

TRUSTING IN GOD'S MERCY

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"I will trust in the mercy of God forever and ever." Ps. 52:8.

In discussing this subject I shall enquire,

- I. What mercy is.
- II. What is implied in trusting in the mercy of the Lord forever.
- III. Point out the conditions on which we may safely trust in God's mercy.
- IV. Allude to several mistakes which are made on this subject.

I. What mercy is.

1. Mercy as an attribute of God, is not to be confounded with mere goodness. This mistake is often made. That it is a mistake, you will see at once if you consider that mercy is directly opposed to justice, while yet justice is one of the natural and legitimate developments of goodness. Goodness may demand the exercise of justice; indeed it often does; but to say that mercy demands the exercise of justice, is to use the word without meaning. Mercy asks that justice be set aside. Of course mercy and goodness stand in very different relations to justice, and are very different attributes.

2. Mercy is a disposition to pardon the guilty. Its exercise consists in arresting and setting aside the penalty of law, when that penalty has been incurred by transgression. It is, as has been said, directly opposed to justice. Justice treats every individual according to his deserts; mercy treats the criminal very differently from what he deserves to be treated. Desert is never the rule by which mercy is guided; while it is precisely the rule of justice.

3. Mercy is exercised only where there is guilt. It always pre-supposes guilt. The penalty of the law must have been previously incurred, else there can be no scope for mercy.

4. Mercy can be exercised no farther than one deserves punishment. It may continue its exercise just as long as punishment is deserved, but no longer; just as far as ill desert goes, but no farther. If great punishment is deserved, great mercy can be shown; if endless punishment is due, there is then scope for infinite mercy to be shown, but not otherwise.

II. I am to show what is implied in trusting in the mercy of God.

1. A conviction of guilt. None can properly be said to trust in the mercy of God unless they have committed crimes, and are conscious of this fact. Justice protects the innocent, and they may safely appeal to it for defence or redress. But for the guilty nothing remains but to trust in mercy. Trusting in mercy always implies a deep, heartfelt conviction of personal guilt.

2. Trust in mercy always implies that we have no hope on the score of justice. If we had anything to expect from justice, we should not look to mercy. The human heart is too proud to throw itself upon mercy while it presumes itself to have a valid claim to favor on the score of justice. Nay more, to appeal to mercy when we might rightfully appeal to justice is never demanded either by God's law or gospel, nor can it be in harmony with our relations to Jehovah's government. In fact, the thing is in the very nature of the mind, impossible.

3. Trust in mercy implies a just apprehension of what mercy is. On this point many fail because they confound mercy with mere goodness, or with grace, considered as mere favor to the undeserving. The latter may be shown where there is no mercy, the term mercy being applied to the pardon of crime. We all know that God shows favor, or grace in the general sense, to all the wicked on earth. He makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the unjust as well as on the just. But to trust in this general favor shown to the wicked while on trial here is not trusting in the mercy of God. We never trust in mercy till we really understand what it is--pardon for the crimes of the guilty.

4. Trust in God's mercy implies a belief that he is merciful. We could not trust Him if we had no such belief. This belief must always lie at the foundation of real trust. Indeed so naturally does this belief beget that out-going of the soul and resting upon God which we call trust, that in the New Testament sense it commonly includes both. Faith, or belief, includes a hearty committal of the soul to God, and a cordial trust in him.

5. "Trusting in the mercy of God forever and ever" implies a conviction of deserving endless punishment. Mercy is co-extensive with desert of punishment, and can in its nature go no farther. It is rational to rely upon the exercise of mercy for as long time as we deserve punishment, but no longer. A prisoner under a three years' sentence to State's prison may ask for the exercise of mercy in the form of pardon for so long a time; but he will not ask a pardon for ten years when he needs it only for three, or ask a pardon after his three years' term has expired. This principle is perfectly obvious; where desert of

punishment ceases, there mercy also ceases and our trust in it. While desert of punishment continues, so may mercy, and our trust in its exercise. When therefore the Psalmist trusts in the mercy of God forever, he renounces all hope of being ever received to favor on the score of justice.

6. Trusting in mercy implies a cessation from all excuses and excuse-making. The moment you trust in mercy, you give up all apologies and excuses at once and entirely; for these imply a reliance upon God's justice. An excuse or apology is nothing more nor less than an appeal to justice; a plea designed to justify our conduct. Trusting in mercy forever implies that we have ceased from all excuses forever.

Thus a man on trial before a civil court, so long as he pleads justifications and excuses, appeals to justice; but if he goes before the court and pleads guilty, offering no justification or apology whatever, he throws himself upon the clemency of the court. This is quite another thing from self-justification. It sometimes happens that in the same trial, the accused party tries both expedients. He first attempts his own defense; but finding this vain, he shifts his position, confesses his crime and ill desert, and throws himself upon the mercy of the court. Perhaps he begs the court to commend him to the mercy of the executive in whom is vested the pardoning power.

Now it is always understood that when a man pleads guilty he desists from making excuses, and appeals only to mercy. So in any private matter with my neighbor. If I justify myself fully, I surely have no confession to make. But if I am conscious of having done him wrong, I freely confess my wrong, and appeal to mercy. Self-justification stands right over against confession.

So in parental discipline. If your child sternly justifies himself, he makes no appeal to mercy. But the moment when he casts himself upon your bosom with tears, and says, I am all wrong, he ceases to make excuses, and trusts himself to mercy. So in the government of God. Trust in mercy is a final giving up of all reliance upon justice. You have no more excuses; you make none.

III. We must next consider the conditions upon which we may confidently and securely trust in the mercy of God forever.

1. Public justice must be appeased. Its demands must be satisfied. God is a great public magistrate, sustaining infinitely responsible relations to the moral universe. He must be careful what He does.

Perhaps no measure of government is more delicate and difficult in its bearings than the exercise of mercy. It is a most critical point. There is eminent danger of making the impression that mercy would trample down law. The very thing that mercy does is to set aside the execution of the penalty of law; the danger is lest this should seem to set aside the law itself. The great problem is, How can the law retain its full majesty, the execution of its penalty being entirely withdrawn? This is always a difficult and delicate matter.

In human governments we often see great firmness exercised by the magistrate. During the scenes of the American Revolution, Washington was earnestly importuned to pardon André. The latter was eminently an amiable, lovely man; and his case excited a deep sympathy in the American army. Numerous and urgent petitions were made to Washington in his behalf; but no, Washington could not yield. They besought him to see André, in hope that a personal interview might touch his heart; but he refused even to see him. He dared not trust his own feelings. He felt that this was a great crisis, and that a nation's welfare was in peril. Hence his stern unyielding decision. It was not that he lacked compassion of soul. He had a heart to feel. But under the circumstances, he knew too well that no scope must be given to the indulgence of his tender sympathies. He dared not gratify these feelings, lest a nation's ruin should be the penalty.

Such cases have often occurred in human governments, when every feeling of the soul is on the side of mercy and makes its strong demand for indulgence; but justice forbids.

Often in family government, the parent has an agonizing trial; he would sooner bear the pain himself thrice told than to inflict it upon his son; but interests of perhaps infinite moment are at stake, and must not be put in peril by the indulgence of his compassions.

Now if the exercise of mercy in such cases is difficult, how much more so in the government of God? Hence the first condition of the exercise of mercy is that something be done to meet the demands of public justice. It is absolutely indispensable that law be sustained. However much disposed God may be to pardon, yet he is too good to exercise mercy on any such conditions or under any such circumstances as will impair the dignity of his law, throw out a license to sin, and open the very flood-gates of iniquity. Jehovah never can do this. He knows he never ought to.

On this point it only need be said at present, that this difficulty is wholly removed by the atonement of Christ.

2. A second condition is that we repent. Certainly no sinner has the least ground to hope for mercy until he repents. Will God pardon the sinner while yet in his rebellion? Never. To do so would be most unjust in God--most ruinous to the universe. It would be virtually proclaiming that sin is less than a trifle--that God cares not how set in wickedness the sinner's heart is; he is ready to take the most rebellious heart, unhumbled, to his own bosom. Before God can do this he must cease to be holy.

3. We must confess our sins. "He that confesseth," and he only, "shall find mercy." Jehovah sustains such relations to the moral universe that he cannot forgive without the sinner's confession. He must have the sinner's testimony against himself and in favor of law and obedience.

Suppose a man convicted and sentenced to be hung. He petitions the governor for pardon, but is too proud to confess, at least in public. "May it please your Honor," he says, "between you and me, I am willing to say that I committed that crime alleged against me, but you must not ask me to make this confession before the world. You will have some regard to my feelings and to the feelings of my numerous and very respectable friends. Before the world therefore I shall persist in denying the crime. I trust however that you will duly consider all the circumstances and grant me a pardon." Pardon you! miscreant, the governor would say--pardon you when you are condemning the whole court and jury of injustice, and the witnesses of falsehood; pardon you while you set yourself against the whole administration of justice in the state? never! never! You are too proud to take your own place and appear in your own character; how can I rely on you to be a good citizen--how can I expect you to be anything better than an arch villain?

Let it be understood then that before we can trust in the mercy of God, we must really repent and make our confession as public as we have made our crime.

Suppose again that a man is convicted and sues for pardon, but will not confess at all. O, he says, I have no crimes to confess; I have done nothing particularly wrong; the reason of my acting as I have is that I have a desperately wicked heart. I cannot repent and never could. I don't know how it happens that I commit murder so easily; it seems to be a second nature to me to kill my neighbor; I can't help it. I am told that you are very good, very merciful; he says to the governor; they even say that you are love itself, and I believe it; you surely will grant me a pardon then, it will be so easy for you--and it is so horrible for me to be hung. You know I have done only a little wrong, and that little only because I could not help it; you certainly cannot insist upon my making any confession. What! have me hung because I don't repent? You certainly are too kind to do any such thing.

I don't thank you for your good opinion of me, must be the indignant reply; the law shall take its course; your path is to the gallows.

See that sinner; hear him mock God in his prayer: "trust in the mercy of God, for God is love." Do you repent? "I don't know about repentance--that is not the question; God is love--God is too good to send men to hell; they are Partialists and slander God who think that he ever sends any body to hell." Too good! you say; too good! so good that he will forgive whether the sinner repents or not; too good to hold the reins of his government firmly; too good to secure the best interests of his vast kingdom! Sinner, the God you think of is a being of your own crazy imagination--not the God who built the prison of despair for hardened sinners--not the God who rules the universe by righteous law and our race also on a gospel system which magnifies that law and makes it honorable.

4. We must really make restitution so far as lies in our power. You may see the bearing of this in the case of a highway robber. He has robbed a traveller of ten thousand dollars, and is sentenced to State's prison for life. He petitions for pardon. Very sorry he is for his crime; will make any confession that can be asked, ever so public; but will he make restitution? Not he; no--he needs that money himself. He will give up half of it, perhaps, to the government; vastly patriotic is he all at once, and liberal withal; ready to make a donation of five thousand dollars for the public good! ready to consecrate to most benevolent uses a splendid sum of money; but whose money? Where is his justice to the man he has robbed? Wretch! consecrate to the public what you have torn from your neighbor and put it into the treasury of the government! No; such a gift would burn right through the chest! What would you think if the government should connive at such an abomination? You would abhor their execrable corruption.

See that man of the world. His whole business career is a course of over-reaching. He slyly thrusts his hands into his neighbor's pockets and thus fills up his own. His rule is uniformly to sell for more than a thing is worth and buy for less. He knows how to monopolize and make high prices, and then sell out his accumulated stocks. His mind is forever on the stretch to manage and make good bargains. But this man at last must prepare to meet God. So he turns to his money to make it answer all things. He has a large gift for God. Perhaps he will build a church or send a missionary--something pretty handsome at least to buy a pardon for a life about which his conscience is not very easy. Yes, he has a splendid bribe for God. Ah, but will God take it? Never! God burns with indignation at the thought. Does God want your price of blood--those gains of oppression? Go and give them back to the suffering poor whose cries have gone up to God against you. O shame to think to filch from thy brother and give to God! not merely rob Peter to pay Paul, but rob man to pay God! The pardon of your soul is not bought so!

5. Another condition is that you really reform.

Suppose there is a villain in our neighborhood who has become the terror of all the region round about. He has already murdered a score of defenseless women and children; burns down our houses by night, plunders and robs daily; and every day brings tidings of his crimes at which every ear tingles. None feel safe a moment. He is an arch and bloody villain. At last he is arrested; and we all breathe more easily. Peace is restored. But this miscreant having received sentence of death, petitions for pardon. He professes no penitence whatever, and makes not even a promise of amendment; yet the governor is about to give him a free pardon. If he does it, who will not say, He ought to be hung up himself by the neck till he is dead, dead! But what does that sinner say? "I trust," says he, "in the great mercy of God. I have nothing to fear." But does he reform? No. What good can the mercy of God do him if he does not reform?

6. You must go the whole length in justifying the law and its penalty.

Mark that convicted criminal. He doesn't believe that government has any right to take life for any crime; he demurs utterly to the justice of such a proceeding, and on this ground insists that he must have a pardon. Will he get it? Will the governor take a position which is flatly opposed to the very law and

constitution which he is sworn to sustain? Will he crush the law to save one criminal, or even a thousand criminals? Not if he has the spirit of a ruler in his bosom. That guilty man if he would have mercy from the execution must admit the right of the law and of the penalty. Else he arrays himself against the law and cannot be trusted in the community.

Now hear that sinner. How much he has to say against his ill desert, and against the justice of eternal punishment. He denounces the laws of God as cruelly and unrighteously severe. Sinner, do you suppose God can forgive you while you pursue such a course? He would as soon repeal His law and vacate his throne. You make it impossible for God to forgive you.

7. No sinner can be a proper object of mercy who is not entirely submissive to all those measures of the government that have brought him to conviction,

Suppose a criminal should plead that there had been a conspiracy to waylay and arrest him--that witnesses had been bribed to give false testimony--that the judge had charged the jury falsely, or that the jury had given an unrighteous verdict; could he hope by such false allegations to get a pardon? Nay verily. Such a man cannot be trusted to sustain law and order in a community, under any government, human or divine.

But hear that sinner complain and cavil. Why, he says, did God suffer sin and temptation to enter this world at all? Why does God let the sinner live at all to incur a doom so dreadful? And why does God block up the sinner's path by his providence, and cut him down in his sins? Yet this very sinner talks about trusting in God's mercy! Indeed; while all the time he is accusing God of being an infinite tyrant and of seeking to crush the helpless, unfortunate sinner! What do these cavils mean? What are they but the uplifted voice of a guilty rebel arraigning his Maker for doing good and showing mercy to his own rebellious creatures? For it needs but a moment's thought to see that the temptation complained of is only a good placed before a moral agent to melt his heart by love. Yet against this the sinner murmurs, and pours out his complaints against God. Be assured that unless you are willing to go the full length of justifying all God does, he never can give you pardon. God has no option to pardon a self-justifying rebel. The interests of myriads of moral beings forbid his doing it. When you will take the ground most fully of justifying God, and condemning yourself, you place yourself where mercy can reach you, and then it surely will. Not before.

8. You must close in most cordially with the plan of salvation. This plan is based on the assumption that we deserve everlasting death and must be saved, if ever, by sovereign grace and mercy. Nothing can save but mercy--mercy which meets the sinner in the dust, prostrate, without an excuse or an apology, giving to God all the glory and taking to himself all the guilt and shame. There is hope for thee, sinner, in embracing this plan with all the heart.

IV. We now notice some mistakes into which many fall.

1. Many really trust in justice and not in mercy. They say, "God is just--God will do me no injustice--I mean to do as well as I can, and then I can safely leave myself in the hands of a just God." True, God will do you no injustice. You never need fear that. But how terrible if God should do you strict justice! How fearful if you get no mercy! If God does not show you infinite mercy, you are forever lost, as surely as you are a sinner! This trusting in God's justice is a fatal rock. The sinner who can do it calmly has never seen God's law and his own heart. The Psalmist did not say, I trust in the justice of God forever and ever.

2. Many trust professedly in the mercy of God without fulfilling the conditions on which only, mercy can be shown. They may hold on in such trusting till they die--but no longer.

3. Sinners do not consider that God cannot dispense with their fulfilling these conditions. He has no right to do so. They spring out of the very constitution of his government, from his very nature, and must therefore be strictly fulfilled. Sooner than dispense with their fulfillment, God would send the whole race, yea, the whole universe, to hell. If God were to set aside these conditions and forgive a sinner while unhumbled, impenitent, and unbelieving, he would upset his throne, convulse the moral universe, and kindle another hell in his own bosom.

4. Many are defeating their own salvation by self-justification. Pleas that excuse self, and cavils that arraign God stand alike and fatally in the way of pardon. Since the world began it has not been known that a sinner has found mercy in this state.

5. Many pretend to trust in mercy who yet profess to be punished for their sins as they go along. They hope for salvation through mercy, and yet they are punished for all their sins in this life. Two more absurd and self-contradictory things were never put together. Punished as much as they deserve here, and yet saved through mercy! Why don't they say it out that they shall be saved after death through justice? Surely if they are punished all they deserve as they go along, justice will ask no more after death.

6. Persons who in the letter plead for mercy, often rely really upon justice. The deep conviction of sin and ill-desert does not sink into their soul till they realize what mercy is, and feel that they can rely on nothing else.

7. Some are covering up their sins, yet dream of going to heaven. Do they think they can hide those sins from the Omniscient Eye? Do they think to cover their sins and yet it "prosper," despite of God's awful word?

8. We cannot reasonably ask for mercy beyond our acknowledged and felt guilt, and they mistake

fatally who suppose that they can. Without a deep conviction of conscious guilt we cannot be honest and in earnest in supplicating mercy. Hear that man pray who thinks sin a trifle and its deserved punishment a small affair. "O Lord, I need a little mercy, only a little; my sins have been few and of small account; grant me, Lord, exemption from the brief and slight punishment which my few errors and defects may have deserved." Or hear that Universalist pray: "O Lord, thou knowest that I have been punished for my sins as I have passed along; I have had a fit of sickness and various pains and losses, nearly or quite enough, thou knowest, to punish all the sins I have committed; now therefore, I pray thee to give me salvation through thy great mercy." How astonishing that some men should hold such nonsense! How can a Universalist pray at all? What should they pray for? Not for pardon, for on their principles they have a valid claim to exemption from punishment on the score of justice, as the criminal has who has served out his sentence in the State's prison. The only rational prayer that can be made is that God will do them justice and let them off, since they have already been punished enough. But why should they pray for this? God may be trusted to do justice without their praying for it. I don't wonder that Universalists pray but little; what have they to pray for? Their daily bread? Very well. But the mercy of God they need not on their scheme; for they suffer all they deserve. Pleasing delusion; flattering enough to human pride, but strange for rational minds, and horribly pernicious! Restoration takes substantially the same ground, only leaving a part of the penalty to be worked out in purgatory, but claiming salvation on the ground of justice and not mercy. Mercy can have no place in any system of Universalism. Every form of this system arrays God in robes of justice, inflexible, fearful justice;--yet these men trust they say in the mercy of God! But what have they done with the gospel--what with all the Bible says about free pardon to the guilty? They have thrust it out of the Bible; and what have they given us instead? Only justice, justice; punishment enough for sin in this world, or at least in a few years of purgatory: sin a trifle,--government a mere farce,--God a liar--hell a bugbear and a humbug; what is all this but dire blasphemy as ever came from hell?

If we ask for but little mercy, we shall get none at all. This may seem strange, but is none the less true. If we get any thing we must ask for great blessings. Suppose a man deserved to be hung, and yet asks only for a little favor; suppose he should say so, can he be forgiven? No. He must confess the whole of his guilt in its full and awful form, and show that he feels it in his very soul. So, sinner, must you come and confess your whole guilt as it is, or have no mercy. Come and get down, low, lower, infinitely low before God--and take mercy there. Hear that Universalist. All he can say at first is, "I thank God for a thousand things." But he begins to doubt whether this is quite enough. Perhaps he needs a little more punishment than he has suffered in this life; he sees a little more guilt; so he prays that God would let him off from ten years of deserved punishment in hell. And if he sees a little more guilt, he asks for a reprieve from so much more of punishment. If truth flashes upon his soul and he sees his own heart and life in the light of Jehovah's law, he gets down lower and lower, as low as he can, and pours out his prayer that God would save him from that eternal hell which he deserves. "O," he cries out, "can God forgive so great a sinner!" Yes, and by so much the more readily, by how much the more you humble yourself, and by how much the greater mercy you ask and feel that you need. Only come down and take such a position that God can meet you. Recollect the prodigal son, and that father running, falling on his neck, weeping, welcoming, forgiving! O! how that father's heart gushed with tenderness!

It is not the greatness of your sins, but your pride of heart that forbids your salvation. It is not anything in your past life, but it is your present state of mind that makes your salvation impossible. Think of this.

You need not wait to use means with God to persuade him to save you. He is using means with you to persuade you to be saved. You act as if God could scarcely be moved by any possible entreaties and submissions to exercise mercy; Oh, you do not see how his great heart beats with compassion and presses the streams of mercy forth in all directions, pouring the river of the waters of life at your very feet, creating such a pressure of appeal to your heart, that you have to brace yourself against it, lest you should be persuaded to repent. O, do you see how God would fain persuade you, and break your heart in penitence, that He may bring you where He can reach you with forgiving mercy--where He can come and bless you without resigning his very throne!

To deny your desert of endless punishment is to render your salvation utterly impossible. God never can forgive you on this ground, because you are trying to be saved on the score of justice. You could not make your damnation more certain than you thus make it, if you were to murder every man you meet. You tie up the hands of mercy and will not let her pluck you from the jaws of death. It is as if your house were on fire, and you seize your loaded rifle to shoot down every man that comes with his bucket to help you. You stand your ground amid the raging element until you sink beneath the flames. Who can help you? What is that man doing who is trying to make his family believe Universalism? It is as if he would shoot his rifle at the very heart of Mercy every time she comes in view. He seems determined to drive off Mercy, and for this end plies all the enginery of Universalism, and throws himself into the citadel of this refuge of lies! O! what a work of death is this! Mercy shall not reach him or his family; so he seems determined--and Mercy cannot come. See how she bends from heaven--Jehovah smiles in love--and weeps in pity--and bends from the very clouds and holds out the pierced hand of the crucified One--But no! I don't deserve the punishment; away with the insult of a pardon offered through mere mercy! What can be more fatal, more damning, more ruinous to the soul?

You see very clearly why all are not saved. It is not because God is not willing to save all, but because they defeat the efforts God makes to save them. They betake themselves to every possible refuge

