

SERMONS AND ESSAYS

BY THE

TENNENTS

AND THEIR CONTEMPORARIES,

COMPILED FOR THE BOARD.

by S. D. Alexander.

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SERMON II.

THE DIVINE MERCY.

BY THE REV. GILBERT TENNENT.

“And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering.—Exodus xxxiv. 6.

* * * * * IN discoursing upon this divine attribute of mercy, it will be necessary to speak upon its *nature*, *kinds*, and *properties*. And

1st. Mercy, in respect of its *nature*, may be thus described, viz: That it is the goodness of God extended to the miserable. Here good and bad angels are excluded: the good, because they are not miserable, and the bad, because they are wholly given up to justice. “But God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness to be reserved unto judgment.” 2 Pet. ii. 4. Or the mercy of God may be thus described, viz: That it is that property of the Supreme Being whereby he is inclined to succour his creatures in misery, together with its kind effects upon them. Here observe, 1st, that the special object of mercy is the creature in misery, and thus it is distinguished from

other attributes. Goodness considers its object as *indigent*, and so communicates needed benefits, but mercy considers its object as *miserable*, because of sin; and therefore, though an innocent creature be the object of divine goodness and bounty, it is only a fallen and sinning creature that is the proper object of God's mercy. Grace is mercy or goodness freely dispensed, and therefore it considers its object, not only as miserable, but unworthy. Whereas, long-suffering consists in the suspension of merited vengeance, and the communication of unmerited benefits. Thus you may see that all these attributes of the Deity import the communication of some good to the creature, and are only distinguished in relation to the objects upon which they are exercised. Misery is the foil of mercy, it can have no other object; hence it is said, that "his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel." Judg. x. 16. Undoubtedly the virtue of mercy was in God from all eternity, but there was no room or occasion for its displays, till the creature's fatal fall from God, and misery consequent upon it, proved it an object to be exercised upon. Man by sin robbed himself of his beauty and happiness, and exposed himself to all the manifold miseries of this and the next life; all which are included in the sentence of death annexed to the breach of the first covenant. As man by sin had lost all right to happiness, and, on the contrary, rendered himself liable to all the threats of the divine law; so by this he likewise became "altogether unprofitable," (Rom. iii. 1, 2,) having lost all his original power to glorify God by active obedience, and

thus he had no ground from himself to expect the divine favour.

2d. Seeing the misery of fallen mankind is twofold, viz: of sin, and punishment; consequently, the operations of mercy consist in affording suitable succours under these maladies. In respect of sin, the mercy of God succours in the following instances:

1. In reconciling sinners to himself, by the blood of his only begotten Son. 2 Cor. v. 18. For the purchase of which reconciliation, the eternal Father gave his beloved Son to shame, pain and death. John iii. 16. And for the application thereof, he confers faith upon the elect, whereby they are enabled to accept and rely upon the blessed Jesus as Mediator and Reconciler. And

2. By renewing sinners by his Spirit, whereby the tyranny and dominion of sin is broken, and the people of God enabled to overcome sin, and triumph over it. "Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof." Rom. vii. 12. "I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." Rom. vii. 25.

In respect of punishment, divine mercy succours in the following manner:

1. By bearing with the sinner for a time before judgment is inflicted. "What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?" Rom. ix. 22.

2. By threatening punishments against the impenitent, in order to reclaim them from their trespasses. God warns

before he wounds, and sends his servants to slay sinners by his word, before he slays them by his sword.

3. By pointing to a remedy, whereby the impending stroke of divine justice may be averted. "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil I thought to do unto them." Jer. xviii. 7, 8. If sinners repent of the evil of sin, God will avert the evil of judgment.

4. By inviting, and expostulating with, sinners to accept of the remedy proposed. "Come now, and let us reason together; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Isa. i. 18. "Thus saith the Lord, what iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity and become vain?" Jer. ii. 5.

5. By receiving into favour those that comply with the remedy, how great soever their trespasses have been, by forgiving their sins, sanctifying and sweetening their sorrows, and supporting them under them by his Spirit, love and power. "Who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases." Ps. ciii. 3. "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee." 2 Cor. xii. 9. "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort, who comforteth us in all our tribulation." 2 Cor. i. 3, 4.
And

6. When he begins to inflict deserved judgment, (in general,) he doth it by degrees, first he sends lighter calamities, and when those do not reclaim the sinner, he sends heavier. In the day of God's rough wind, he stays his east wind. First rods are tried, and if those do not avail, scorpions may be expected. Jehovah does not all at once stir up "all his wrath." Ps. lxxviii. 38. But the

2d proposition was to speak of the *kinds* of mercy. Now the mercy of God may be said to be two-fold, viz: either *common* or *special*. Common mercy consists in conferring without distinction upon the children of men, the outward comforts and conveniences of life, and hence the Almighty is said to cause his sun to rise upon the evil and the good, and to send his rain upon the just and the unjust. Matt. v. 45. But the special mercy of God consists in conferring upon the elect, such things as do accompany salvation, and that through Christ, in the channel of the new covenant. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings, in heavenly places, in Christ." Eph. i. 3. But I proceed to the

3d proposition, which was to discourse upon the *properties* of divine mercy. And

1. It is *eternal*. "The mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting." Ps. ciii. 17. It is repeated twenty-six times in one psalm, "that his mercy endureth for ever." Ps. cxxxvi. And this may justly enhance our esteem of it, and desire after it. Though God may hide

his face for a little moment, yet with everlasting kindness will he return to his people. And

2. God's mercy is *great*, and hence God is said to be "plenteous in mercy." Ps. lxxxvi. 5. "Rich in mercy." Eph. ii. 4. And, in Psalm li. 1, we read of the multitude of his "tender mercies." And in 2 Sam. xxiv. 14, his mercies are expressly said to be "great." But methinks the greatness of God's mercy appears especially by considering these two things, viz: What is the sinner's *due*, according to strict justice, and the *mitigation* thereof which he enjoys in this world? Surely "the wages of sin is death." Rom. vi. 23. Which includes all the miseries of this present life, as well as the pains of hell hereafter. Now, therefore, every mitigation of those miseries, every comfort the sinner enjoys, is mercy; it is what the sinner has forfeited a right to; it is what he deserves not.

3. The mercy of God is *incomparable*. "They say, if a man put away his wife, and she go from him and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? But thou hast played the harlot with many lovers, yet return unto me, saith the Lord." Jer. iii. 1. The merciful God exceeds his creatures both in giving and forgiving. And

1st. In *giving*. Our donations are often extorted from us, but He gives of his own accord, without any incentive but what is in his own bosom. Isa. lxxv. 1.

We give but small gifts, but He gives the greatest, viz: Himself, his Son, his Spirit, his kingdom. Job iii. 16.

We give to our friends, but Jehovah confers many donations on his enemies. Matt. v. 45.

We are soon weary of giving, but so is not God; he is unwearied in his mercy (to the penitent); "he giveth liberally and upbraideth not." James i. 5. And

2d. The merciful God exceeds his creatures in *forgiving*.

Men are revengeful to those that wrong them, but God is "merciful and gracious, long suffering," as our text asserts. How remarkable, to this purpose, are these words of the prophet, "I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man!" Hos. xi. 9.

Men are difficultly drawn to forgive, and cannot forgive often; but God is ready to pardon (Neh. ix. 17); and does multiply pardons.

Sometimes men forgive when it is not in their power to revenge themselves, but sinners are always under God's control and within the reach of his arm.

4. The mercy of God is *sure* and infallible. "Incline your ear and come unto me, hear and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." Isa. lv. 3. And hence it is that the gifts and callings of God are said to be without repentance, and that the foundation of God stands sure. The Lord knoweth who are his. God's special mercy to his people is built upon the sure and invariable foundation of his purposes and promises, as well as the satisfaction and intercession of Christ. And

5. God's mercy is *free*. "In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated, according to the purpose of him, who worketh all things after the coun-

sel of his own will." Eph. i. 11. Albeit the virtue of mercy belongs to God, in respect of his being, yet the dispensation of it depends entirely upon God's good pleasure, and hence the apostle Paul informs us, that "it is not of him that will-eth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy," and that "he hath mercy upon whom he will have mercy, and whom he will, he hardeneth." Rom. ix. 16, 18.

Now, because when such things as are really or seemingly contrary are put together, they illustrate each other; it may not be improper, before I proceed to the improvement of this subject, to discourse upon the severity of God in his judgments, which is seemingly opposed to his mercy. Of this, mention is made in Rom. xi. 22, and in many other places of scripture; and of this there are many examples upon sacred record, such as the instance of the fallen angels, our first parents, the old world, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, Korah, Dathan, Abiram, Achan, Ananias and Sapphira, and many others. From which we may gather that God's judgments, which he exercises by his severity, are no other than singular punishments, inflicted for singular offences. The meritorious cause of them is some aggravated iniquity, the nature of which is often pointed out by the punishment inflicted, which is not common but singular. Adonibezek, who had cut off the thumbs and great toes of threescore and ten kings, was served so himself. Judges i. 6, 7. And hence Samuel saith concerning Agag, that "as his sword made women childless, so his mother should be childless among women." 1 Sam. xv. 33. Hence the Lord elsewhere threatens that those

who shed the blood of others, should themselves have blood to drink. Thus you see that the punishment does often resemble the sin that procured it. Now the judgments of God are of various kinds, viz: Spiritual or bodily, private or public. Spiritual judgments are such as these, viz: A famine of the word. Amos viii. 11, 12. Leanness and backsliding. Rev. ii. 5. Errors in judgment. "And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." 2 Thess. ii. 10, 11. Corporal judgments are war, pestilence, famine, drought and the like. Now the procuring causes of public and epidemical judgments are such as the following, viz: Ingratitude against God. Isa. i. 3. Contempt of his word. "Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers? did not the Lord, he against whom we have sinned? for they would not walk in his ways, neither were they obedient unto his law." Isa. xlii. 24. Another cause of judgments, is slighting of the ministers of God. "But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his word, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy." 2 Chron. xxxvi. 16. Besides, pride and idolatry are procuring causes of divine judgments. "The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be brought down." Isa. ii. 11. Jer. ii. 13, 14. Likewise the following evils against our neighbour, are causes of divine judgments, viz: Oppression of the poor. "The Lord will enter into judgment with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof; for ye have eaten up the vineyard, the spoil of the

poor is in your houses." Isa. iii. 14. 2d. Wronging the widow and fatherless. "They judge not the fatherless, neither does the cause of the widow come before them." Isa. i. 23. 3d. Cheating the labourer of his hire. "Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong, that useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work." Jer. xxii. 13. The prophet Hosea mentions a number of causes together, in the fourth chapter of his book, verses 1, 2. "Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel, for the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out and blood toucheth blood, therefore shall the land mourn." To the aforesaid causes of divine judgments I may add covetousness and hypocrisy. "Woe unto them that join house to house—therefore my people are gone into captivity." Isa. v. 8, 13. "O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger—I will send him against a hypocritical nation." Isa. x. 6. Here it may be observed, that judgments are not always sent, except the aforesaid evils become general, and are attended with impudence, after various warnings. Jer. v. 1. Isa. iii. 9. Ps. xc. 10, 11. Now the judgments of God are always just, and sometimes unsearchable and wonderful; for sometimes he not only sends them on the ungodly, but upon his own people. Yea, as the apostle Peter observes, "Judgment begins at the house of God." The Lord threatened his people of old, that them only he

had known of all the families of the earth, therefore he would punish them for their iniquities. Hence David tells us, that his flesh trembled for fear of God, and that he was afraid of God's judgments. I may add that the end of God's punishments is the glory of God's holiness, the conversion and humiliation of some, and the hardening of others. Witness the prodigal, Pharaoh, and others. But it is time to proceed to the improvement of this subject. And

1st. We should be cautious of abusing God's mercy; let us beware that we suck not poison out of that sweet flower. To take encouragement to go on in sin, because of God's mercy, is the vilest instance of ingratitude, and justly exposes to an aggravated condemnation; abused mercy turns into enraged fury and vengeance. "If he bless himself, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk after the imagination of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst; the Lord will not spare him, but the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him." Deut. xxix. 19.

2d. The mercy of God offers encouragement and support to the people of God, in all their distresses, whether outward or inward. Are they afflicted with outward straits? The merciful God, who is their Shepherd, will not suffer them to want, but make their bread and water sure. He that hears and feeds the ravens, will surely hear and help his children. Have they backslidden from God, and are they labouring to be sorrowfully sensible thereof? Then

may they encourage themselves in this, that all God's ways are mercy and truth, and that the mercy of Jehovah endureth for ever. He will begin and end with mercy, and such as are under the first convictions of sin may take encouragement from the mercy of God, which is great above the heavens, and most freely dispensed upon the vilest creatures. Mercy considers not what one deserves, but what he needs. God is more inclined to mercy than wrath. Justice and judgment is his strange work, but mercy is his delight. Micah vii. 18. "It is delightful to the mother," saith Chrysostom, "to have her breasts drawn; so it is to God to have the breasts of his mercy drawn." The Almighty is slow to anger, but ready to forgive. Ps. lxxxvi. 5. Let us, therefore, entertain honourable thoughts of God's mercy, and trust in it for ever. Ps. liii. 8. What greater encouragement can there be to believe, than the mercy of God? Mercy is one of the most orient pearls of the crown of God; he reckons it his glory to be conferring pardons upon penitent transgressors; and, therefore, he invites poor sinners to come and lay hold on his mercy. "Whosoever will, let him come and take of the water of life freely." Rev. xxii. 17. Mercy woos sinners in the most importunate, moving and condescending strains. "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat: come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Isa. lv. 1. And what joy does the Almighty express, when sinners accept of the proposals of his mercy! when the prodigal son returned from his wanderings, how much did

it please the indulgent father, who made a feast to express his joy on that occasion !

We should be induced to inquire into the state of our souls, in order to know whether we have an interest in the special mercy of God or not. For it will be miserable and ruining to us in the issue, if we content ourselves with common mercies. Now we may be helped to determine this important point, by an impartial comparing of ourselves with the following particulars, viz :

1. Those who have an interest in the special mercy of God, have been (if of adult age when converted) made sensible of their misery without it, and their unworthiness of it, with the prodigal and publican.

2. They have been stirred up to solicitous inquiries, how they might obtain an interest therein. Acts ii. 37.

3. Such have, deliberately and without reserve, consented to embrace Christ Jesus (the fountain of mercy) in all his offices and relations, and resolved to bear his cross and obey his laws. Job i. 12.

4. And, in consequence hereof, they find the general bias of their affections going towards God, and an habitual carefulness to do the things that are pleasing to him. Now, those who, upon examination, find themselves destitute of the aforesaid characters, should, in order to obtain mercy,

1. Think seriously of all the kindnesses of heaven towards them, together with their innumerable sins against those mercies, and the dangers to which they are thereby exposed.
2. Attend with diligence upon the preached word; for it is by the foolishness of preaching that God saves those

that believe. 3. Bewail your sins against the mercies of God; let the goodness of God lead you to repentance. 4. Try to reform your lives. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the ungodly man his thoughts, and let him turn unto the Lord, for he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." And, 5. Pray earnestly and frequently to God for mercy, in the name of Christ, with fear and hope.

And let me exhort those that have obtained the special mercy of God to walk worthy of it. 1. Praise God for his mercy in the Psalmist's language: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name." Ps. ciii. 1. Such as have been monuments of mercy, should be trumpets of praise.

2. Love God. Mercy is a powerful excitant to this. "I will love thee, O Lord, my strength." Ps. xviii. 1. Surely that heart is harder than marble and adamant, which mercy will not melt. "I would hate my own soul, (saith Austin,) if I did not find it loving God." We should love God for outward comforts, but much more for special and enduring mercies.

3. Let us imitate the mercy of God, in showing mercy to our fellow creatures. God is the Father of mercy, show yourselves to be his children by being like him. It was a just observation of Ambrose, "that the sum of religion is to be rich in works of mercy." O let the lamp of our profession be filled with the oil of mercy! And to this our dear Lord exhorts us, "Be merciful, as your Father also is merciful." Matt. vi. 36. But let the

despisers and abusers of mercy, who go on in a course of any of the evils before mentioned, which procure the judgments of God, be entreated to repent, and reform speedily, otherwise ye may expect the dreadful effects of divine severity in some or all of the instances thereof before expressed. By your ungrateful return for mercies received, "you treasure up wrath against the day of wrath, and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God." Though God be gracious and merciful, slow to wrath, yet will he by no means clear the guilty.