XIV.

FOR MINE OWN SAKE.

"I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins. Put me in remembrance; let us plead together: declare thou that thou mayest be justified."

—Isaiah xlili: 25.

ABURST of marvellous grace is this in the midst of sternest rebuke and condemnation. Did we not read the prophet in the light of the gospel we might be surprised to find mercy so obtruding itself upon guilt and hardness of heart. And yet how like Christ's own words,—"And when they had nothing to pay he frankly forgave them both!" Helpless indebtedness met at once with frank, unasked, and unconditional forgiveness.

And so this sentence from Isaiah is but a fragment of the gospel found in the prophets, the most unqualified declaration of free grace perhaps which can be found in Scripture. For here is the sternest arraignment of the transgressor. "Thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob; thou hast been weary of me, O Israel; thou hast not brought me the small cattle of thy burnt offerings; neither

hast thou honored me with thy sacrifices. But thou hast made me to serve with thy sins, thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities." And what then? Punishment we should have said, stern and unmitigated; or, at least, a threat of punishment unless there should be instant repentance.

But instead of this God breaks upon this sinning people in unrestrained and overwhelming forgiveness, and "mercy rejoiceth against judgment." In circumstances where he can do absolutely nothing for his people's sake, he magnifies his name by doing all for his own sake.

These words teach us—

I. The ground of forgiveness is in the Lord alone.

God does not look to us to see what we have done to deserve forgiveness, but he looks upon Jesus Christ to see what he has done to procure forgiveness. It is a suffering Saviour, not a penitent sinner, that calls out his mercy and pardon. "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake." This sentence, you see, does away at a stroke with priest and penance, with works and worthiness, with tears and contritions, as the basis of forgiveness. It finds the whole reason and justification for divine pardon in the broken heart of Christ upon the cross, instead of seeking them in the broken heart of the sinner.
at the foot of the cross. This is not saying that penitence and contrition have no place in the forgiveness of the sinner. They have a most important place. But they are not the foundation-stones of grace. They rest on God's action, instead of God's action resting on them; they are the result of divine compassion, not its procuring cause.

For what is the distinguishing feature of the Christian faith? It is called in Scripture "the gospel of the grace of God." And by this title it is shown to be separated heaven-wide from every other system of religion. All other religions proceed upon the idea that a guilty sinner must do something to propitiate God's favor and make him reconciled to us. The glad tidings of the gospel are, that "God hath reconciled us unto himself by Jesus Christ." And this is the message which we are sent to proclaim, this is the ministry of reconciliation which has been committed to us,—"to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." In other words, we are not sent to show men how they can procure pardon by their penitence and importunity, but how pardon has been procured for them in Jesus Christ; and how that pardon has now come begging at their stubborn hearts and beseeching for acceptance. If this is not so, then "grace is no more grace." If Christ's work must be supplemented with some work of ours; if his atonement and intercession must be assisted and made efficacious by our importunity,—then the "mine own sake" of God has been tinctured and conditioned by the "thine own sake" of the sinner, and the quality of pure grace is gone. It is humbling, I know, to the transgressor that even his tears must be ruled out of court as having no weight in determining his acquittal. Let tears be shed, indeed; but not as the showers that are to soften and propitiate the unrelenting heart of God! Let them be poured out as the streams of a fountain that has at last been opened, and its great deeps broken up by the revelation of the amazing truth that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Here is the sovereignty of God in mercy, as it appears elsewhere in judgment. The divine Lord becomes incarnate, and then settles in himself the whole question of sin and pardon. In himself he fills up the appalling measure of wrath which guilt deserves; and from himself he pours out the marvellous measure of grace which the sinner could never deserve. Hear the echo of the prophet's words as they are repeated by the Apostle Paul: "And be ye kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's
sake hath forgiven you." It is even stronger in the original: "Even as God in Christ hath forgiven you," —as though in the act of pardon the Lord did not even look upon the sinner; as though he determined the question entirely outside of him and independently of him. It is not the penitent's tears, but the Saviour's atonement, that refracts the white beam of justice, and sends it forth in the divided rays of grace, mercy, and peace. Judgment fell upon our Substitute till he cried out, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and thereby pardon fell upon us in the "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." You say, "I have understood it differently. I have supposed that our penitence and faith were the conditions on which God pardons us." Surely it cannot be so. **Faith is the condition of our receiving forgiveness, but it is not the condition of God's bestowing it.** We were forgiven in Christ before we believed, just as truly as we were forgiven in ourselves after we believed. Our hand must be stretched out to take God's gift, but our extended hand is not the condition on which that gift is bestowed. It is Christ's extended hands that constitute that condition,—hands extended to grasp the awful penalty of sin, that they might thereby hold out the blessed gift of peace; hands bearing in their pierced palms the pains of our transgression, that they thereby might lift up before the world a free grace and an unconditional remission of sins. Here is where the controversy between God and man was settled; here is where the release of the condemned transgressor was procured; here is where the sole condition of the sinner's pardon was met, and met to the full.

It comes to this, then, that we are to receive the atonement of Christ as a finished work, not as a work that needs to be supplemented or augmented by ourselves. Instead of begging and importuning God to have mercy upon us, we are to lift our eyes to the Redeemer's cross, and behold there how he has had mercy on us; and penitently and humbly and believingly accept the mercy that he has bestowed. It is not by making friendship with God that we are to become reconciled to him; for "when we were enemies we were reconciled to him by the death of his Son." It is not by making our peace with God that we are to find rest of soul; for "he is our peace" who hath "abolished in his flesh the enmity, ... so making peace." It is for us, in other words, to see what God has done in Jesus Christ; and with shame-facedness at our long obstinacy, and melting contrition at our continued rejection of his grace, fall at his feet and accept it.

Do you not see, then, how God has forestalled
you in the whole matter of reconciliation, doing for his own sake what you were proposing to have him do for your sakes? "I will call upon him," you said, "and continue to call till at last he shall relent and have mercy upon me!" "And it shall come to pass that before they call I will answer," saith the Lord. Christ's atonement on the cross is God's answer to the sinner before he has called; it is the Father coming out to meet him while yet he is a great way off. Look and be amazed, O sinner! And if you have thought to beseech God to have compassion on you, let us show you "God beseeching you by us," while we, according to his command, "pray you in Christ's stead be ye reconciled to God." He has done before you asked it more than you would have ever dared to ask.

There is a beautiful oriental custom, of which I have read, that tells the story very perfectly. When a debt had been settled, either by full payment or forgiveness, it was the usage for the creditor to take the cancelled bond and nail it over the door of him who had owed it, that all passers-by might see that it was paid. Oh, blessed story of our remission! There is the cross, the door of grace, behind which a bankrupt world lies in hopeless debt to the law. See Jesus, our bondsman and brother, coming forth with the long list of our indebtedness in his hand. He lifts it up

where God and angels and men may see it, and then as the nail goes through his hand it goes through the bond of our transgressions to cancel it forever, "blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, that was contrary to us, he took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." Come to that cross, O sinner! Not in order that you may wash out your sins by your tears, or atone for them by your good works, or efface them by your sophistries and self-deceptions. But come rather that you may read the long black list which is against you, and he pierced to your heart by compunction and sorrow that you have offended such a being; and then that, lifting up your eyes, you may see God turning his eyes to the same cross at which you are looking, and saying, "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." Will not remember. — "The true penitent never forgives himself," is the saying of the ascetic. If he is only a penitent it may be so. But if he becomes a believer then he learns to forgive himself in God's importunate forgiveness of him; to forget his past sins in God's gracious oblivion of them; so that, instead of trying to write the lines of condemnation deeper and deeper in his heart, he reads them written in the wounds of Christ, and blotted out by the
blood of Christ, and thereby the sentence of death has been changed to a proclamation of life.

II. The object of faith is the Lord alone.

None of us regards faith as a work; and yet we unconsciously fall into the habit of trying to exercise a laborious faith, as though its efficacy depended on the strength of its own activity. But the whole office of saving belief is to rest upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. It does nothing, it creates nothing, it changes nothing. It simply accepts an accomplished fact, and trusts in it, and rejoices in it. Do you remember that twice in the New Testament we have the honest question, "What shall I do?" met by the startling answer, "Thou shalt believe;" as though it had been said, we are done with doing as a ground of salvation, since man has failed and become utterly bankrupt on that score, and now a new and gracious order of things has been introduced by which a sinner is saved by believing. They said unto him, "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" "This," says Jesus, "is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." An utter rejection, you see, of the proffer of works. But this is not saying that obedience, and service, and well doing are no longer required as a satisfaction to God's law, and that by some arbitrary fiat the paper currency of a creed is henceforth to

be accepted in place of the solid gold of obedience. No; not a requirement of God's law has been relaxed, not a duty has been abrogated, not a claim has been compromised, not a penalty has been remitted. And the only reason why we are saved by faith instead of by works is that Christ has stepped into our place, and become "the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." So that "do" has now been conjugated into "done," and instead of the "This do" of Moses, God holds up before us the "It is finished" of Christ. This is what the gospel means by giving such an unexpected and seemingly inadequate answer to the honest question about works. "What shall I do to be saved?" "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," — which means, being interpreted, accept what God has done to save you. Behold how in the incarnate Son he has taken the whole record of your sins, — the not doing, the undoing, and the evil doing, — and expiated it on the cross, and blotted it out, and consigned it to oblivion, if you will have it so; and how he has given you eternal life if you will take it, that henceforth, relieved of your tormenting past, and having eternal life within you, you may work from life instead of working for life. We neither ask the Lord now to do something to save us, nor does he
ask us to do something to be saved. All has been
done. "Put me in remembrance," he says now,
"let us plead together." All Christ's heavenly
intercession is but a calling to mind of his earthly
obedience and death. He who by the Eternal
Spirit offered up himself without spot to God, has
"by his own blood entered into the holy place,
having obtained eternal redemption for us." And
now his sprinkled blood is pleading, and his
wounded hands are pleading, and pierced feet are
pleading, and his gracious lips are pleading. "Let
us plead together," he says to the sinner; plead
not against me by persisting in thy sins, for I have
atoned for them; plead not with me to forgive thy
sins, for I am waiting to be gracious; but let us
plead together; join thy faith to my atonement,
and unite thy trust with my tears. God will be
put in remembrance of his Son, who gave his life
a ransom for many, and for his sake he "will not
remember thy sins."

Faith, then,—I mean the faith by which we are
justified and saved,—is the simple apprehension
and trustful acceptance of Jesus Christ and his
accomplished work. Its efficacy is not in changing
God and making him gracious to us, but in
changing us by making us acquainted with God,
and showing us how he has been gracious to us.
"Look unto me and be ye saved," he says. A

look creates nothing; it only reveals to us what
already is. The opened eye takes in the external
scene and transfers it to the mind, and makes an
inward experience of what was before an outward
fact. Even so faith, which is the eye of the soul,
apprehends that which is set before it in the
gospel, and makes that true in ourselves which
was true for us before in Christ. It is already a
fact that God has reconciled us unto himself by
the death of his Son; and when our faith lays
hold of this fact, believes it, and accepts it, then
we are reconciled to God.

Thus, as we have said, the object of faith is
always in the Lord, and not in ourselves. Its eye
can never look inward. It may strain after an
introverted vision, trying to get assurance from the
depths of the heart; and it may produce some
artificial light there, even as we get fire-flashes by
exciting the optic nerve; but it will be only mo-
mentary and transient, and utterly unsatisfying.
Faith's field of vision is all in Christ, his work, his
atonement, his word; and all its light and con-

fidence must come in resting in that work and
believing in that word.

It seems to me not true, then, that we are to
persuade God to be merciful to us by the intensity
and persistency of our repentance. That were to
set up a cross in our hearts for God to look at,
instead of ourselves looking at the cross which he has set up on Calvary for us to look at; and that were to change ends of faith, making it God's consent to our contrition for sin, instead of our consent to God's atonement for sin. Alas for us, if we are thinking to invite the Lord to look to us and save us, instead of heeding his word and looking unto him and being saved! The sovereign gracious settlement of the question of sin has been effected in our Redeemer, and there we are to meet God in all our dealings on that subject. Feel our sins, sorrow over them, be condemned and pierced through and through by them, confess them, forsake them, we must assuredly must, or we can never have forgiveness. But where did the Jewish worshipper confess his sins and the sins of the people? He confessed them on the scapegoat that was to bear them away. And we are to confess our transgressions on Jesus Christ, 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.' We may smite upon our breasts forever, and cry, 'Unworthy, unworthy;' but it will not avail unless we lift up our eyes to him on whom the Lord hath laid the iniquities of us all, and cry, 'Worthy the Lamb that was slain.' Faith is the obverse side of repentance. They are the two faces of the same coin of redemption. Repentance looks towards our sin, and faith looks towards our sin-bearer; and, no matter how long our repentings may go on, they cannot save us unless our faith sees our transgressions laid on Christ and borne away. "Look to the wounds of Christ, brother Martin," said the monk who led Luther from his wretched penance to God's peace; "look to the wounds of Christ, and there you will learn how God feels towards you." Aye, there we learn all that we need to know about our controversy with the Lord. Nowhere are the lines of God's condemnation of sin written so deeply as there. Put these two sayings of Scripture side by side: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;" and yet, when our sins are found upon him, "It pleased the Lord to bruise him." Oh, appalling words! Judgment upon guilt was never proclaimed in more awful language.

And yet now God looks out upon the world, through that beloved Son, in perfect and changeless reconciliation. And it is only for us to look also to him, and be reconciled. His heart is in the attitude of permanent forgiveness, and it is only for us to believe and be forgiven. The sun of his love is always shining unclouded, and we have but to turn to it our faces and be enlightened. And the Psalmist's cry is the true one for us to utter,—not, "Turn thyself to us," but,
"Turn us, O Lord, and cause thy face to shine upon us, that we may be saved." It is we that have the averted face and the downcast eyes and the unreconciled heart, and it is we that need to be turned that God's face may shine upon us. And this is the test which determines now our relation to God,—whether our faith is fixed submissively, consentingly, obediently, upon his Son. Stand with your back to the sun, and your shadow is before you, and you walk in it with every step you take. And condemnation is the shadow of a sinner with his back upon Christ. "This is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men have loved darkness rather than light." Turn your face to the sun, and your shadow is behind you, and you are walking ever out of darkness. And justification is the light of a soul with its face towards Christ. "He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Which is yours, O hearer,—the averted, or the uplifted, reconciled, joyful face?

III. The object of confession is the Lord alone. "Declare, that thou mayest be justified." And what are we to declare,—something about ourselves, about what we are and what we have done? By no means. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus,"—this is the sole object of our profession. In settling the question of salvation nothing else is to be mentioned,—not even our faith, as though that were a ground or reason of our justification. On the contrary, faith simply mentions Christ: owns him in words, declares him in profession, as unconscious of itself as the eye is of its own vision when absorbed in some glorious prospect.

We hear persons talking about "making a profession of religion." It is the thing, above all others, which we ought not to do. The Pharisee made a profession of religion,—"I thank Thee that I am not as other men: . . . I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all I possess." And we know how odious all this was to God.

The true penitent will profess nothing concerning himself, except his sins; and put nothing before God, except Christ. Look not upon me, but, "Behold, O God! our shield, and look upon the face of thine anointed," will be his cry and his confession. And with such a perfect and all-satisfying object of declaration before his eyes, and on his tongue, he can credit the marvellous promise, that "with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

But there is a profession towards men as well as towards God; and of that also Christ is the sole object. "Whosoever, therefore, shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before
Father which is in heaven." To put any claim of worthlessness or sanctity or holiness before men is as offensive as to put it before God. And yet Christ is to be professed in the sight of all; and this in the life, and not merely in the speech. We are justified by our faith in Christ; but our faith is justified by our works for Christ. Faith holds up Christ before God as the ground of salvation, and holy living holds up Christ before men as the evidence of salvation. And here is the supreme test of the genuineness of our piety. If our faith is not living itself out before the world, in an obedient and holy life, in doing the works which the Lord commanded, in bearing the cross which he enjoined, and in maintaining the purity which he requires, then have we no evidence that our faith is looking up to God, and finding acceptance with him in the Beloved. If we are not with all our heart and life declaring the Lord Jesus before men, I know not what evidence we have that he is continuing to make mention of us before the Father and the holy angels.

And now, my brethren, let this awful freeness of God’s grace alarm you while it melts you! What a sin it is to do despite to such grace by continued rejection of God’s Son! What an even darker sin it is to render it of none effect by your unholy living, apostatizing from God in your flesh at the same moment that you are professing to obey him in your spirit, and so "turning the grace of God into lasciviousness and denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ"!