

Justice

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the concept of justice and argues that it is not about punishment, but about giving fair play and rendering to every man according to his work.

Scripture: Micah 6:8, Matthew 5:7, John 14:15, Romans 3:25, Romans 5:10, 1 Peter 2:24, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "Atonement Theology", "Gods Justice"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the true nature of justice and mercy, emphasizing that God's justice and mercy are inseparable. He challenges the prevalent theories of atonement, rejecting the idea that the sufferings of Christ were necessary to appease a wrathful God. MacDonald believes in the atonement as a reconciliation with God, leading to repentance, love, and service to both God and humanity. He advocates for a faith rooted in obedience to Christ, leading to a transformation of the heart and a true understanding of God's character as loving, just, and merciful.

Transcript

Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy; for thou renderest to every man according to his work.--Psalm lxii. 12.

Some of the translators make it kindness and goodness; but I presume there is no real difference among them as to the character of the word which here, in the English Bible, is translated mercy.

The religious mind, however, educated upon the theories yet prevailing in the so-called religious world, must here recognize a departure from the presentation to which they have been accustomed: to make the psalm speak according to prevalent theoretic modes, the verse would have to be changed thus:--'To thee, O Lord, belongeth justice, for thou renderest to every man according to his work.'

Let the reason of my choosing this passage, so remarkable in itself, for a motto to the sermon which follows, remain for the present doubtful. I need hardly say that I mean to found no logical argument upon it.

Let us endeavour to see plainly what we mean when we use the word justice, and whether we mean what we ought to mean when we use it--especially with reference to God. Let us come nearer to knowing what we ought to understand by justice, that is, the justice of God; for his justice is the live, active justice, giving existence to the idea of justice in our minds and hearts. Because he is just, we are capable of knowing

justice; it is because he is just, that we have the idea of justice so deeply imbedded in us.

What do we oftenest mean by justice? Is it not the carrying out of the law, the infliction of penalty assigned to offence? By a just judge we mean a man who administers the law without prejudice, without favour or dislike; and where guilt is manifest, punishes as much as, and no more than, the law has in the case laid down. It may not be that justice has therefore been done. The law itself may be unjust, and the judge may mistake; or, which is more likely, the working of the law may be foiled by the parasites of law for their own gain. But even if the law be good, and thoroughly administered, it does not necessarily follow that justice is done.

Suppose my watch has been taken from my pocket; I lay hold of the thief; he is dragged before the magistrate, proved guilty, and sentenced to a just imprisonment: must I walk home satisfied with the result? Have I had justice done me? The thief may have had justice done him--but where is my watch? That is gone, and I remain a man wronged. Who has done me the wrong? The thief. Who can set right the wrong? The thief, and only the thief; nobody but the man that did the wrong. God may be able to move the man to right the wrong, but God himself cannot right it without the man. Suppose my watch found and restored, is the account settled between me and the thief? I may forgive him, but is the wrong removed? By no means. But suppose the thief to bethink himself, to repent. He has, we shall say, put it out of his power to return the watch, but he comes to me and says he is sorry he stole it and begs me to accept for the present what little he is able to bring, as a beginning of atonement: how should I then regard the matter? Should I not feel that he had gone far to make atonement--done more to make up for the injury he had inflicted upon me, than the mere restoration of the watch, even by himself, could reach to? Would there not lie, in the thief's confession and submission and initial restoration, an appeal to the divinest in me--to the eternal brotherhood? Would it not indeed amount to a sufficing atonement as between man and man? If he offered to bear what I chose to lay upon him, should I feel it necessary, for the sake of justice, to inflict some certain suffering as demanded by righteousness? I should still have a claim upon him for my watch, but should I not be apt to forget it? He who commits the offence can make up for it--and he alone.

One thing must surely be plain--that the punishment of the wrong-doer makes no atonement for the wrong done. How could it make up to me for the stealing of my watch that the man was punished? The wrong would be there all the same. I am not saying the man ought not to be punished--far from it; I am only saying that the punishment nowise makes up to the man wronged. Suppose the man, with the watch in his pocket, were to inflict the severest flagellation on himself: would that lessen my sense of injury? Would it set anything right? Would it anyway atone? Would it give him a right to the watch? Punishment may do good to the man who does the wrong, but that is a thing as different as important.

Another thing plain is, that, even without the material rectification of the wrong where that is impossible, repentance removes the offence which no suffering could. I at least should feel that I had no more quarrel with the man. I should even feel that the gift he had made me, giving into my heart a repentant brother, was infinitely beyond the restitution of what he had taken from me. True, he owed me both himself and the watch, but such a greater does more than include such a less. If it be objected, 'You may forgive, but the man has sinned against God!--Then it is not a part of the divine to be merciful, I return, and a man may be more merciful than his maker! A man may do that which would be too merciful in God! Then mercy is not a divine attribute, for it may exceed and be too much; it must not be infinite, therefore cannot be God's own.

'Mercy may be against justice.' Never--if you mean by justice what I mean by justice. If anything be against justice, it cannot be called mercy, for it is cruelty. 'To thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy, for thou renderest to

every man according to his work.' There is no opposition, no strife whatever, between mercy and justice. Those who say justice means the punishing of sin, and mercy the not punishing of sin, and attribute both to God, would make a schism in the very idea of God. And this brings me to the question, What is meant by divine justice?

Human justice may be a poor distortion of justice, a mere shadow of it; but the justice of God must be perfect. We cannot frustrate it in its working; are we just to it in our idea of it? If you ask any ordinary Sunday congregation in England, what is meant by the justice of God, would not nineteen out of twenty answer, that it means his punishing of sin? Think for a moment what degree of justice it would indicate in a man--that he punished every wrong. A Roman emperor, a Turkish *cadi*, might do that, and be the most unjust both of men and judges. Ahab might be just on the throne of punishment, and in his garden the murderer of Naboth. In God shall we imagine a distinction of office and character? God is one; and the depth of foolishness is reached by that theology which talks of God as if he held different offices, and differed in each. It sets a contradiction in the very nature of God himself. It represents him, for instance, as having to do that as a magistrate which as a father he would not do! The love of the father makes him desire to be unjust as a magistrate! Oh the folly of any mind that would explain God before obeying him! that would map out the character of God, instead of crying, Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do? God is no magistrate; but, if he were, it would be a position to which his fatherhood alone gave him the right; his rights as a father cover every right he can be analytically supposed to possess. The justice of God is this, that--to use a boyish phrase, the best the language will now afford me because of misuse--he gives every man, woman, child, and beast, everything that has being, fair play; he renders to every man according to his work; and therein lies his perfect mercy; for nothing else could be merciful to the man, and nothing but mercy could be fair to him. God does nothing of which any just man, the thing set fairly and fully before him so that he understood, would not say, 'That is fair.' Who would, I repeat, say a man was a just man because he insisted on prosecuting every offender? A scoundrel might do that. Yet the justice of God, forsooth, is his punishment of sin! A just man is one who cares, and tries, and always tries, to give fair play to everyone in every thing. When we speak of the justice of God, let us see that we do mean justice! Punishment of the guilty may be involved in justice, but it does not constitute the justice of God one atom more than it would constitute the justice of a man.

'But no one ever doubts that God gives fair play!'

'That may be--but does not go for much, if you say that God does this or that which is not fair.'

'If he does it, you may be sure it is fair.'

'Doubtless, or he could not be God--except to devils. But you say he does so and so, and is just; I say, he does not do so and so, and is just. You say he does, for the Bible says so. I say, if the Bible said so, the Bible would lie; but the Bible does not say so. The lord of life complains of men for not judging right. To say on the authority of the Bible that God does a thing no honourable man would do, is to lie against God; to say that it is therefore right, is to lie against the very spirit of God.

To uphold a lie for God's sake is to be against God, not for him. God cannot be lied for. He is the truth. The truth alone is on his side. While his child could not see the rectitude of a thing, he would infinitely rather, even if the thing were right, have him say, God could not do that thing, than have him believe that he did it. If the man were sure God did it, the thing he ought to say would be, 'Then there must be something about it I do not know, which if I did know, I should see the thing quite differently.'

But where an evil thing is invented to explain and account for a good thing, and a lover of God is called upon to believe the invention or be cast out, he needs not mind being cast out, for it is into the company of Jesus. Where there is no ground to believe that God does a thing except that men who would explain God have believed and taught it, he is not a true man who accepts men against his own conscience of God. I acknowledge no authority calling upon me to believe a thing of God, which I could not be a man and believe right in my fellow-man.

I will accept no explanation of any way of God which explanation involves what I should scorn as false and unfair in a man. If you say, That may be right of God to do which it would not be right of man to do, I answer, Yes, because the relation of the maker to his creatures is very different from the relation of one of those creatures to another, and he has therefore duties toward his creatures requiring of him what no man would have the right to do to his fellow-man; but he can have no duty that is not both just and merciful.

More is required of the maker, by his own act of creation, than can be required of men. More and higher justice and righteousness is required of him by himself, the Truth;--greater nobleness, more penetrating sympathy; and nothing but what, if an honest man understood it, he would say was right. If it be a thing man cannot understand, then man can say nothing as to whether it is right or wrong. He cannot even know that God does it, when the it is unintelligible to him. What he calls it may be but the smallest facet of a composite action.

His part is silence. If it be said by any that God does a thing, and the thing seems to me unjust, then either I do not know what the thing is, or God does not do it. The saying cannot mean what it seems to mean, or the saying is not true. If, for instance, it be said that God visits the sins of the fathers on the children, a man who takes visits upon to mean punishes, and the children to mean the innocent children, ought to say, 'Either I do not understand the statement, or the thing is not true, whoever says it.'

God may do what seems to a man not right, but it must so seem to him because God works on higher, on divine, on perfect principles, too right for a selfish, unfair, or unloving man to understand. But least of all must we accept some low notion of justice in a man, and argue that God is just in doing after that notion.

The common idea, then, is, that the justice of God consists in punishing sin: it is in the hope of giving a larger idea of the justice of God in punishing sin that I ask, 'Why is God bound to punish sin?'

'How could he be a just God and not punish sin?'

'Mercy is a good and right thing,' I answer, 'and but for sin there could be no mercy. We are enjoined to forgive, to be merciful, to be as our father in heaven. Two rights cannot possibly be opposed to each other. If God punish sin, it must be merciful to punish sin; and if God forgive sin, it must be just to forgive sin. We are required to forgive, with the argument that our father forgives. It must, I say, be right to forgive. Every attribute of God must be infinite as himself. He cannot be sometimes merciful, and not always merciful. He cannot be just, and not always just. Mercy belongs to him, and needs no contrivance of theologic chicanery to justify it.'

'Then you mean that it is wrong to punish sin, therefore God does not punish sin?'

'By no means; God does punish sin, but there is no opposition between punishment and forgiveness. The one may be essential to the possibility of the other. Why, I repeat, does God punish sin? That is my point.'

'Because in itself sin deserves punishment.'

'Then how can he tell us to forgive it?'

'He punishes, and having punished he forgives?'

'That will hardly do. If sin demands punishment, and the righteous punishment is given, then the man is free. Why should he be forgiven?'

'He needs forgiveness because no amount of punishment will meet his deserts.'

I avoid for the present, as anyone may perceive, the probable expansion of this reply.

'Then why not forgive him at once if the punishment is not essential--if part can be pretermitted? And again, can that be required which, according to your showing, is not adequate? You will perhaps answer, 'God may please to take what little he can have;' and this brings me to the fault in the whole idea.

Punishment is nowise an offset to sin. Foolish people sometimes, in a tone of self-gratulatory pity, will say, 'If I have sinned I have suffered.' Yes, verily, but what of that? What merit is there in it? Even had you laid the suffering upon yourself, what did that do to make up for the wrong? That you may have bettered by your suffering is well for you, but what atonement is there in the suffering? The notion is a false one altogether. Punishment, deserved suffering, is no equipoise to sin. It is no use laying it in the other scale. It will not move it a hair's breadth. Suffering weighs nothing at all against sin. It is not of the same kind, not under the same laws, any more than mind and matter. We say a man deserves punishment; but when we forgive and do not punish him, we do not always feel that we have done wrong; neither when we do punish him do we feel that any amends has been made for his wrongdoing. If it were an offset to wrong, then God would be bound to punish for the sake of the punishment; but he cannot be, for he forgives. Then it is not for the sake of the punishment, as a thing that in itself ought to be done, but for the sake of something else, as a means to an end, that God punishes. It is not directly for justice, else how could he show mercy, for that would involve injustice?

Primarily, God is not bound to punish sin; he is bound to destroy sin. If he were not the Maker, he might not be bound to destroy sin--I do not know; but seeing he has created creatures who have sinned, and therefore sin has, by the creating act of God, come into the world, God is, in his own righteousness, bound to destroy sin.

'But that is to have no mercy.'

You mistake. God does destroy sin; he is always destroying sin. In him I trust that he is destroying sin in me. He is always saving the sinner from his sins, and that is destroying sin. But vengeance on the sinner, the law of a tooth for a tooth, is not in the heart of God, neither in his hand. If the sinner and the sin in him, are the concrete object of the divine wrath, then indeed there can be no mercy. Then indeed there will be an end put to sin by the destruction of the sin and the sinner together. But thus would no atonement be wrought--nothing be done to make up for the wrong God has allowed to come into being by creating man. There must be an atonement, a making-up, a bringing together--an atonement which, I say, cannot be made except by the man who has sinned.

Punishment, I repeat, is not the thing required of God, but the absolute destruction of sin. What better is the world, what better is the sinner, what better is God, what better is the truth, that the sinner should suffer--continue suffering to all eternity? Would there be less sin in the universe? Would there be any making-up for sin? Would it show God justified in doing what he knew would bring sin into the world,

justified in making creatures who he knew would sin? What setting-right would come of the sinner's suffering?

If justice demand it, if suffering be the equivalent for sin, then the sinner must suffer, then God is bound to exact his suffering, and not pardon; and so the making of man was a tyrannical deed, a creative cruelty. But grant that the sinner has deserved to suffer, no amount of suffering is any atonement for his sin. To suffer to all eternity could not make up for one unjust word. Does that mean, then, that for an unjust word I deserve to suffer to all eternity? The unjust word is an eternally evil thing; nothing but God in my heart can cleanse me from the evil that uttered it; but does it follow that I saw the evil of what I did so perfectly, that eternal punishment for it would be just?

Sorrow and confession and self-abasing love will make up for the evil word; suffering will not. For evil in the abstract, nothing can be done. It is eternally evil. But I may be saved from it by learning to loathe it, to hate it, to shrink from it with an eternal avoidance. The only vengeance worth having on sin is to make the sinner himself its executioner. Sin and punishment are in no antagonism to each other in man, any more than pardon and punishment are in God; they can perfectly co-exist.

The one naturally follows the other, punishment being born of sin, because evil exists only by the life of good, and has no life of its own, being in itself death. Sin and suffering are not natural opposites; the opposite of evil is good, not suffering; the opposite of sin is not suffering, but righteousness. The path across the gulf that divides right from wrong is not the fire, but repentance. If my friend has wronged me, will it console me to see him punished? Will that be a rendering to me of my due?

Will his agony be a balm to my deep wound? Should I be fit for any friendship if that were possible even in regard to my enemy? But would not the shadow of repentant grief, the light of reviving love on his countenance, heal it at once however deep? Take any of those wicked people in Dante's hell, and ask wherein is justice served by their punishment. Mind, I am not saying it is not right to punish them; I am saying that justice is not, never can be, satisfied by suffering--nay, cannot have any satisfaction in or from suffering.

Human resentment, human revenge, human hate may. Such justice as Dante's keeps wickedness alive in its most terrible forms. The life of God goes forth to inform, or at least give a home to victorious evil. Is he not defeated every time that one of those lost souls defies him? All hell cannot make Vanni Fucci say 'I was wrong.' God is triumphantly defeated, I say, throughout the hell of his vengeance. Although against evil, it is but the vain and wasted cruelty of a tyrant. There is no destruction of evil thereby, but an enhancing of its horrible power in the midst of the most agonizing and disgusting tortures a divine imagination can invent.

If sin must be kept alive, then hell must be kept alive; but while I regard the smallest sin as infinitely loathsome, I do not believe that any being, never good enough to see the essential ugliness of sin, could sin so as to deserve such punishment. I am not now, however, dealing with the question of the duration of punishment, but with the idea of punishment itself; and would only say in passing, that the notion that a creature born imperfect, nay, born with impulses to evil not of his own generating, and which he could not help having, a creature to whom the true face of God was never presented, and by whom it never could have been seen, should be thus condemned, is as loathsome a lie against God as could find place in heart too undeveloped to understand what justice is, and too low to look up into the face of Jesus.

It never in truth found place in any heart, though in many a pettifogging brain. There is but one thing lower than deliberately to believe such a lie, and that is to worship the God of whom it is believed. The one deepest, highest, truest, fittest, most wholesome suffering must be generated in the wicked by a vision, a true sight, more or less adequate, of the hideousness of their lives, of the horror of the wrongs they have done. Physical suffering may be a factor in rousing this mental pain; but 'I would I had never been born!' must be the cry of Judas, not because of the hell-fire around him, but because he loathes the man that betrayed his friend, the world's friend.

When a man loathes himself, he has begun to be saved. Punishment tends to this result. Not for its own sake, not as a make-up for sin, not for divine revenge--horrible word, not for any satisfaction to justice, can punishment exist. Punishment is for the sake of amendment and atonement. God is bound by his love to punish sin in order to deliver his creature; he is bound by his justice to destroy sin in his creation. Love is justice--is the fulfilling of the law, for God as well as for his children.

This is the reason of punishment; this is why justice requires that the wicked shall not go unpunished--that they, through the eye-opening power of pain, may come to see and do justice, may be brought to desire and make all possible amends, and so become just. Such punishment concerns justice in the deepest degree. For Justice, that is God, is bound in himself to see justice done by his children--not in the mere outward act, but in their very being. He is bound in himself to make up for wrong done by his children, and he can do nothing to make up for wrong done but by bringing about the repentance of the wrong-doer.

When the man says, 'I did wrong; I hate myself and my deed; I cannot endure to think that I did it!' then, I say, is atonement begun. Without that, all that the Lord did would be lost. He would have made no atonement. Repentance, restitution, confession, prayer for forgiveness, righteous dealing thereafter, is the sole possible, the only true make-up for sin. For nothing less than this did Christ die. When a man acknowledges the right he denied before; when he says to the wrong, 'I abjure, I loathe you; I see now what you are; I could not see it before because I would not; God forgive me; make me clean, or let me die!' then justice, that is God, has conquered--and not till then.

'What atonement is there?'

Every atonement that God cares for; and the work of Jesus Christ on earth was the creative atonement, because it works atonement in every heart. He brings and is bringing God and man, and man and man, into perfect unity: 'I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.'

'That is a dangerous doctrine!'

More dangerous than you think to many things--to every evil, to every lie, and among the rest to every false trust in what Christ did, instead of in Christ himself. Paul glories in the cross of Christ, but he does not trust in the cross: he trusts in the living Christ and his living father.

Justice then requires that sin should be put an end to; and not that only, but that it should be atoned for; and where punishment can do anything to this end, where it can help the sinner to know what he has been guilty of, where it can soften his heart to see his pride and wrong and cruelty, justice requires that punishment shall not be spared. And the more we believe in God, the surer we shall be that he will spare nothing that suffering can do to deliver his child from death. If suffering cannot serve this end, we need look for no more hell, but for the destruction of sin by the destruction of the sinner. That, however, would, it appears to me, be for God to suffer defeat, blameless indeed, but defeat.

If God be defeated, he must destroy--that is, he must withdraw life. How can he go on sending forth his life into irreclaimable souls, to keep sin alive in them throughout the ages of eternity? But then, I say, no atonement would be made for the wrongs they have done; God remains defeated, for he has created that which sinned, and which would not repent and make up for its sin. But those who believe that God will thus be defeated by many souls, must surely be of those who do not believe he cares enough to do his very best for them. He is their Father; he had power to make them out of himself, separate from himself, and capable of being one with him: surely he will somehow save and keep them! Not the power of sin itself can close all the channels between creating and created.

The notion of suffering as an offset for sin, the foolish idea that a man by suffering borne may get out from under the hostile claim to which his wrong-doing has subjected him, comes first of all, I think, from the satisfaction we feel when wrong comes to grief. Why do we feel this satisfaction? Because we hate wrong, but, not being righteous ourselves, more or less hate the wronger as well as his wrong, hence are not only righteously pleased to behold the law's disapproval proclaimed in his punishment, but unrighteously pleased with his suffering, because of the impact upon us of his wrong. In this way the inborn justice of our nature passes over to evil. It is no pleasure to God, as it so often is to us, to see the wicked suffer. To regard any suffering with satisfaction, save it be sympathetically with its curative quality, comes of evil, is inhuman because undivine, is a thing God is incapable of. His nature is always to forgive, and just because he forgives, he punishes. Because God is so altogether alien to wrong, because it is to him a heart-pain and trouble that one of his little ones should do the evil thing, there is, I believe, no extreme of suffering to which, for the sake of destroying the evil thing in them, he would not subject them. A man might flatter, or bribe, or coax a tyrant; but there is no refuge from the love of God; that love will, for very love, insist upon the uttermost farthing.

'That is not the sort of love I care about!'

No; how should you? I well believe it! You cannot care for it until you begin to know it. But the eternal love will not be moved to yield you to the selfishness that is killing you. What lover would yield his lady to her passion for morphia? You may sneer at such love, but the Son of God who took the weight of that love, and bore it through the world, is content with it, and so is everyone who knows it. The love of the Father is a radiant perfection. Love and not self-love is lord of the universe. Justice demands your punishment, because justice demands, and will have, the destruction of sin. Justice demands your punishment because it demands that your father should do his best for you. God, being the God of justice, that is of fair-play, and having made us what we are, apt to fall and capable of being raised again, is in himself bound to punish in order to deliver us--else is his relation to us poor beside that of an earthly father. 'To thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy, for thou renderest to every man according to his work.' A man's work is his character; and God in his mercy is not indifferent, but treats him according to his work.

The notion that the salvation of Jesus is a salvation from the consequences of our sins, is a false, mean, low notion. The salvation of Christ is salvation from the smallest tendency or leaning to sin. It is a deliverance into the pure air of God's ways of thinking and feeling. It is a salvation that makes the heart pure, with the will and choice of the heart to be pure. To such a heart, sin is disgusting. It sees a thing as it is,--that is, as God sees it, for God sees everything as it is. The soul thus saved would rather sink into the flames of hell than steal into heaven and skulk there under the shadow of an imputed righteousness. No soul is saved that would not prefer hell to sin. Jesus did not die to save us from punishment; he was called Jesus because he should save his people from their sins.

If punishment be no atonement, how does the fact bear on the popular theology accepted by every one of the opposers of what they call Christianity, as representing its doctrines? Most of us have been more or less trained in it, and not a few of us have thereby, thank God, learned what it is--an evil thing, to be cast out of intellect and heart. Many imagine it dead and gone, but in reality it lies at the root (the intellectual root only, thank God) of much the greater part of the teaching of Christianity in the country; and is believed in--so far as the false can be believed in--by many who think they have left it behind, when they have merely omitted the truest, most offensive modes of expressing its doctrines. It is humiliating to find how many comparatively honest people think they get rid of a falsehood by softening the statement of it, by giving it the shape and placing it in the light in which it will least assert itself, and so have a good chance of passing both with such as hold it thoroughly, and such as might revolt against it more plainly uttered.

Once for all I will ease my soul regarding the horrid phantasm. I have passed through no change of opinion concerning it since first I began to write or speak; but I have written little and spoken less about it, because I would preach no mere negation. My work was not to destroy the false, except as it came in the way of building the true. Therefore I sought to speak but what I believed, saying little concerning what I did not believe; trusting, as now I trust, in the true to cast out the false, and shunning dispute. Neither will I now enter any theological lists to be the champion for or against mere doctrine. I have no desire to change the opinion of man or woman. Let everyone for me hold what he pleases. But I would do my utmost to disable such as think correct opinion essential to salvation from laying any other burden on the shoulders of true men and women than the yoke of their Master; and such burden, if already oppressing any, I would gladly lift. Let the Lord himself teach them, I say. A man who has not the mind of Christ--and no man has the mind of Christ except him who makes it his business to obey him--cannot have correct opinions concerning him; neither, if he could, would they be of any value to him: he would be nothing the better, he would be the worse for having them. Our business is not to think correctly, but to live truly; then first will there be a possibility of our thinking correctly. One chief cause of the amount of unbelief in the world is, that those who have seen something of the glory of Christ, set themselves to theorize concerning him rather than to obey him. In teaching men, they have not taught them Christ, but taught them about Christ. More eager after credible theory than after doing the truth, they have speculated in a condition of heart in which it was impossible they should understand; they have presumed to explain a Christ whom years and years of obedience could alone have made them able to comprehend. Their teaching of him, therefore, has been repugnant to the common sense of many who had not half their privileges, but in whom, as in Nathanael, there was no guile. Such, naturally, press their theories, in general derived from them of old time, upon others, insisting on their thinking about Christ as they think, instead of urging them to go to Christ to be taught by him whatever he chooses to teach them. They do their unintentional worst to stop all growth, all life. From such and their false teaching I would gladly help to deliver the true-hearted. Let the dead bury their dead, but I would do what I may to keep them from burying the living.

If there be no satisfaction to justice in the mere punishment of the wrong-doer, what shall we say of the notion of satisfying justice by causing one to suffer who is not the wrong-doer? And what, moreover, shall we say to the notion that, just because he is not the person who deserves to be punished, but is absolutely innocent, his suffering gives perfect satisfaction to the perfect justice? That the injustice be done with the consent of the person maltreated makes no difference: it makes it even worse, seeing, as they say, that justice requires the punishment of the sinner, and here is one far more than innocent.

They have shifted their ground; it is no more punishment, but mere suffering the law requires! The thing gets worse and worse. I declare my utter and absolute repudiation of the idea in any form whatever.

Rather than believe in a justice--that is, a God--to whose righteousness, abstract or concrete, it could be any satisfaction for the wrong-doing of a man that a man who did no wrong should suffer, I would be driven from among men, and dwell with the wild beasts that have not reason enough to be unreasonable.

What! God, the father of Jesus Christ, like that! His justice contented with direst injustice! The anger of him who will nowise clear the guilty, appeased by the suffering of the innocent! Very God forbid! Observe: the evil fancy actually substitutes for punishment not mere suffering, but that suffering which is farthest from punishment; and this when, as I have shown, punishment, the severest, can be no satisfaction to justice! How did it come ever to be imagined? It sprang from the trustless dread that cannot believe in the forgiveness of the Father; cannot believe that even God will do anything for nothing; cannot trust him without a legal arrangement to bind him.

How many, failing to trust God, fall back on a text, as they call it! It sprang from the pride that will understand what it cannot, before it will obey what it sees. He that will understand first will believe a lie--a lie from which obedience alone will at length deliver him. If anyone say, 'But I believe what you despise,' I answer, To believe it is your punishment for being able to believe it; you may call it your reward, if you will. You ought not to be able to believe it.

It is the merest, poorest, most shameless fiction, invented without the perception that it was an invention--fit to satisfy the intellect, doubtless, of the inventor, else he could not have invented it. It has seemed to satisfy also many a humble soul, content to take what was given, and not think; content that another should think for him, and tell him what was the mind of his Father in heaven. Again I say, let the person who can be so satisfied be so satisfied; I have not to trouble myself with him.

That he can be content with it, argues him unready to receive better. So long as he can believe false things concerning God, he is such as is capable of believing them--with how much or how little of blame, God knows. Opinion, right or wrong, will do nothing to save him. I would that he thought no more about this or any other opinion, but set himself to do the work of the Master. With his opinions, true or false, I have nothing to do. It is because such as he force evil things upon their fellows--utter or imply them from the seat of authority or influence--to their agony, their paralysation, their unbelief, their indignation, their stumbling, that I have any right to speak. I would save my fellows from having what notion of God is possible to them blotted out by a lie.

If it be asked how, if it be false, the doctrine of substitution can have been permitted to remain so long an article of faith to so many, I answer, On the same principle on which God took up and made use of the sacrifices men had, in their lack of faith, invented as a way of pleasing him. Some children will tell lies to please the parents that hate lying. They will even confess to having done a wrong they have not done, thinking their parents would like them to say they had done it, because they teach them to confess. God accepted men's sacrifices until he could get them to see--and with how many has he yet not succeeded, in the church and out of it!--that he does not care for such things.

'But,' again it may well be asked, 'whence then has sprung the undeniable potency of that teaching?' I answer, From its having in it a notion of God and his Christ, poor indeed and faint, but, by the very poverty and untruth in its presentation, fitted to the weakness and unbelief of men, seeing it was by men invented to meet and ease the demand made upon their own weakness and unbelief. Thus the leaven spreads. The truth is there. It is Christ the glory of God. But the ideas that poor slavish souls breed concerning this glory the moment the darkness begins to disperse, is quite another thing.

Truth is indeed too good for men to believe; they must dilute it before they can take it; they must dilute it before they dare give it. They must make it less true before they can believe it enough to get any good of it. Unable to believe in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, they invented a mediator in his mother, and so were able to approach a little where else they had stood away; unable to believe in the forgivingness of their father in heaven, they invented a way to be forgiven that should not demand of him so much; which might make it right for him to forgive; which should save them from having to believe downright in the tenderness of his father-heart, for that they found impossible.

They thought him bound to punish for the sake of punishing, as an offset to their sin; they could not believe in clear forgiveness; that did not seem divine; it needed itself to be justified; so they invented for its justification a horrible injustice, involving all that was bad in sacrifice, even human sacrifice. They invented a satisfaction for sin which was an insult to God. He sought no satisfaction, but an obedient return to the Father. What satisfaction was needed he made himself in what he did to cause them to turn from evil and go back to him.

The thing was too simple for complicated unbelief and the arguing spirit. Gladly would I help their followers to loathe such thoughts of God; but for that, they themselves must grow better men and women. While they are capable of being satisfied with them, there would be no advantage in their becoming intellectually convinced that such thoughts were wrong. I would not speak a word to persuade them of it. Success would be worthless. They would but remain what they were--children capable of thinking meanly of their father.

When the heart recoils, discovering how horrible it would be to have such an unreality for God, it will begin to search about and see whether it must indeed accept such statements concerning God; it will search after a real God by whom to hold fast, a real God to deliver them from the terrible idol. It is for those thus moved that I write, not at all for the sake of disputing with those who love the lie they may not be to blame for holding; who, like the Jews of old, would cast out of their synagogue the man who doubts the genuineness of their moral caricature of God, who doubts their travesty of the grandest truth in the universe, the atonement of Jesus Christ. Of such a man they will unhesitatingly report that he does not believe in the atonement. But a lie for God is against God, and carries the sentence of death in itself.

Instead of giving their energy to do the will of God, men of power have given it to the construction of a system by which to explain why Christ must die, what were the necessities and designs of God in permitting his death; and men of power of our own day, while casting from them not a little of the good in the teaching of the Roman Church, have clung to the morally and spiritually vulgar idea of justice and satisfaction held by pagan Rome, buttressed by the Jewish notion of sacrifice, and in its very home, alas, with the mother of all the western churches! Better the reformers had kept their belief in a purgatory, and parted with what is called vicarious sacrifice!

Their system is briefly this: God is bound to punish sin, and to punish it to the uttermost. His justice requires that sin be punished. But he loves man, and does not want to punish him if he can help it. Jesus Christ says, 'I will take his punishment upon me.' God accepts his offer, and lets man go unpunished--upon a condition. His justice is more than satisfied by the punishment of an infinite being instead of a world of worthless creatures. The suffering of Jesus is of greater value than that of all the generations, through endless ages, because he is infinite, pure, perfect in love and truth, being God's own everlasting son. God's condition with man is, that he believe in Christ's atonement thus explained. A man must say, 'I have sinned, and deserve to be tortured to all eternity. But Christ has paid my debts, by being

punished instead of me. Therefore he is my Saviour. I am now bound by gratitude to him to turn away from evil.' Some would doubtless insist on his saying a good deal more, but this is enough for my purpose.

As to the justice of God requiring the punishment of the sinner, I have said enough. That the mere suffering of the sinner can be no satisfaction to justice, I have also tried to show. If the suffering of the sinner be indeed required by the justice of God, let it be administered. But what shall we say adequate to confront the base representation that it is not punishment, not the suffering of the sinner that is required, but suffering! nay, as if this were not depth enough of baseness to crown all heathenish representation of the ways of God, that the suffering of the innocent is unspeakably preferable in his eyes to that of the wicked, as a make-up for wrong done! nay, again, 'in the lowest deep a lower deep,' that the suffering of the holy, the suffering of the loving, the suffering of the eternally and perfectly good, is supremely satisfactory to the pure justice of the Father of spirits! Not all the suffering that could be heaped upon the wicked could buy them a moment's respite, so little is their suffering a counterpoise to their wrong; in the working of this law of equivalents, this *lex talionis*, the suffering of millions of years could not equal the sin of a moment, could not pay off one farthing of the deep debt. But so much more valuable, precious, and dear, is the suffering of the innocent, so much more of a satisfaction--observe--to the justice of God, that in return for that suffering another wrong is done: the sinners who deserve and ought to be punished are set free.

I know the root of all that can be said on the subject; the notion is imbedded in the gray matter of my Scotch brains; and if I reject it, I know what I reject. For the love of God my heart rose early against the low invention. Strange that in a Christian land it should need to be said, that to punish the innocent and let the guilty go free is unjust! It wrongs the innocent, the guilty, and God himself. It would be the worst of all wrongs to the guilty to treat them as innocent. The whole device is a piece of spiritual charlatantry--fit only for a fraudulent jail--delivery. If the wicked ought to be punished, it were the worst possible perversion of justice to take a righteous being however strong, and punish him instead of the sinner however weak. To the poorest idea of justice in punishment, it is essential that the sinner, and no other than the sinner, should receive the punishment. The strong being that was willing to bear such punishment might well be regarded as worshipful, but what of the God whose so-called justice he thus defeats? If you say it is justice, not God that demands the suffering, I say justice cannot demand that which is unjust, and the whole thing is unjust. God is absolutely just, and there is no deliverance from his justice, which is one with his mercy. The device is an absurdity--a grotesquely deformed absurdity. To represent the living God as a party to such a style of action, is to veil with a mask of cruelty and hypocrisy the face whose glory can be seen only in the face of Jesus; to put a tirade of vulgar Roman legality into the mouth of the Lord God merciful and gracious, who will by no means clear the guilty. Rather than believe such ugly folly of him whose very name is enough to make those that know him heave the breath of the hart panting for the waterbrooks; rather than think of him what in a man would make me avoid him at the risk of my life, I would say, 'There is no God; let us neither eat nor drink, that we may die! For lo, this is not our God! This is not he for whom we have waited!' But I have seen his face and heard his voice in the face and the voice of Jesus Christ; and I say this is our God, the very one whose being the Creator makes it an infinite gladness to be the created. I will not have the God of the scribes and the pharisees whether Jewish or Christian, protestant, Roman, or Greek, but thy father, O Christ! He is my God. If you say, 'That is our God, not yours!' I answer, 'Your portrait of your God is an evil caricature of the face of Christ.'

To believe in a vicarious sacrifice, is to think to take refuge with the Son from the righteousness of the Father; to take refuge with his work instead of with the Son himself; to take refuge with a theory of that

work instead of the work itself; to shelter behind a false quirk of law instead of nestling in the eternal heart of the unchangeable and righteous Father, who is merciful in that he renders to every man according to his work, and compels their obedience, nor admits judicial quibble or subterfuge. God will never let a man off with any fault. He must have him clean. He will excuse him to the very uttermost of truth, but not a hair's-breadth beyond it; he is his true father, and will have his child true as his son Jesus Christ is true. He will impute to him nothing that he has not, will lose sight of no smallest good that he has; will quench no smoking flax, break no bruised reed, but send forth judgment unto victory. He is God beyond all that heart hungriest for love and righteousness could to eternity desire.

If you say the best of men have held the opinions I stigmatize, I answer, 'Some of the best of men have indeed held these theories, and of men who have held them I have loved and honoured some heartily and humbly--but because of what they were, not because of what they thought; and they were what they were in virtue of their obedient faith, not of their opinion. They were not better men because of holding these theories. In virtue of knowing God by obeying his son, they rose above the theories they had never looked in the face, and so had never recognized as evil. Many have arrived, in the natural progress of their sacred growth, at the point where they must abandon them. The man of whom I knew the most good gave them up gladly. Good to worshipfulness may be the man that holds them, and I hate them the more therefore; they are lies that, working under cover of the truth mingled with them, burrow as near the heart of the good man as they can go. Whoever, from whatever reason of blindness, may be the holder of a lie, the thing is a lie, and no falsehood must mingle with the justice we mete out to it. There is nothing for any lie but the pit of hell. Yet until the man sees the thing to be a lie, how shall he but hold it! Are there not mingled with it shadows of the best truth in the universe? So long as a man is able to love a lie, he is incapable of seeing it is a lie. He who is true, out and out, will know at once an untruth; and to that vision we must all come. I do not write for the sake of those who either make or heartily accept any lie. When they see the glory of God, they will see the eternal difference between the false and the true, and not till then. I write for those whom such teaching as theirs has folded in a cloud through which they cannot see the stars of heaven, so that some of them even doubt if there be any stars of heaven. For the holy ones who believed and taught these things in days gone by, all is well. Many of the holiest of them cast the lies from them long ere the present teachers of them were born. Many who would never have invented them for themselves, yet receiving them with the seals affixed of so many good men, took them in their humility as recognized truths, instead of inventions of men; and, oppressed by authority, the authority of men far inferior to themselves, did not dare dispute them, but proceeded to order their lives by what truths they found in their company, and so had their reward, the reward of obedience, in being by that obedience brought to know God, which knowledge broke for them the net of a presumptuous self-styled orthodoxy. Every man who tries to obey the Master is my brother, whether he counts me such or not, and I revere him; but dare I give quarter to what I see to be a lie, because my brother believes it? The lie is not of God, whoever may hold it.

'Well, then,' will many say, 'if you thus unceremoniously cast to the winds the doctrine of vicarious sacrifice, what theory do you propose to substitute in its stead?'

'In the name of the truth,' I answer, None. I will send out no theory of mine to rouse afresh little whirlwinds of dialogistic dust mixed with dirt and straws and holy words, hiding the Master in talk about him. If I have any such, I will not cast it on the road as I walk, but present it on a fair patine to him to whom I may think it well to show it. Only eyes opened by the sun of righteousness, and made single by obedience, can judge even the poor moony pearl of formulated thought. Say if you will that I fear to show my opinion. Is the man

a coward who will not fling his child to the wolves? What faith in this kind I have, I will have to myself before God, till I see better reason for uttering it than I do now.

'Will you then take from me my faith, and help me to no other?'

Your faith! God forbid. Your theory is not your faith, nor anything like it. Your faith is your obedience; your theory I know not what. Yes, I will gladly leave you without any of what you call faith. Trust in God. Obey the word--every word of the Master. That is faith; and so believing, your opinion will grow out of your true life, and be worthy of it. Peter says the Lord gives the spirit to them that obey him: the spirit of the Master, and that alone, can guide you to any theory that it will be of use to you to hold. A theory arrived at any other way is not worth the time spent on it. Jesus is the creating and saving lord of our intellects as well as of our more precious hearts; nothing that he does not think, is worth thinking; no man can think as he thinks, except he be pure like him; no man can be pure like him, except he go with him, and learn from him. To put off obeying him till we find a credible theory concerning him, is to set aside the potion we know it our duty to drink, for the study of the various schools of therapy. You know what Christ requires of you is right--much of it at least you believe to be right, and your duty to do, whether he said it or not: do it. If you do not do what you know of the truth, I do not wonder that you seek it intellectually, for that kind of search may well be, as Milton represents it, a solace even to the fallen angels. But do not call anything that may be so gained, The Truth. How can you, not caring to be true, judge concerning him whose life was to do for very love the things you confess your duty, yet do them not? Obey the truth, I say, and let theory wait. Theory may spring from life, but never life from theory.

I will not then tell you what I think, but I will tell any man who cares to hear it what I believe. I will do it now. Of course what I say must partake thus much of the character of theory that I cannot prove it; I can only endeavour to order my life by it.

I believe in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, my elder brother, my lord and master; I believe that he has a right to my absolute obedience whereinsoever I know or shall come to know his will; that to obey him is to ascend the pinnacle of my being; that not to obey him would be to deny him. I believe that he died that I might die like him--die to any ruling power in me but the will of God--live ready to be nailed to the cross as he was, if God will it. I believe that he is my Saviour from myself, and from all that has come of loving myself, from all that God does not love, and would not have me love--all that is not worth loving; that he died that the justice, the mercy of God, might have its way with me, making me just as God is just, merciful as he is merciful, perfect as my father in heaven is perfect. I believe and pray that he will give me what punishment I need to set me right, or keep me from going wrong. I believe that he died to deliver me from all meanness, all pretence, all falseness, all unfairness, all poverty of spirit, all cowardice, all fear, all anxiety, all forms of self-love, all trust or hope in possession; to make me merry as a child, the child of our father in heaven, loving nothing but what is lovely, desiring nothing I should be ashamed to let the universe of God see me desire. I believe that God is just like Jesus, only greater yet, for Jesus said so. I believe that God is absolutely, grandly beautiful, even as the highest soul of man counts beauty, but infinitely beyond that soul's highest idea--with the beauty that creates beauty, not merely shows it, or itself exists beautiful. I believe that God has always done, is always doing his best for every man; that no man is miserable because God is forgetting him; that he is not a God to crouch before, but our father, to whom the child-heart cries exultant, 'Do with me as thou wilt.'

I believe that there is nothing good for me or for any man but God, and more and more of God, and that alone through knowing Christ can we come nigh to him.

I believe that no man is ever condemned for any sin except one--that he will not leave his sins and come out of them, and be the child of him who is his father.

I believe that justice and mercy are simply one and the same thing; without justice to the full there can be no mercy, and without mercy to the full there can be no justice; that such is the mercy of God that he will hold his children in the consuming fire of his distance until they pay the uttermost farthing, until they drop the purse of selfishness with all the dross that is in it, and rush home to the Father and the Son, and the many brethren--rush inside the centre of the life--giving fire whose outer circles burn. I believe that no hell will be lacking which would help the just mercy of God to redeem his children.

I believe that to him who obeys, and thus opens the doors of his heart to receive the eternal gift, God gives the spirit of his son, the spirit of himself, to be in him, and lead him to the understanding of all truth; that the true disciple shall thus always know what he ought to do, though not necessarily what another ought to do; that the spirit of the father and the son enlightens by teaching righteousness. I believe that no teacher should strive to make men think as he thinks, but to lead them to the living Truth, to the Master himself, of whom alone they can learn anything, who will make them in themselves know what is true by the very seeing of it. I believe that the inspiration of the Almighty alone gives understanding. I believe that to be the disciple of Christ is the end of being; that to persuade men to be his disciples is the end of teaching.

'The sum of all this is that you do not believe in the atonement?'

I believe in Jesus Christ. Nowhere am I requested to believe in any thing, or in any statement, but everywhere to believe in God and in Jesus Christ. In what you call the atonement, in what you mean by the word, what I have already written must make it plain enough I do not believe. God forbid I should, for it would be to believe a lie, and a lie which is to blame for much non-acceptance of the gospel in this and other lands. But, as the word was used by the best English writers at the time when the translation of the Bible was made--with all my heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, I believe in the atonement, call it the a-tone-ment, or the at-one-ment, as you please. I believe that Jesus Christ is our atonement; that through him we are reconciled to, made one with God. There is not one word in the New Testament about reconciling God to us; it is we that have to be reconciled to God. I am not writing, neither desire to write, a treatise on the atonement, my business being to persuade men to be atoned to God; but I will go so far to meet my questioner as to say--without the slightest expectation of satisfying him, or the least care whether I do so or not, for his opinion is of no value to me, though his truth is of endless value to me and to the universe--that, even in the sense of the atonement being a making-up for the evil done by men toward God, I believe in the atonement. Did not the Lord cast himself into the eternal gulf of evil yawning between the children and the Father? Did he not bring the Father to us, let us look on our eternal Sire in the face of his true son, that we might have that in our hearts which alone could make us love him--a true sight of him? Did he not insist on the one truth of the universe, the one saving truth, that God was just what he was? Did he not hold to that assertion to the last, in the face of contradiction and death? Did he not thus lay down his life persuading us to lay down ours at the feet of the Father? Has not his very life by which he died passed into those who have received him, and re-created theirs, so that now they live with the life which alone is life? Did he not foil and slay evil by letting all the waves and billows of its horrid sea break upon him, go over him, and die without rebound--spend their rage, fall defeated, and cease? Verily, he made atonement! We sacrifice to God!--it is God who has sacrificed his own son to us; there was no way else of getting the gift of himself into our hearts. Jesus sacrificed himself to his father and the children to bring them together--all the love on the side of the Father and the Son, all the selfishness on the side of the children. If the joy that alone makes life worth living, the joy that God is such as Christ, be a true thing

in my heart, how can I but believe in the atonement of Jesus Christ? I believe it heartily, as God means it.

Then again, as the power that brings about a making-up for any wrong done by man to man, I believe in the atonement. Who that believes in Jesus does not long to atone to his brother for the injury he has done him? What repentant child, feeling he has wronged his father, does not desire to make atonement? Who is the mover, the causer, the persuader, the creator of the repentance, of the passion that restores fourfold?--Jesus, our propitiation, our atonement. He is the head and leader, the prince of the atonement. He could not do it without us, but he leads us up to the Father's knee: he makes us make atonement. Learning Christ, we are not only sorry for what we have done wrong, we not only turn from it and hate it, but we become able to serve both God and man with an infinitely high and true service, a soul-service. We are able to offer our whole being to God to whom by deepest right it belongs. Have I injured anyone? With him to aid my justice, new risen with him from the dead, shall I not make good amends? Have I failed in love to my neighbour? Shall I not now love him with an infinitely better love than was possible to me before? That I will and can make atonement, thanks be to him who is my atonement, making me at one with God and my fellows! He is my life, my joy, my lord, my owner, the perfecter of my being by the perfection of his own. I dare not say with Paul that I am the slave of Christ; but my highest aspiration and desire is to be the slave of Christ.

'But you do not believe that the sufferings of Christ, as sufferings, justified the supreme ruler in doing anything which he would not have been at liberty to do but for those sufferings?'

I do not. I believe the notion as unworthy of man's belief, as it is dishonouring to God. It has its origin doubtless in a salutary sense of sin; but sense of sin is not inspiration, though it may lie not far from the temple-door. It is indeed an opener of the eyes, but upon home-defilement, not upon heavenly truth; it is not the revealer of secrets. Also there is another factor in the theory, and that is unbelief--incapacity to accept the freedom of God's forgiveness; incapacity to believe that it is God's chosen nature to forgive, that he is bound in his own divinely willed nature to forgive. No atonement is necessary to him but that men should leave their sins and come back to his heart. But men cannot believe in the forgiveness of God. Therefore they need, therefore he has given them a mediator. And yet they will not know him. They think of the father of souls as if he had abdicated his fatherhood for their sins, and assumed the judge. If he put off his fatherhood, which he cannot do, for it is an eternal fact, he puts off with it all relation to us. He cannot repudiate the essential and keep the resultant. Men cannot, or will not, or dare not see that nothing but his being our father gives him any right over us--that nothing but that could give him a perfect right. They regard the father of their spirits as their governor! They yield the idea of the Ancient of Days, 'the glad creator,' and put in its stead a miserable, puritanical martinet of a God, caring not for righteousness, but for his rights; not for the eternal purities, but the goody proprieties. The prophets of such a God take all the glow, all the hope, all the colour, all the worth, out of life on earth, and offer you instead what they call eternal bliss--a pale, tearless hell. Of all things, turn from a mean, poverty stricken faith. But, if you ate straitened in your own mammon-worshipping soul, how shall you believe in a God any greater than can stand up in that prison-chamber?

I desire to wake no dispute, will myself dispute with no man, but for the sake of those whom certain believers trouble, I have spoken my mind. I love the one God seen in the face of Jesus Christ. From all copies of Jonathan Edwards's portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing. Not such a God is he concerning whom was the message John heard from Jesus, that he is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

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