

MEN INVITED TO REASON TOGETHER WITH GOD

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"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."--Isaiah 1:18.

God is a moral agent. If he was not, He could not have moral character. That He has moral character is sufficiently manifest from the revealed fact that man is made in his image. Every man knows himself to have a moral constitution, and to be a moral being. It is also a fact that we necessarily conceive of God as a moral agent, and cannot rationally think otherwise.

God is also a good being--not only moral, but holy and wise. He always acts upon good and sufficient reasons, and never irrationally and without reasons for his conduct.

Hence if we would appeal to God on any subject, we must address him as a good being, and must make our appeal through his intelligence, expecting him to be influenced more or less according as we present good and sufficient reasons.

God is always influenced by good reasons. Good reasons are more sure to have their due and full weight on his mind than on the mind of any other being in the universe. Nothing can be more certain than this--that if we present to him good reasons and such as ought to influence him, he will be influenced as much as he ought to be. Upon this we may rest with unlimited confidence.

1. Entering now upon the direct consideration of our text, let us first inquire, What is that to which this text invites us?

"Come now, and let us reason together"--but what are we to "reason" about? The passage proceeds to say--"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." In the previous context God makes grievous and terrible charges against men. Their sins and hypocrisies and apostasies have been provoking beyond measure;--Now therefore He comes down to look into their case and see if there be any hope of repentance, and proceeds to make a proposal. Come now, He says, let us reason together; Come near if ye will reason with me. Produce your strong reasons why your God should forgive your great sin.

2. The invitation, coupled with the promises annexed, implies that there are good and sufficient reasons why God should forgive the penitent. Hence the case is fair for practical results. The way is open for salvation. Sinners may so present their reasons before God as to ensure success.

3. The nature of the case shows that we are to address our reasons and make our appeal, not to Justice, but to Mercy. We are to present reasons which will sanction the exercise of mercy. We have no hope from any appeal that we can make to justice. We must not come to demand the blessing we need, for it is assumed that our sins are as scarlet, and hence that there can be no such thing as a justification for them. Hence our inquiry is brought within fixed limits. We have only to search for those considerations which may induce the Lord to exercise mercy in our case.

Now since sinners need two great blessings; viz., pardon and sanctification, our subject naturally embraces two points;

1. The reasons which may be offered why God should pardon our sin;
2. The corresponding reasons why he should sanctify our hearts.

I. First, then, what reasons have we to present before God why he should forgive sin?

I enter upon this inquiry and bring up these reasons before your mind in order to show you what reasons you may present before God and to encourage you to present them.

1. You may plead that you entirely justify God in all his course. You must certainly take this position, for he cannot forgive you so long as you persist in self-justification. You know there is a breach of friendship between your soul and God. You have broken his laws. You either have good reason for your sin or you have not. If you have, God is wrong; if you have not, then you are wrong. You know how this case stands. You know beyond all question--with a force of reason that ought to silence all cavil,--that all the wrong is on your side and all the right on God's side. You might and should know also that you must confess this. You need not expect God to forgive you till you do. He ought not to publish to the universe that he is wrong and you are right, when there is no truth in such a proclamation. Hence you see that you must confess what your conscience affirms to be truth in the case.

Now therefore, will you honestly say--not as the decision of your conscience merely, but as the utterance of your heart, that you do accept the punishment of your iniquities as just, and do honour and acquit your God in all the precepts of his law, and in all the course of his providence? Can you present this reason? So far as it goes, it is a good reason, and will certainly have its weight.

2. You may come to God and acknowledge that you have no apology whatever to make for your sin. You renounce the very idea of apology. The case, you deeply feel, admits of none.

3. You must also be ready to renounce all sin and be able in all honesty to say this before God. You must utterly cease from all rebellion against God, and be able to say so from your very heart,--else you can not reasonably expect to be forgiven.

4. You must unconditionally submit to his discretion. Nothing less than this is the fitting moral position for a sinner towards God. You must unqualifiedly surrender yourself to his will and utterly renounce your own. This will be an important element in your plea before God for pardon whenever you can honestly make it.

5. You may plead the life and death of Jesus Christ as sufficient to honor the law and justify God in showing mercy. It is plain that our reasons must reach other points besides our own state of mind; they must also refer to the penalty of law, and show that such arrangements are made as will insure the honor and sustain the dignity of the law, though sin be forgiven. Hence we see how much it is worth to us that we are able to plead before God that Christ has fully honored the law, so that God can forgive sin without the danger of seeming to connive at it. It is everything to the purpose of a returning sinner that he may plead that forgiveness through Christ's death is safe to the government of God. Pardon must not put in peril the holiness or justice of Jehovah. The utmost expression he could make, or need to make, of his holiness and justice, as touching the sins of man, is already made in the death of Christ, "whom God did himself set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past . . . that he might be just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus."

Now therefore, can you say that you are willing to accept the sacrifice which he has made, and receive the gift of salvation through his blood as all of boundless grace, and in no sense or measure of meritorious works? If you can truly say this, it will become a strong reason before God why he should forgive you.

6. You may also urge his professed love for sinners. God has professed the greatest love for lost men; has even spoken of loving them "with an everlasting love," and you are at liberty to urge this when you come to reason together with God. You may plead that he has manifested this love in the gift of his dear Son, and hence you must be sure that you understand his language, and there cannot be any mistake in the matter. All your life long, too, he has been manifesting his love towards you in his kind providence;--so that he has not ever left himself without witness to both the fact and the greatness of this love for the lost of our race.

7. He has also invited you to come and reason with him. Therefore he has fully opened the way for the freest and fullest communion on this point. With amazing condescension he suffers you to come before him and plead, filling your mouth with arguments. You may speak of all his promises, and of that solemn oath in which he swore by himself, to the end that they all "might have a strong consolation who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us in the gospel."

You may also plead his honor, that seeing he is under oath and stands committed before the universe, you may ask him what he will do for his great name if he refuses to forgive a repentant and believing sinner. You may plead all the relations and work of Christ. You may say to him, Lord, will it not induce other sinners to come to thee? Will it not encourage thy church to labor and pray more for salvation? Will not thy mercy, shown to me, prove a blessing to thousands?

You may urge the influence of refusing to do so. You may suggest that his refusal is liable to be greatly misapprehended--that it may be a scandal to many, and that the wicked will be emboldened to say that God has made no such exceeding great and precious promises.

You may urge that there is joy in heaven and on earth also over every sinner pardoned and saved--that the saints everywhere will be delighted and will exceedingly rejoice in the Lord their God. The psalmist represents the young convert as saying--"The humble shall hear thereof and be glad." You may urge that since God loves to make saints happy in this world, he surely will not be averse to giving you his Spirit and putting away your sins--it will cause such joy in the hearts of his dear people.

You may also plead the great abhorrence you have of living in sin, as you surely will unless he forgives you. You may also plead that God hates sin and therefore must be more than willing to turn your heart away from sinning and make it wholly pure before his eyes. You may urge on him the worth of your soul, a thing which he understands far better than you do, and which he shows that he appreciates inasmuch as he gave up his only Son to die that souls might not perish. Ask him if he does not know what it is for a soul to be saved and what it is for a soul to be lost, and tell him that the great question between these two momentous states is now pending in your case and must be soon decided for eternity! Ask him if after all he has done and said about salvation he can refuse to save your perishing soul. Say--O my God, dost thou not know how much my soul is worth, and how certainly it is lost for ever unless thou interpose to save it?

You may mention before him your lost estate--that you are entirely dependent on his grace and mercy; that you are utterly lost to God, to happiness and to heaven, unless he has mercy on you, and you may conjure him by the love of his dear Son to take all these things into consideration.

You may also allude to his merciful disposition, and suggest how often his word has affirmed that "the Lord delighteth in mercy," and that while "judgment is his strange work, mercy is his delight." Ask him if he will not gratify his own love of showing mercy, and give you the salvation you so much need. Remind him that here is a great opportunity to magnify his mercy, and display the riches of his grace, and make an impression on the minds of both saints and sinners greatly to his own honor and to their good. Tell him that to save one so lost and so vile as you cannot but glorify his great mercy far as the case is known in earth, or hell, or heaven. Tell him how he has said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," and ask him if he will not take advantage of this opportunity to show all men how he loves to act on this divine law of benevolence.

Tell him moreover how wretched you are and must be in your sins if you cannot find salvation, and what mischief you will be likely to do everywhere, on earth and in hell, if you are not forgiven and renewed in holiness. Tell him that it is awful and makes your soul shudder to think of going on in sin and of becoming hardened past all repentance. Remind him that he has invited you to come and reason with him, and that he has virtually promised to hear and to consider your case. You do not come to justify yourself, but only to plead his great mercy and what Christ has done for you. With these very strong reasons you come before him, on his own invitation, not to complain against his justice, but to intercede for his mercy; that you must beg of him to consider the awful ruin of hell, and that you cannot escape without his help, and cannot endure its everlasting horrors. He has himself said, "Can thy heart endure, or can thy hands be strong in the day that I shall deal with thee?" Tell him your heart cannot endure this, and that this should be a strong reason why he should have mercy on your soul.

You also commit yourself entirely to his hands, and resign everything to his discretion and to his supreme disposal. Tell him you believe he will do the very best thing possible to him, all things considered, and that you shall by no means shrink from confiding your whole case to his disposal. You are not disposed to dictate or control what God shall do, but are willing to submit all to his wisdom and love. In fact you have such confidence in him that you expect he will give you salvation, for you believe he has intended to encourage you to expect this great blessing, and on this ground you do expect to find mercy. You will therefore at any rate renounce all your sin henceforth and forever. Say, "O Lord, thou knowest that I am purposed to renounce all sinning, and in this purpose I will persist and die in it if die I must, yea, go to hell, if so it must be, renouncing all my sin, and trusting in thy promised grace."

Let this be the manner of your reasoning together with God on this great question of the salvation of your soul.

II. We must now notice a few reasons which may be urged by the pardoned sinner who pleads for entire sanctification.

1. You may plead your present justification. You have already found grace in his sight. This is a good reason to be used in your plea that he would fulfil all his promises to you, and not leave his great work, already begun, unfinished.

2. You may plead your relation to Him, to the church, and to the world--that having now been justified and adopted into his family, you are known as a Christian and a child of God, and it therefore becomes of the utmost consequence that you should have grace to live so as to adorn your profession and honor the name by which you are called.

You may also plead your great responsibilities, and the weight of those interests that are depending upon your spiritual progress. Tell Him you have publicly committed yourself to his faithfulness--that you have trusted that he would keep you blameless and henceforward make his grace sufficient for you. You have professed to rely upon sanctifying grace, and how can you bear now to fail of finding all you need and all you have professed to expect?

You should notice also the matter of your influence over others, especially the influence of your example. If it is known that you frequently fall into sin, how sad must be the influence! On the other hand, if God enables you to stand up and testify continually to his sustaining grace, what a testimony is this to his praise, and what a blessing to your Christian acquaintances!

Plead the desire you feel to be completely delivered from sin. Ask him if he has not given you this very desire himself, and inquire if He intends to sharpen your thirst and yet withhold the waters of life. Ask him if you must suppose that he means to enkindle the burning desire and yet leave it for ever unsatisfied.

Plead also his expressed will. Revert to that explicit avowal--"This is the will of God, even your sanctification." Ask if he did not intend you should understand this as applicable to deliverance from all sin and therefore as an unqualified expression of his desire and will that you should be altogether free from sin even now. Ask if he has not so revealed his will on this point that you do not come to him in any uncertainty as to his will. Has He not in many forms, and in forms most clear and decisive, signified his wish that you should "perfect holiness," and rise quite above all the power of temptation? Remind Him how He has pledged his word of grace and held out before you most encouraging promises.

Tell him also how the church needs such witnesses to testify what grace has done and what they have themselves experienced. Refer to what the world is saying because the church is not sanctified, and show how great a scandal unsanctified professors are to their brethren because they testify falsely to the rich provisions of gospel grace. Plead that the church has many of them fallen almost out of sight of God's great grace, and so that they have become a sad stumbling-block to the world. Consider how much scandal and unbelief exist everywhere and ask how these great evils can be removed and evermore prevented.

Appeal to his great love for you as manifested in what Christ has done, and in his present office as your Advocate on high;--as evinced, also, in the gift of the Spirit. Tell him you must and will confide in his love. Say, "I understand it; I must and will assume it, I cannot doubt, I must not disbelieve. I do not make my appeal to one who is an alien and a stranger, but to a kind and loving Father; and I come in simple confidence as his child." Say--"I dread to offend thee and I long to live worthy of my vocation, and cannot endure to misrepresent that great and blessed grace on which my hope reposes."

So you must come to reason with your Heavenly Father. By no means forget to urge the love he has professed, and to throw yourself upon his faithfulness, pleading that He will fulfil to you all that He has promised, and gloriously finish the work He has begun. Tell him how you have stumbled many by your falls into sin and have given great occasion of reproach to the cause you love; tell Him you cannot live so--that you are ready to die under this awful burden. Cry out before Him, "How have I given thine enemies occasion to doubt thy sanctifying grace and to disbelieve thy words of promise! O, my Saviour, didst thou not give thyself to die for such a sinner as I am, to redeem me from all iniquity? and now, art thou willing that thy servants should be stumbled by me and fall over me into the depths of hell?"

Remind Him also of your dependence on Him, and that you set out in the Christian life with the understanding that without his grace to help, you could do nothing. Tell him you have consecrated yourself to Him in distinct reliance upon his promised aid, and that you cannot endure to fall so far short of what you had hoped, and what you have promised and expected. Tell him of your willingness to make any sacrifice--that there is nothing you are unwilling to give up--that you are willing to forego your good name and to lay your reputation wholly upon his altar--that there is not one sacrifice you are not willing to make and you beg of Him if He sees a single thing held so dear to your heart that you are not willing to sacrifice it for his sake, to show you what it is, and press you to forsake it. Assure Him that if self-denial comes in his service you are willing to meet all the consequences. You are ready to confess his grace to you and not conceal it from the great congregation. Can you say this? If so, do it. Tell him you are ready to die to the world--ready to give it all up and renounce it utterly and forever. You are determined you will have no more fellowship with the works of darkness--to have the world become dead to you and you to the world. You are ready to meet all and bear all that the service of Christ may impose and involve. No matter if the world disowns you and casts you out from its regard and fellowship. You have counted the cost and are ready to meet it all.

Urge as a further reason that you are willing to become dead to a worldly and unbelieving church--that you are ready to die even to their good opinion--to be excommunicated if they will do it; to be cast out if they will cast you out. You shrink not from being reputed a heretic, if you may only have grace to overcome all sin and every temptation. You wish to please but one, and you are quite satisfied with pleasing God only. This shall be your object, and this, attained, shall fully satisfy your soul. You are willing to give up all idols and live to Him alone. No matter if your name be cast out as evil and trodden down as vile, by the church, by her ministry, by all men, if you may only live to please God. Tell Him you are willing to renounce all creature help, and all earthly reliances, with only one great inquiry--How can I most and best please God?

Be sure to remind him that you intend to be wholly disinterested and unselfish in this matter; you ask these things not for your own present selfish interest; you are aware that a really holy life may subject you to much persecution--you know that "if any man will live godly in Christ Jesus, he shall suffer persecution;" and you are well aware that if you receive this cleansing, it may bring on you much persecution;--you come not therefore to ask for present personal good, for you expect only greater trials; but you will consent to endure anything that does not involve sin. You want to represent him truly. You want to encourage all Christians and all sinners too to seek abounding grace by showing them how you have found mercy.

Then tell Him of your great weakness, and how you entirely distrust yourself; how, oftentimes, you are covered with confusion and filled with shame so that you cannot lift up your head and you are constrained to cry, O, my God, dost thou not pity thy child? Tell Him you loathe yourself--that you would fain spue yourself out of your own mouth, because you so much dishonor Him. Tell him you despair utterly of saving yourself, but that you still have unshaken confidence in Him. Remind Him moreover of his promises, and say that you are encouraged because you know that you are asking mercy of a most gracious God. Tell Him you shall go away greatly disappointed if you do not receive the grace you ask and need. As said a dear sister in a great struggle of her soul for spiritual blessings--"O, my God, thou hast made me exceeding great and precious promises; now if thou dost not give me these blessings, what can I say any more for thee? How can I plead for thee if thou dost shut me up in my desolations? How can I ever again present thy strong claims to be believed and trusted as to all thy words of gracious promise?"

Thus making your strong issue, you come pleading not your goodness but your badness;--appealing not to God's justice, but to his mercy; telling him how poor you are and how rich he is, and that therefore you cannot bear to go away empty.

REMARKS.

1. Whenever we have considered the reasons for God's actions till they have really moved and persuaded us, they will surely move Him. God is not slow--never slower than we, to see the reasons for showing mercy and for leading us to holiness.

2. Many fail in coming to God because they do not treat Him as a rational being. Instead of considering him as a rational being, they come without ever considering the reasons why he should and will forgive and sanctify. Of course, failing to have faith, and having views altogether dishonoring to God, they fail to get the blessing they seek.

3. Many do not present these reasons, because in honesty they cannot. Now God assumes that we ought to be in a state of mind to present all these reasons honestly. If we are not in such a state, we ought not to expect blessings.

4. When we want anything of God, we should always consider whether we can present good reasons why it should be granted. If you were to apply to any other being, e.g., your Governor, you would of course ask in the outset--Can I give any good reasons? If you are to appeal to justice, you must ask--Have I any good reasons to offer? So if you want favours on the score of mercy, what reasons have you to offer why they should be granted? If you have reasons, be sure to offer them, and by no means assume that you shall get your case without reasons.

5. All who are in any want are invited to come and bring forward their strong reasons. If in sorrow, distress, affliction, come and present your plea. If you are a sinner, oppressed with a sense of sin, fear not to unbosom your heart before your God. All those who are under any afflictive dispensation should come, like Job, and tell God how deeply you are afflicted. Why not? Did not saints of old say to God, "Doubtless thou art our Father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not?"

Christian parents, you are invited to come and present your strong reasons why your children should be converted. Come and tell God how much you need this blessing. Tell him you cannot endure that all your prayers in their behalf should come to naught, that the great labour of your life should fail, and worse than fail, as it must if your children of the covenant should disgrace religion and press their way through throngs of offered mercies down to hell.

Backsliders should come and tell God all their case. Ask him if he will not break your chains, and bring you back, and put a new song into your mouth, even of praise for recovering grace.

6. Of all beings, God is most easily influenced to save. He is by his very nature disposed to save the lost. He loves to let his mercies flow. You have only to bring forth your strong reasons; indeed you have only to come in the spirit of a child, trustful and lowly, and your case is gained. You need not come with a bribe; you need not come and offer pay. No; you have only to come and say--I want to serve God; for this end I need spiritual blessings. Tell him how much He has loved you, and how often and richly He has manifested this love; and plead that He would still show forth this same love yet more abundantly, that you may still follow on in his service, and never more be confounded and put to shame and sorrow for your own grievous sins.

7. We, of Oberlin, have peculiar reasons to urge why God should appear for the conversion and salvation of sinners among us. Just look here, brethren, you who have come here to embosom this institution with your influence and your prayers--have you no special reasons to urge why God should bless this place and sanctify this school, and convert to Himself these precious souls? O come and ask God if the growing people of this great nation, already outstripping the progress of the means of grace, must not become almost heathen, if his infinite mercy does not descend on all our schools and colleges and mold these young minds to Himself! These young women, what shall their influence be when they become wives and mothers, and are scattered over the breadth of the land? And these young men, destined to stand on the high places of social and moral power--shall the Great West feel their influence--and the distant South, shall it and its peculiar institutions feel the touch of their power? And the East--shall it know the weight of their principle and of their educated and sanctified talent? O have we not reason to plead mightily with God! O how many young palpitating hearts are here which need to be drawn into God's work and into the spirit of full consecration to the Lord of Hosts! Christians, have you no plea, no special, peculiar plea to urge in behalf of interests so great and so pressing?

Sinners in Oberlin, have you not some plea to urge? O, my stony heart, go not down to ruin from this Oberlin! Say rather, O my God, wash all my sins away; O fulfil thy promise and make me white as snow. Let me not die, but live and declare the high praises of my God for evermore!