

OFFENDING AGAINST CHRIST'S MERCY

by Richard Sibbes

Sibbes' warning against rejecting or taking lightly the mercy Christ offers, cautioning against treating divine compassion with contempt and encouraging serious response to Christ's gracious offers of forgiveness.

1 Chapters

Table of Contents

1. Offending Against Christ's Mercy

Offending Against Christ's Mercy

Offending Against Christ's Mercy by Richard Sibbes We are now to take notice of various sorts of men that offend deeply against this merciful disposition of Christ.

FALSE DESPAIR OF CHRIST'S MERCY

There are those who go on in all ill courses of life on this pretence, that it would be useless to go to Christ, because their lives have been so bad; whereas, as soon as we look to heaven, all encouragements are ready to meet us and draw us forward. Among others, this is one allurements, that Christ is ready to welcome us and lead us further. None are damned in the church but those that are determined to be, including those who persist in having hard thoughts of Christ, that they may have some show of reason to fetch contentment from other things, as that unprofitable servant (Mat 25:30) who would needs take up the opinion that his master was a hard man, thereby to flatter himself in his unfruitful ways, in not improving the talent which he had.

FALSE HOPE OF CHRIST'S MERCY

There are those who take up a hope of their own, that Christ will suffer them to walk in the ways to hell, and yet bring them to heaven; whereas all comfort should draw us nearer to Christ. Otherwise it is a lying comfort, either in itself or in our application of it.

RESISTING CHRIST'S MERCY

There are those who take it on themselves to cast water on those sparks which Christ labors to kindle in them, because they will not be troubled with the light of them. Such must know that the Lamb can be angry, and that they who will not come under his scepter of mercy shall be crushed in pieces by his scepter of power (Psa 2:9). Though he will graciously tend and maintain the least spark of true grace, yet where he finds not the spark of grace but opposition to his Spirit striving with them, his wrath, once kindled, shall burn to hell. There is no more just provocation than when kindness is churlishly refused. When God would have cured Babylon, and she would not be cured, then she was given up to destruction (Jer 51:9). When Jerusalem would not be gathered under the wing of Christ, then their habitation is left desolate (Mat 23:37-38). When wisdom stretches out her hand and men refuse, then wisdom will laugh at men's destruction (Pro 1:26). Salvation itself will not save those that spill the medicine and cast away the plaster. It is a pitiful case, when this merciful Savior shall delight in destruction; when he that made men shall have no mercy on them (Isa 27:11).

Oh, say the rebels of the time, God has not made us to damn us. Yes, if you will not meet Christ in the ways of his mercy, it is fitting that you should 'eat of the fruit of your own way, and be filled with your own devices' (Pro 1:31). This will be the hell of hell, when men shall think that they have loved their sins more than their souls; when they shall think what love and mercy has been almost enforced upon them, and yet they would perish. The more accessory we are in pulling a judgment upon ourselves, the more the conscience will be confounded in itself. Then they shall

acknowledge Christ to be without any blame, themselves without any excuse.

If men appeal to their own consciences, they will tell them that the Holy Spirit has often knocked at their hearts, as willing to have kindled some holy desires in them. How else can they be said to resist the Holy Ghost, but that the Spirit was readier to draw them to a further degree of goodness than was consistent with their own wills? Therefore those in the church that are damned are self-condemned before. So that here we need not rise to higher causes, when men carry sufficient cause in their own bosoms.

PRESUMING ON CHRIST'S MERCY And the best of us all may offend against this merciful disposition if we are not watchful against that liberty which our carnal disposition will be ready to take from it. Thus we reason, if Christ will not quench the smoking flax, what need we fear that any neglect on our part can bring us into a comfortless condition? If Christ will not do it, what can?

You know the apostle's prohibition, notwithstanding, 'Quench not the Spirit' (1Th 5:19). Such cautions of not quenching are sanctified by the Spirit as a means of not quenching. Christ performs his office in not quenching by stirring up suitable endeavors in us; and there are none more solicitous in the use of the means than those that are most certain of their good success. The reason is this: the means that God has set apart for the effecting of any thing are included in the purpose that he has to bring that thing to pass. And this is a principle taken for granted, even in civil matters; for who, if he knew before that it would be a fruitful year, would therefore hang up his plough and neglect tillage?

Hence the apostle stirs us up from the certain expectation of a blessing (1Co 15:57-58), and this encouragement from the good issue of victory is intended to stir us up, and not to put us off. If we are negligent in the exercise of grace received and the use of the means prescribed, suffering our spirits to be oppressed with many and various cares of this life, and take not heed of the discouragements of the times, for this kind of neglect God in his wise care suffers us often to fall into a worse condition in our feelings than those that were never so much enlightened. Yet in mercy he will not suffer us to be so far enemies to ourselves as wholly to neglect these sparks once kindled. Were it possible that we should be given up to abandon all endeavor wholly, then we could look for no other issue but quenching; but Christ will tend this spark and cherish this small seed, so that he will always preserve in the soul some degree of care.

If we would make a comfortable use of this, we must consider all those means whereby Christ preserves grace begun; such as, first, holy communion, by which one Christian warms another. 'Two are better than one' (Ecc 4:9). 'Did not our heart burn within us?', said the disciples (Luk 24:32). Secondly, much more communion with God in holy duties, such as meditation and prayer, which not only kindles but adds a luster to the soul. Thirdly, we feel by experience the breath of the Spirit to go along with the breath of his ministers. For this reason the apostle knits these two together: 'Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings' (1Th 5:19-20). Nathan, by a few words, blew up the decaying sparks in David. Rather than that God will suffer his fire in us to die, he will send some Nathan or other, and something always is left in us to join with the Word, as of the same nature with it; as a coal that has fire in it will quickly gather more fire to it. Smoking flax will easily take fire. Fourthly, grace is strengthened by the exercise of it:

'Arise therefore, and be doing, and the LORD be with thee' (1Ch 22:16), said David to his son Solomon. Stir up the grace that is in you, for in this way holy motions turn to resolutions, resolutions to practice, and practice to a prepared readiness to every good work.

However, let us remember that grace is increased, in the exercise of it, not by virtue of the exercise itself, but as Christ by his Spirit flows into the soul and brings us nearer to himself, the fountain, so instilling such comfort that the heart is further enlarged. The heart of a Christian is Christ's garden, and his graces are as so many sweet spices and flowers which, when his Spirit blows upon them, send forth a sweet savor. Therefore keep the soul open to entertain the Holy Ghost, for he will bring in continually fresh forces to subdue corruption, and this most of all on the Lord's day. John was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, even in Patmos, the place of his banishment (Rev 1:10). Then the gales of the Spirit blow more strongly and sweetly. As we look, therefore, for the comfort of this doctrine, let us not favor our natural sloth but exercise ourselves rather to godliness (1Ti 4:7), and labor to keep this fire always burning upon the altar of our hearts. Let us dress our lamps daily, and put in fresh oil, and wind up our souls higher and higher still. Resting in a good condition is contrary to grace, which cannot but promote itself to a further measure. Let none turn this grace 'into lasciviousness' (Jude 4). Infirmities are a ground of humility, not a plea for negligence, nor an encouragement to presumption. We should be so far from being evil because Christ is good that those coals of love should melt us. Therefore those may well suspect themselves in whom the consideration of this mildness of Christ does not work that way. Surely where grace is, corruption is 'as vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes' (Pro 10:26). And therefore they will labor, with respect to their own comfort, as likewise for the credit of religion and the glory of God, that their light may break forth. If a spark of faith and love is so precious, what an honor will it be to be rich in faith! Who would not rather walk in the light, and in the comforts of the Holy Ghost, than live in a dark, perplexed state? And not rather be carried with full sail to heaven than be tossed always with fears and doubts? The present trouble in conflict against a sin is not so much as that disquiet which any corruption favored will bring upon us afterward. True peace is in conquering, not in yielding. The comfort intended in this text is for those that would fain do better, but find their corruptions clog them; that are in such a mist, that often they cannot tell what to think of themselves; that fain would believe, and yet often fear that they do not believe; and that think that it cannot be that God should be so good to such sinful wretches as they are, and yet they do not permit these fears and doubts in themselves.

SEEKING ANOTHER SOURCE OF MERCY And among others, how do they wrong themselves and him that will have other mediators to God for them than he! Are any more pitiful than he who became man to that end, that he might be pitiful to his own flesh? Let all, at all times, repair to this meek Savior, and put up all our petitions in his prevailing name. What need do we have to knock at any other door? Can any be more tender over us than Christ? What encouragement we have to commend the state of the church in general, or of any broken-hearted Christian, to him by our prayers, of whom we may speak to Christ, as they did of Lazarus, 'Lord, the church which thou lovest, and gavest thyself for, is in distress'; 'Lord, this poor Christian, for whom thou wast bruised (Isa 53:5) is bruised and brought very low.' It cannot but touch his heart when the misery of those so dear to him is spread before him.

MISTREATING THE HEIRS OF MERCY

Again, considering this gracious nature in Christ, let us think with ourselves thus: when he is so kind to us, shall we be cruel against him in his name, in his truth, in his children? How shall those that delight to be so terrible to 'the meek of the earth' (Zep 2:3) hope to look so gracious a Savior in the face? They that are so boisterous towards his spouse shall know one day that they had to deal with himself in his church. So it cannot but cut the heart of those that have felt this love of Christ to hear him wounded who is the life of their lives and the soul of their souls. This makes those that have felt mercy weep over Christ whom they have pierced with their sins. There cannot but be a mutual and quick sympathy between the head and the members. When we are tempted to any sin, if we will not pity ourselves, yet we should spare Christ, in not putting him to new torments. The apostle could not find out a more heart-breaking argument to enforce a sacrifice of ourselves to God than to appeal to us 'by the mercies of God' in Christ (Rom 12:1).

STRIFE AMONG THE HEIRS OF MERCY This mercy of Christ should also move us to commiserate the state of the poor church, torn by enemies without, and rending itself by divisions at home. It cannot but affect any soul that ever felt comfort from Christ to consider what an affectionate entreaty the apostle makes to mutual agreement in judgment and affection. 'If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye my joy, that ye be like-minded' (Php 2:1), as if he should say, 'Unless you will disclaim all consolation in Christ, labour to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.' What a joyful spectacle is this to Satan and his faction, to see those that are separated from the world fall in pieces among themselves! Our discord is our enemy's melody. The more to blame are those that for private aims affect differences from others, and will not suffer the wounds of the church to close and meet together. This must not be understood as if men should dissemble their judgment in any truth where there is just cause of expressing themselves; for the least truth is Christ's and not ours, and therefore we are not to take liberty to affirm or deny at our pleasure. There is something due on a penny as well as on a pound, therefore we must be faithful in the least truth, when the season calls for it. Then our words are 'like apples of gold in pictures of silver' (Pro 25:11). One word spoken in season will do more good than a thousand out of season. But in some cases peace, through having our faith to ourselves before God (Rom 14:22), is of more consequence than the open discovery of some things we take to be true, considering that the weakness of man's nature is such that there can hardly be a discovery of any difference in opinion without some estrangement of affection. So far as men are not of one mind, they will hardly be of one heart, except where grace and the peace of God bear great rule in the heart (Col 3:15). Therefore open show of difference is only good when it is necessary, although some, from a desire to be somebody, turn into by-ways and yield to a spirit of contradiction in themselves. Yet, if Paul may be judge, they 'are yet carnal' (1Co 3:3). If it be wisdom, it is wisdom from beneath: for the wisdom from above, as it is pure, so it is peaceable (Jas 3:17). Our blessed Savior, when he was to leave the world, what did he press upon his disciples more than peace and love? And in his last prayer, with what earnestness did he beg of his Father that 'they all may be one', as he and the Father were one (John 17:21). But what he prayed for on earth, we shall only enjoy perfectly in heaven. Let this make the meditation of that time the more sweet unto us.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE BRUISED And further, to expose offenders of this kind, what spirit shall we think -them to be of that take advantage of the bruisedness and infirmities of men's spirits to relieve them with false peace for their own worldly ends? A wounded spirit will part with

anything. Most of the gainful points of popery, such as confession, satisfaction, merit and purgatory, spring from hence, but they are physicians of no value, or tormentors and not physicians at all. It is a greater blessing to be delivered from the sting of these scorpions (Rev 9:5) than we are thankful for. Spiritual tyranny is the greatest tyranny, and then especially when it is where most mercy should be shown; yet even there some, like cruel surgeons, delight in making long cures, to serve themselves through the misery of others. It brings men under a terrible curse that they 'remembered not to shew mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man', that they might 'even slay the broken in heart' (Psa 109:16). In the same way, to such as raise temporal advantage to themselves out of the spiritual misery of others we must add such as raise estates by betraying the church, and are unfaithful in the trust committed unto them, when the children cry for the bread of life, and there is none to give them, bringing thus upon the people of God that heavy judgment of a spiritual famine, starving Christ in his members. Shall we so requite so good a Savior who counts the love and mercy shown in feeding his lambs (John 21:15) as shown to himself?

DESPISING THE SIMPLE MEANS OF MERCY

Lastly, they carry themselves very unkindly towards Christ who stumble at his low stooping to us in his government and ordinances, that are ashamed of the simplicity of the gospel, that count preaching foolishness. They, out of the pride of their heart, think that they may do well enough without the help of the Word and sacraments, and think Christ did not take enough dignity upon him; and therefore they will mend the matter with their own devices so that they may give better satisfaction to flesh and blood, as in popery. What greater unthankfulness can there be than to despise any help that Christ in mercy has provided for us? In the days of his flesh the proud Pharisees took offence at his familiar conversing with sinful men, though he only did so as a physician to heal their souls. What defenses was Paul driven to make for himself, for his plainness in unfolding the gospel? The more Christ, in himself and in his servants, shall descend to exalt us, the more we should, with all humility and readiness, entertain that love and magnify the goodness of God, that has put the great work of our salvation, and laid the government, upon so gentle a Savior as will carry himself so mildly in all things wherein he is to deal between God and us, and us and God. The lower Christ comes down to us, the higher let us lift him up in our hearts. So will all those do that have ever found the experience of Christ's work in their hearts.

Taken from The Bruised Reed. Updated.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
 - 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net