wide and his very life is oozing forth from him, but his friend has brought the salve and bandages with which to strap up every wound. Is this all that he has provided for the wounded warrior? No, for there is a stretcher, carried by men who choose their steps with care, so that they do not jolt the poor invalid. Where will they carry him? The hospital is prepared. The bed—so soft, just fit to bear such a mass of weakness and pain—is waiting for him and the nurse stands there in readiness to render such service as may be required. The man soon sleeps the sleep that brings with it restoration—and when he opens his eyes, what does he see? Just such food as is suited to his circumstances and needs! A bunch of flowers is also placed near him, to gladden and cheer him with their beauty and fragrance. And a friend comes stepping softly up, and asks whether he has a wife, or a mother, or any friend to whom a letter may be written for him. Before he thinks of anything that he needs, it is there beside him and, almost before he can express a wish, it is supplied! This is one instance of the tenderness of human sympathy, but infinitely greater is the tenderness of God

towards guilty sinners! He has thought of all that a sinner can possibly need and he has provided in abundance all that the guilty soul can require to bring him safe into Heaven itself!

For every individual case, God, in the Covenant of His Grace, seems to have prepared some separate good thing. For great sinners, whose iniquities are many and gross, there are gracious words like these, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool." If the man has not fallen into such depths of open sin, the Lord says to him, as the tender-hearted Savior said to one who was in that condition, "One thing you lack"—and that one thing the Grace of God is prepared to supply! There is as much in the Word of God to encourage the moral to come to Christ as there is to woo the immoral to forsake their sins and accept "the tender mercy of our God." If there are children or young people who desire to find the Lord, there is this special promise for them, "Those that seek Me early shall find Me." Yes, even for the little ones there are such tender words as these, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the Kingdom of God." Then, if the sinner is an aged man, he is reminded that some were brought to labor in the vineyard even at the 11 th hour! And if he is actually dying, there is encouragement for him in the narrative of the dying thief who trusted in the dying Savior and who, when he closed his eyes on earth, opened them with Christ in Paradise! So again I say that in the Covenant of His Grace, God has seemed to meet the peculiar case of every sinner who really desires to be saved. If you are very sad and depressed, desponding and almost dismayed, there are Divine declarations and promises that are exactly suited to your case! Here are a few of them—"He heals the broken in heart, and binds up their wounds." "The Lord takes pleasure in them that fear Him, in those that hope in His mercy." "A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench." Everything seems to be done on purpose that into whatever condition a man may have fallen through the grievous malady of sin, God may come to him, not roughly, but most tenderly, and give to him just what he most needs! I rejoice to be able to say that all that a sinner can need between here and Heaven is provided in the Gospel of Christ—all for pardon, all for the new nature, all for preservation, all for perfecting and all for glorifying is treasured up in Christ Jesus, in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell!

Let us, then, before we go any further, bless that tender thoughtfulness of God which, foreseeing the greatness of our sins and our sorrows, our needs and our weaknesses, has provided for our vast necessities a boundless store of Grace and mercy!

II. But, secondly, the tenderness of God is seen IN THE METHODS BY WHICH HE BRINGS SINNERS TO HIMSELF.

The old system of surgery may have been useful in its time, but it certainly was not very tender. On board a man-of-war after action, what rough methods were adopted by those who were trying to save the lives of the wounded! Some of the remedies that we read of in the old doctors' books must have been a great deal more horrible than the diseases they were intended to cure, and I do not doubt that many of the patients died through the use of these rough remedies. But God's method of showing mercy to man is always Divinely tender. It is always powerful but, while masculine in its force, it is feminine in its tenderness.

See now, my dear Hearer, God has sent the Gospel to you, but how has He sent it? He might have sent it to you by an angel—a bright seraph might have stood here to tell you, in flaming sentences, of the mercy of God. But you would have been alarmed if you could have seen him and you would have fled from his presence! You would have been altogether out of order for the reception of the angelic message. Instead of sending an angel to you, the Lord has sent the Gospel to you by a man of like passions with yourself—one who can sympathize with you in your waywardness and who will affectionately try to deliver his message to you in such a form as will best meet your weakness. Some of you first heard the Gospel from your dear mother's lips—who else could tell the sweet story as well as she could? Or you have listened to it from a friend whose tearful eyes and heaving bosom proved how intensely she loved your soul. Be thankful that God has not thundered out the Gospel from Sinai with sound of trumpet, waxing loud and long, reminding you of the terrific blast of the last tremendous day, but that the blessed message of salvation, "Believe and live," comes to you from a fellow creature's tongue in melting tones that plead for its reception!

See also the tenderness of God's mercy in another respect, in that the Gospel is not sent to you in an unknown tongue. You have not to go to school to learn the Greek, or Hebrew, or Latin language in order that you may read about the way of salvation. It is sent to you in your homely Saxon mother tongue. I can honestly say that I have never sought after the beauties of eloquence and the refinements of rhetoric, but if there has been a word, more rough and ready than another, which I thought would favor my purpose of making plain the message of the Gospel, I have always chosen that word. Though I might have spoken in another fashion had I chosen to do so, I have thought it right and best, as the Apostle Paul did, to "use great plainness of speech," that no one of my hearers might be able to truthfully say, "I could not understand the plan of salvation as it was set forth by my minister." Well, then, since you have heard the Gospel so plainly preached that you have no need of a dictionary in order to understand it, see in this fact the tender mercy of God and His desire to win your soul unto Himself!

Remember, too, that the Gospel comes to men not only by the most suitable form of ministry, and in the simplest style of language, but it also comes to men just as they are. Whatever your condition may be, the Gospel is suitable to you. If you have lived a life of vice, the Gospel comes to you and says, "Repent you therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." You may, on the other hand, have lived a life of self-righteousness. If so, the Gospel bids you lay aside this worthless righteousness of your own, which is as filthy rags, and bids you put on the spotless robe of Christ's righteousness! You may be very tender-hearted, or you may be quite the reverse. Your tears may readily flow, or you may be hard as the millstone, but, in either case, God's Gospel is exactly suited to you! Yes, blessed be the name of the Lord, if a sinner is at the very gates of Hell, the Gospel is adapted to his desperate condition and can lift him up even out of the depths of despair!

One other thing I want you to particularly notice, and that is that the mercy of God is so tender because it comes to you now. If you are able to relieve a poor sufferer at once, and yet you keep him waiting, your treatment is as cruel as it is tardy. But God's Gospel says, "Behold, now is the day of salvation!" If any sinner stands outside Mercy's gate for even half an hour, he must put the blame for his exclusion down to his own account, for, if he would but obey the Gospel message and trust to the finished work of Christ, the door would be opened at once! Such delays as this are not God's delays, but ours! And if we postpone our acceptance of His mercy, we have ourselves to blame!

III. Now I must pass on to notice, thirdly, THE TENDERNESS OF GOD'S MERCY IN THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE GOSPEL.

What does the Gospel ask of us? It certainly asks nothing of us but what it gives to us. It never asks of any man a sum of money in order that he may redeem his soul with gold. The poorest are as heartily welcomed by Christ as the richest! And the beggar who could count all his money on his fingers is as gladly received as the millionaire who has his stocks and his shares, his lands and his ships! Poor men are bid to come to Jesus "without money and without price."

Neither does the Lord ask of us any severe penances and punishments in order to make us acceptable to Him. He does not require you to put your bodies to torture, or to pass through a long series of outward and visible mortification of the flesh. You may trust Christ while you are sitting in your pew—and if you do so, you shall be at once forgiven and accepted!

No great depth of learning is asked as a condition of salvation. In order to be a Christian, one need not be a philosopher. Do you know yourself to be a sinner—guilty, lost, condemned—and Christ to be a Savior? Do you trust Christ to be your Savior? Then you are saved, however ignorant you may be about other matters!

Nor is any great measure of spiritual depression asked as a qualification for coming to Christ. I know that some preachers seem to teach that you must not come to Christ till you have first been to the devil—I mean that you must not believe that Christ is able and willing to save you until you have been, as it were, right up to Hell's gates in terror of conscience and awful depression of spirits! Jesus Christ asks not anything like this of you—but if you truly repent and forsake your

sins, give up the evils which are destroying you and put your trust in the griefs and pains which He endured upon the Cross, you are saved!

Nor does the Gospel even ask a great amount of faith of you. To be saved does not require Abraham's faith, nor the faith of Paul or Peter. It requires a like precious faith—faith similar in substance and in essence, but not in degree. If you can but touch the hem of Christ's garment, you shall be made whole! If your view of Christ is such a poor trembling glance that you seem to yourself scarcely to have seen Him, yet that look will be the means of salvation to you! If you can but believe, all things are possible to him that believes! And though your belief is but as a grain of mustard seed, yet shall it ensure your entrance into Heaven! What a precious Savior Christ is! If you have sincere trust in Him, even though it is but very faint and feeble, you shall be accepted. If you can, from your heart, say to Christ, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom," you shall soon have His gracious assurance, "You shall be with Me in Paradise." Do not delude yourself with the idea that there is a great deal for you to do in order to fit yourself for coming to Christ. All such fitness is nothing but unfitness! All that you can do to make yourself ready for Christ to save you is to make yourself more unready! The fitness for washing is to be filthy—the fitness for being relieved is to be poor and needy. The fitness for being healed is to be sick—and the fitness for being pardoned is to be a sinner! If you are a sinner—and I guarantee you that you are—here is the Inspired Apostolic declaration, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." And to that declaration we may add our Lord's own words, "He that believes on Him is not condemned." "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." Oh that God would give all of you the Grace to receive this gracious Gospel, whose requirements are so tenderly and so mercifully brought down to your low estate!

IV. The fourth point which illustrates God's tender mercy is this—THERE IS GREAT TENDERNESS ABOUT ALL THE ARGUMENTS OF THE GOSPEL.

How does the Gospel speak to men? It tells them, first, of the Father's love. You never can forget, if you have once heard or read it, the story of the prodigal son who wasted his substance with riotous living. You remember how he said, when he was feeding the swine, "I will arise and go to my father." That was a Divine touch and showed the Savior's master hand when He put it in and again when He added this affecting description, "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." Sinner, that is God's way of coming to meet you! If you want to meet Him, He sees that yearning desire and that trembling wish of yours and He will come more than half way to meet you! Yes, it is because He comes all the way that you are able to go any part of the way!

How else does the Gospel talk to men? Why, it tells them of the great Shepherd's love. He lost one sheep from His flock and He left the 99 in the wilderness while He went to seek the one which had gone astray. And when He had found it, He laid it on His shoulders, rejoicing, and when He came home, He said to His friends and neighbors, "Rejoice with Me; for I have found My sheep which was lost." That lost sheep was the type of an unconverted sinner, and that Shepherd is the bleeding Savior who came to seek and to save that which was lost!

Ought not such arguments as these prevail with you? When the Gospel seeks to win a sinner's heart—its master plea comes from the heart, the blood, the wounds, the death of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, the compassionate Savior! The thunders of Sinai might drive you away from God, but the groans of Calvary ought to draw you to Him! God's tender mercy appeals even to man's self-interest and says to him, "Why will you die? Your sins will kill you. Why do you cling to them?" It says to him, "The pains of Hell are terrible." And it only mentions them in love, so that the sinner may never have to feel them, but may escape from them. Mercy also adds, "The Grace of God is boundless, so your sin may be pardoned. The Heaven of God is wide and large, so there is room for you there." Mercy thus pleads with the Sinner, "God will be glorified in your salvation, for He delight in mercy, and He says that as He lives, He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live."

I cannot enlarge upon this point, but must be content with saying that all Scripture proves God's love to sinners. Almost every page of Scripture speaks to you, Sinner, with a message of love! And even when God speaks in terrible language, warning men to flee from the wrath to come, there is always this gracious purpose in it—that men may be persuaded not to ruin themselves and may, through the abounding mercy of God, accept the free gift of eternal life instead of willfully choosing the wages of sin which must assuredly be death!

O my dear Hearers, as I think of some of you who are unconverted, I can hardly tell you how sad I feel when I recollect against what tenderness you have sinned! God has been very good to many of you. You have been kept from the depths of poverty, you have even been dandled on the knee of prosperity. Yet you have forgotten God! Others of you have had many Providential helps in fighting the battle of life. You have been often Divinely assisted when you were sick, or when your poor wife and children were all but in need. God very graciously stepped in to supply your needs, yet now you talk to your friends about how "lucky" you have been, whereas the truth is that God has been tenderly merciful towards you! Yet you have not even seen His hand in your prosperity and, instead of giving God the glory for it, you have ascribed it to that heathen goddess, "Luck." God has been patient and gentle with you as a nurse might be toward a wayward child, yet you altogether ignore Him or turn away from Him! You were sick, a little while ago, and God raised you up again to health and strength—is there still no burning of your heart towards God? I pray that God's Grace may work in you the change that no pleading of mine can ever produce, and that you may say, "I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto Him, Father, I have sinned." If you heartily make that confession to your Heavenly Father, He will forgive you and welcome you as freely as the father in the parable welcomed the returning prodigal!

1. The last point of the tenderness of God's mercy that I can now speak of is this, THE TENDERNESS OF ITS APPLICATIONS AND OF ITS ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

What does God do for sinners? Well, when they trust in Jesus, He forgives all their sins, without any upbraiding or drawbacks. I have sometimes thought that if I had been the father of a prodigal son, I could have forgiven him when he came home and I hope I should have very freely done so. But I do not think I could ever have treated him in quite the same way that I treated his elder brother. I mean this—I would have had them sit at the same table, and feast on the same food—but I think that when market-day came round, I would have said to my younger son, "I shall not trust you with the money. I must send your elder brother to the market with that, for you might run away with it." Perhaps I would not go so far as to say this, but I think I would feel it, for such a son as that one would be rather suspicious for a long time. Yet see how differently God deals with us! After some of us have been great sinners and He has forgiven us, He puts us in trust with the Gospel and bids us go and preach it to our fellow sinners! Look at John Bunyan—a swearing, drinking profligate playing at "tip-cat" on Sundays—yet, when the Lord had forgiven him, He did not say to him, "Now, Master John, you will have to sit in the back seats all your life. You shall go to Heaven, I will provide you a place there, but I cannot make as much use of you as I can of some who have been kept from such sins as you have committed." Oh, no! He is put in the front rank of the Lord's servants, an angel's pen is given to him that he may write *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and he has the high honor of lying for nearly 13 years in prison for the Truth's sake! And among all the saints there is scarcely one who is greater than John Bunyan! Look at the Apostle Paul, too. He called himself the chief of sinners, yet his Lord and Father made him, after his conversion, such an eminent servant of Christ that he could truly write, "In nothing am I behind the very chief of Apostles, though I am nothing."

It is a proof of great tenderness on God's part that He gives liberally and upbraids not. He not only forgives, but He also forgets! He says, "Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." And although we may have been the vilest of the vile, He makes no drawbacks on that account. I have known a father who has said to his bankrupt son, "Now, you young scapegrace, I will set you up in business again, but I have already lost so much money through you that I shall have to make a difference in my will, for I cannot give all this to you and then treat you as I treat your brother." But, blessed be God, He makes no difference in His will! He has not said that He will give the front seats in Heaven to those who have sinned less than others have done, and put the greater sinners somewhere in the background. Oh no! They shall all be with Jesus where He is and shall behold and participate in His Glory! There is not one Heaven for the great sinners and

another for the little ones—but there is the same Heaven for those who have been the greatest sinners, but who have repented and trusted in Jesus, as there is for those who have been kept from running into the same excess of riot. Let us admire the wondrous tenderness of Divine Grace in its dealings with the very chief of sinners! When God deigns to cleanse a sinner, He does not partly wash him, but He takes away all his sin! He does not partly comfort him, but He loads him with loving kindness and gives him all that his heart could wish! Oh, that sinners could be persuaded to come unto Him for His full and free forgiveness!

Possibly somebody here says, “If God is so tender in mercy towards those who come to Him through Christ, I should be glad if you could explain why His mercy has not been extended to me. I have been seeking the Lord for months! I am at His House as often as I can be. I delight to hear the Gospel preached and I long for it to be blessed to me. I have been reading the Scriptures and searching for precious promises to suit my case, but I cannot find them. I have been praying for a long while, but my prayers still remain unanswered. I cannot get any peace! I wish I could. I have been trying to believe, but I cannot.” Well, my Friend, let me tell you a story that I heard the other day. I cannot vouch for its truth, but it will serve for an illustration for me. There were two drunken sailors who wanted to go across a narrow inlet. They got into a boat and began to row, in their wild drunken way, but they did not appear to make any headway. It was not far across, so they ought to have been on the other side in a quarter of an hour, but they were not across in an hour, nor yet in several hours! One of them said, “I believe the boat is bewitched.” The other one said he thought they were and I suppose they were, through the liquor they had been drinking! At last, the morning light came and one of them, who had become sober by that time, looked over the side of the boat and then called out to his mate, “Why, Sandy, you never pulled up the anchor!” They had been tugging at the oars all night long, but had not pulled up the anchor! You smile at their folly and I do not regret that you do because you can now catch the meaning of what I am saying. There is many a man who is, as it were, tugging away at the oars with his prayers, and his Bible reading, and his going to Chapel, and his trying to believe. But, like those drunken sailors, he has not pulled up the anchor! That is to say, he is either holding fast to his own supposed righteousness, or else he is clinging to some old sin of his which he cannot give up. Ah, my dear Friend! You must pull up the anchor whether it holds you to your sins or to your self-righteousness! That anchor, still down out of sight, fully accounts for all your lost labor and fruitless anxiety. Pull up that anchor and there will soon be a happy end of all your troubles—and you will find God to be full of tender mercy and abundant Grace even to you! May it be so, for our Lord Jesus Christ’s sake! Amen