

Eleventh Passion-Sermon

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Christ's Prayer On The Cross.—The Malefactor On The Right.

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Luke 23, 32-43.

And there were also two others, malefactors, led with Him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted His raiment, and cast lots. And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided Him, saying, He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He be Christ, the chosen of God. And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming to Him, and offering Him vinegar, and saying, If Thou be the King of the Jews, save Thyself. And a superscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, This is the King of the Jews. And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, If Thou lie Christ, save Thyself and us. But the other answering, rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? and we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To-day shall thou be with me in paradise.

The holy Evangelist here mentions two things that are very consolatory. Therefore, although the other Evangelists have omitted them in their record of Christ's sufferings, we shall treat of them here, so that this record may be before us in its completeness. The first of these things is, that Christ, immediately after the cross, to which He had been nailed, was erected, began to pray, saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." The other thing we wish to notice is, that the malefactor on the right of Christ, hearing this prayer, learned from it that Jesus was the Son of God and the very Christ, and therefore desired to be remembered by Him when He should have come into His kingdom.

Let us now consider these two things, for they are full of consolation and we can never sufficiently meditate upon them nor explain them. And, besides all this, it is necessary for us, not only to behold the works and sufferings of this Man, but also most carefully to heed the words proclaimed by Him; for these declare the reason of His deeds and sufferings, and their consequence.

It is of the greatest importance, however, to distinguish between the suffering of our Lord Jesus and that of all other men. This distinction is momentous, not only because Jesus Christ is eternal God, who created heaven and earth and all things, but also because His suffering had a peculiar cause, and because the benefit, or fruit, of His suffering is such that it could not have been pro-

Eleventh Passion-Sermon

duced by the suffering of any other man, or of an angel, or of any creature. He suffered, as you lately heard, not for Himself, but for us, that we might be delivered from sin and death. This we also learn from the words He here speaks in our text, which words it behooves every Christian to observe and to entwine in his soul as his most precious treasure and comfort.

The words He spoke upon the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," clearly show, that He was attending to His true priestly office even while suspended in the air upon the cross; and that He was fulfilling the work which brought Him to earth, not only with His suffering, in that He sacrificed Himself, but also with prayer, both sacrifice and prayer belonging to the office of the priest. Christ tells us that the sacrifice consisted chiefly in His sanctifying Himself for our sakes, so that we "also might be sanctified through the truth," John 17; or, according to John 10, in His laying down His "life for the sheep." There are many more passages of this kind, all of which show that His sufferings were not to be for Himself, but for us. The zeal with which He here performed this work and offered this sacrifice was such that He even prayed that the Father would forgive those who crucified Him, —that He would pardon and not punish their sin. He prayed thus that all might know why He was brought to the cross, and that they might receive comfort from this knowledge.

This prayer, therefore, should teach us, first of all, that our dear Lord Jesus is a priest, and that He fulfilled the duties of His priestly office there upon the cross. To pray for sinners is, indeed, one of the proper employments of the priesthood. Now, Aaron, serving under the law, was invested with peculiar priestly apparel made for glory and for beauty. But would we know with what priestly robes Christ was clad and what the altar was at which He served, we need merely look at the cross. There we see Him entirely naked, full of wounds and void of every trace of sacerdotal splendor. Still He attended to His priestly

duties most perfectly and carefully, even praying for His foes. Let us not be offended at His unpriestly appearance, for the work of this Priest has a significance entirely different from that of Moses' priests. This difference we learn even from the superscription written over Him, which declares Him to be "The King of the Jews," the correctness of which title He had Himself publicly and clearly confessed before Pilate.

Neither does this title harmonize with His appearance. Instead of wearing a scarlet robe, His body is covered with blood and wounds and bruises. Instead of a golden crown. He wears a crown of thorns. There upon the cross we see a Priest and King, of whom the world is ashamed, whom the world despises, and whom it regards as neither King nor Priest. This is just what Isaiah says: "When we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not." This Priest offers us His own body and blood upon the cross in a place that was dishonored, desecrated, yea, accursed. This shall ever be our dearest, loveliest and most graceful garment, no matter how it is regarded by the world and the natural eye. Bulls, heifers and calves were sacrificed in the temple upon a consecrated altar, but Christ sacrifices Himself upon an altar that was not consecrated. Gallows and places of execution are to this day horrid and dishonorable, and Moses writes: "He that is hanged is accursed of God." Now, the world thinks it disgraceful and dishonorable that this Priest was not permitted to bring His offering even to the place where heifers and calves were sacrificed. But this was for us and for our good, that we might learn that He has brought a fully satisfactory offering for our sins, as it was stated already in the preceding sermon. Since our sins could not be atoned for and removed by any other than this Priest who is the eternal Son of God, it is our fault that He could not have a more honorable altar and a more

Eleventh Passion-Sermon

precious garment. This is no hindrance, however, to the discharge of His office. He not only does offer His body and blood, but also prays for poor, ignorant sinners.

We should, therefore, be heartily comforted because of this Priest and His office. Even as He suffers not alone for those who were present at His crucifixion, took hold of Him and nailed Him to the cross, so neither does He pray for them alone, but also for us, otherwise the prayer of Christ would receive too limited an interpretation. Those present then were merely our servants and ministers. Had it not been my sin and thy sin that nailed the Lord Jesus to the cross, these men would surely not have been able to molest Him.

He now comes forward as the true High Priest and Lamb of God, by the sacrifice of Himself to atone for the sins of all the world and to conquer death for men, and this is the only reason why the Jews and Gentiles receive power to harm Him. Thus we see that when He prays for those who crucify Him, He prays for us and all men, who by our sins had furnished the cause for His crucifixion and death. For this reason we should not regard the gallows, or the cross, on which Christ suffered, as anything else than that altar, upon which He offers up His life and at which He discharges the priestly duty of prayer, to the end that we might be free from sin and everlasting death. For whoever takes sin away, takes away death also, because when sin is gone then death has lost its power, and therefore hell also.

Christ, our only and eternal High Priest, is the One who has done this for us on the cross. He has reconciled us to God, without the intervention of our works, by His own sufferings, having been made a curse for us, having died upon the cross for our sins, and having finally prayed for sinners. Let us, therefore, not forget heartily to thank Him for this. ...

Let us, therefore, open our hearts and behold Christ, our High Priest, in His proper priestly garment and at His proper priestly work. The eye

does not see Him arrayed in beauty or in wealth, but finds Him ignominiously hanging there in misery and wretchedness. But if we look into His heart we shall discover ornaments so bright and treasures so rich that we can never thank Him for them sufficiently. He is adorned, in the first place, with that most sincere obedience in which He glorifies His Father by permitting Himself to be spit upon, scourged and tortured. In this life we cannot fully comprehend the glory of this ornament; still we can understand enough of it to know that all pearls and purple and gold are nothing beside it. His other ornament is that great love He has for us which makes Him care so little about His life and His sufferings, almost forgetting them in the heart-felt interest He takes in our condition and in our need, and praying for us rather than for Himself. We cannot sufficiently understand such love as this; for in the heart of the Lord there is burning such a flame of love for us, that He does not seem to see or to feel His own most severe suffering, torture and disgrace, but only considers and perceives and cares for thy and my misery, distress and affliction.

We cannot help acknowledging that the love of the Lord, who is so concerned about us that He entirely overlooks His own danger, injury and pain, is indeed a mighty, burning love. Father and mother, when their dear child is in danger or want, rush through the fire to save it, caring not for their own safety, but only for that of their child. The love of our Lord Jesus is also such that He passes through affliction as through a fire, to grasp us with the hand of mercy and affection. Now, this is the fitting garment with which our eternal High Priest is arrayed. This is not an outer vestment for the eye of reason to behold; but the eye of faith perceives it in Jesus within, as His words also sufficiently testify. .

The chief thing in the entire history of the passion is that Christ gave Himself for us and, caring for nothing as much as for our deliverance, reached toward us, and pursued us through all manner of affliction as through a fire. To this

Eleventh Passion-Sermon

main point we should pay especial attention, and cling to it so closely that it cannot be wrested from our hands. ...

The Lord does not ... pray at random, but makes a distinction between those for whom He prays and others, saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." He thus designates two classes of sinners. Some know that they do wrong, and still do so without fear, prompted by pure malice and hatred against the acknowledged divine truth. These commit the "sin unto death," as it is called 1 John 5, that is, the sin Against the Holy Ghost, if they continue in such willful sin and do not confess, abstain from and ask forgiveness for it, but remain impenitent to the end, and besides blaspheme the Word of God and the truth which cannot be gainsaid, ...

[Some sinners sin maliciously.] Other sinners sin ignorantly. But we must understand their case correctly. David, for instance, knew well enough that he was doing wrong and sinning against God in taking the wife of Uriah and then having him slain. But his carnal lust and the devil so impetuously impelled him to the deed that he committed it before rightly considering what he was doing. Afterward, however, he confessed his sin, was grieved by it, wished that he had not committed it, and prayed for mercy.

We all are encumbered with this sin and are easily and unawares led astray. Sometimes we fall through fear, sometimes through carelessness and weakness, like Peter, and sometimes through presumptuousness. Such sins Christ bore with Him to the cross and for such He prayed; for these are bare and naked sins, which are not inconsistent with grace, being recognized and confessed and their forgiveness being sought. Thus we often find that harlots, villains, murderers, and other wicked people, who know that they have done wrong and make no attempt at justifying themselves, find mercy. To the believer God does not impute such acknowledged sins, because the sacrifice of Christ is interposed between them and

God. But they who knowingly and willfully persist in sin and even excuse their sins, sin against the Holy Ghost and deny the grace of God. For them Christ does not pray here, but only for those who know not what they do, and who, as said before, fall through fear, weakness and the like. The latter can rely upon the offering and prayer of Christ and can be assured that their sins are forgiven, for Christ here prays for them, and His prayer was surely accepted. We must not doubt this, but find in it consolation and joy.

So much it was meet briefly to say concerning Christ's prayer on the cross, with which He declares why He is suffering there, namely, that they who sin ignorantly and then repent might, for His sake, have a merciful God, who does not impute to them, but graciously forgives, their sin.

Let us now look a little also at the history of the malefactor on the right of Christ. We can nowhere find an incident of more remarkable beauty than here. The poor fellow cannot deny his sins; he knows that he has sinned, and that he must now die for his sins. He cannot, therefore, boast before God of any good works, or of any merit of his own. He even reproves his comrade, who, railing on the Lord Jesus, said, "If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us," by answering him thus: We are indeed justly punished, "for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this Man hath done nothing amiss." He thus confesses that he had well deserved that dreadful death. It is a matter of astonishment, therefore, in the first place, that, having every reason to fear God on account of his sins, the malefactor still was confident, as we shall hear, that the Lord Jesus would take him with Him into His kingdom.

It is a matter of great astonishment, in the second place, that this one man did not stumble at the huge stumbling-stone laid in his way by the entire council of Jerusalem, including the temporal and spiritual government, which mocked and reviled the Lord Jesus. The chief spiritual rulers

Eleventh Passion-Sermon

said: "He saved others, let Him save Himself, if He be Christ, the Chosen of God." The soldiers also mocked Him, saying, "If Thou be the King of the Jews, save Thyself;" for the superscription written over Him declared that He was "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." The malefactor crucified on the left of Christ said: "If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us." This he said, not because he desired help, but because he wanted to insult and ridicule the Lord. In short, the whole world is offended in Christ, who hangs on the cross, and it does not esteem Him. Even the disciples, although a part of them stood by the cross, had lost all hope.

The poor malefactor on the right alone steps over the rock of offence and dares to call Christ, who hangs on the cross at his side, a Lord and King. He gives the lie to all the world, cares not what others think of him, and proclaims Christ to be an everlasting King. Those are his words: "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." He calls Christ a Lord, says He has a kingdom, and desires Him, when He shall have entered His kingdom, to remember him. Now, the time rendered it certain, that neither of them could live till evening. Therefore he believes that Christ is the Lord of another and an eternal life. This faith and this confession, found, as it was, in the midst of a world that despaired of Christ and hated Him, must have been indeed a great and exquisite faith, — a glorious confession.

The question may occur to us, whence could the malefactor have obtained this abundant and accurate knowledge, by which he was able to recognize and proclaim Christ as the Lord of eternal life, or who could have been his instructor? Without a doubt, he learned this alone from Christ's prayer on the cross. The prophet Isaiah, chap. 53, declares that the Messiah should suffer and be "numbered with the transgressors," and also that He should bear "the sins of many and make intercession for the transgressors." This prophecy was fulfilled on the cross. The innocent

Lord, who had done no evil, hangs there between two murderers. And as He begins to pray, and says, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," the malefactor catches the little word "Father." People were not in the habit of conversing with God in this way. Christ is the only One who can speak thus to God, and He it is who has taught us thus to speak. The malefactor hence concludes that Christ must be God's Son, and recognizes Him, by His praying for sinners, as the true Messiah, or Christ. The quoted passages from Isaiah, and similar passages from other prophets which he had heard, either in the temple at Jerusalem, or elsewhere in some synagogue, but which he had not understood, now, no doubt, occurred to him. He takes these passages together, and the Holy Spirit makes these prophecies so bright and clear to his soul that he can contain himself no longer, but confesses with his lips what he believes in his heart, and says, "Lord, remember me When Thou comest into Thy kingdom."

He would say: Thou art the Son of God. For our sins Thou sufferest on earth this dreadful death upon the cross. But Thou shalt afterward ascend into an everlasting kingdom and be Lord over all. There, O Lord, remember me! I am willing now to die, for I have well deserved death. But do Thou not forget me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom. — Behold, what a deep knowledge of Christ Jesus this man derived from Christ's short prayer! This prayer was the sermon that taught him true wisdom.

The knowledge and confession of Christ which proceeded from the malefactor on the cross, is the very same knowledge and confession by which God preserves the Christian Church today. Though everything else should fail, and emperors, kings, popes and bishops cease to be, God will still retain a small company that shall have His Spirit and that shall confess His name before the world. When the disciples, and others who are closely allied to the Lord Jesus, refuse to confess and believe, and deny the Lord through fear, and

Eleventh Passion-Sermon

are offended in Him and desert Him, then some malefactor or murderer must appear, to confess this Christ, to preach concerning Him, and to teach others what they should think of Him and why they should be comforted in Him. The Lord our God is determined not to leave Christ without followers who confess Him, even if He must have recourse to the thief upon the gallows, or the murderer upon the wheel.

This is, therefore, a consoling history; for it teaches us, first of all, that they who follow Christ and receive all mercy from Him, are none other than those sinners who confess their sins and heartily pray for grace; these shall receive grace and mercy. With His previous prayer, "Father, forgive them," &c., His present action corresponds; He suffers now, that sin may be forgiven. And then, upon the cross, before He dies, the dear Lord soon proves, in the case of the malefactor, or murderer, how beneficial and powerful His sufferings are and what they avail. He there proves that His sufferings benefit all poor sinners who, with the malefactor, believe and confess that Christ is an eternal King; that by His agony, death and resurrection He has acquired for them the forgiveness of their sins and their deliverance from everlasting death; and that He will take them into His eternal kingdom.

Hence we can conclude with such certainty as not to entertain the vestige of a doubt, that Christ did not offer Himself on the cross for saints, for no mortal, let him be who he may, is holy of himself; but that He offered Himself for sinners, for He came to call sinners to repentance and not the righteous, as He Himself says, Matt. 9. Therefore, he who tries to get to heaven by means of a holy life, good works, and personal merits, deceives himself. He who does not confess himself a sinner, can find no access to the Lord Jesus; for Christ did not die for His own, but for the sinner's sake.

Christ converted the malefactor on the cross into a saint, not suffering him to remain and

to perish in his sins. We should therefore regard this history as an example showing by very deed what the Redeemer sought and acquired by His sufferings, and what He accomplished by the priestly sacrifice and prayer which He offered on the cross. He took sin upon Himself, not because He delights in sin, neither because He would have us remain under sin and continue in iniquity. No, He suffers for sinners so that they need not go on in sin, and so that they may become converted and be pious and holy. This His purpose was accomplished in the case of the malefactor, who, being converted, accused himself of sin, but still trusted in the Lord Jesus, believing that God, through Him and for His sake, would forgive his sins and give him life eternal.

The malefactor is thus made an entirely different man. His shameful and justly merited death now becomes a real act of divine service. He suffers no longer as a murderer, but as a saint. He dies in the true confession and in heart-felt confidence in God's grace through Christ. He is sincerely grieved for his sins. He now begins to obey God and to do many good works. With his sufferings he honors and praises God. Publicly, before all the world, he glorifies the crucified Jesus, exhorting and admonishing every one to repent and to believe in this Lord. In short, his faith in Christ does not only cause him to be a saint, but it even bears him into paradise and into everlasting life, according to Christ's promise: "To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Let us follow this example and not act like the rude and ungodly, who say: I will sin so that Christ may have a chance to save me and to show me mercy. No, no; but let us say: I am born in sin and am full of filth and evil lusts. It is, therefore, not necessary for me first to sin in order to be able to confess myself a sinner. I have, alas, been only too great a sinner from the very beginning! I am already under the curse of God and condemned to eternal death. Therefore, since God in infinite compassion calls me to repentance, will I now turn myself unto Him and take refuge in this

Eleventh Passion-Sermon

Lord, whose suffering has ransomed sinners, and whose innocent death has delivered me from the death so well deserved and long since merited, and who has reconciled me unto God!

He, however, who abuses this sermon of mercy, and refuses to forsake and confess and repent of his sins, may look upon the murderer on the left of Christ and upon the rulers of the Jews

and upon the soldiers, and consider how they fared in their wickedness and what they merited with their impenitent lives. If we would be benefited by the Lord Jesus and by His agony and prayer, we must follow the example of the malefactor who confessed his sins and prayed for grace, and acknowledged that Christ was the Lord and the King of everlasting life. May the dear Lord Jesus, our eternal King, grant us this. Amen.