

The Sinner Stripped of His Vain Pleas

by Philip Doddridge

Philip Doddridge's sermon addresses the futility of sinners' excuses before God and the urgent need for genuine repentance and faith in Christ for salvation.

Scripture: Psalm 50:21

Topics: "Judgment And Repentance", "Guilt And Conviction"

Description

Philip Doddridge preaches about the vanity of sinners' pleas before God, emphasizing that no excuse or justification will stand in the presence of the Almighty Judge. He challenges sinners to acknowledge their guilt and prepare to face the consequences of their actions, urging them to seek deliverance through the Gospel. The sermon highlights the futility of relying on heritage, knowledge of religion, good deeds, or ignorance as defenses, ultimately leading to a deep sense of conviction and repentance before God's judgment.

Transcript

1,2. The vanity of those pleas which sinners may secretly confide in, is so apparent that they will be ashamed at last to mention them before God.--3. Such as, that they descended from pious us parents.--4. That they had attended to the speculative part of religion.--5. That they had entertained sound notion.--6. 7. That they had expressed a zealous regard to religion, and attended the outward forms of worship with those they apprehended the purest churches.--8. That they had been free from gross immoralities.--9. That they did not think the consequences of neglecting religion would have been so fatal.-- 10. That they could not do otherwise then they did.--11. Conclusion. With the meditation of a convinced sinner giving up his vain pleas before God

1. MY last discourse left the sinner in very alarming and very pitiable circumstances; a criminal convicted at the bar of God, disarmed of all pretences to perfect innocence and sinless obedience, and consequently obnoxious to the sentence of a holy law, which can make no allowance for any transgression, no not for the least; but pronounces death and a curse against every act of disobedience: how much more then against those numberless and aggravated acts of rebellion, of which, O sinner! thy conscience hath condemned thee before God?

I would hope Some of my readers will ingenuously fall under the conviction, and not think of making any apology; for sure I am, that, humbly to plead guilty at the divine bar, is the most decent, and, all things considered, the most prudent thing that can be done in such an unhappy state. Yet I know the treachery

and the self-flattery of a sinful and corrupted heart. I know what excuses it makes, and how, when it is driven from one refuge, it flies to another, to fortify itself against conviction, and to persuade, not merely another, but itself, "That if it has been in some instances to blame, it is not quite so criminal as was represented; that there are at least considerations that plead in its favor, which, if they cannot justify, will in some degree excuse."

A secret reserve of this kind, sometimes perhaps scarcely formed into a distinct reflection, breaks the force of conviction, and often prevents that deep humiliation before God which is the happiest token of approaching deliverance. I will therefore examine into some of these particulars; and for that purpose would seriously ask thee, O sinner! what thou hast to offer in arrest or judgment? What plea thou canst urge for thyself; why the sentence of God should not go forth against thee, and why thou shouldst not fall into the hands of his justice? 2.

But this I must premise, that the question is not; how wouldst thou answer to me, a weak sinful worm like thyself, who am shortly to stand with thee at the same bar? and "the Lord grant that I may find mercy of the Lord in that day," (2 Tim. 1:18) but, what wilt thou reply to thy Judge? What couldst thou plead, if thou wast now actually before his tribunal, where, to multiply vain words, and to frame idle apologies, would be but to increase thy guilt and provocation? Surely, the very thought of his presence must supersede a thousand of those trifling excuses which now sometimes impose on "a generation that are pure in their own eyes," though they "are not washed from their filthiness!" (Prov. 30:12) or while they are conscious of their impurities, "trust in words that cannot profit," (Jer 7:8) and "lean upon broken reeds." (Isa. 36:6) 3.

You will not to be sure, in such a condition, plead "that you are descended from pious parents." That was indeed your privilege; and wo be to you that you have abused it, and "forsaken the God of your fathers." (2 Chron. 7:22) Ishmael was immediately descended from Abraham, the friend of God, and Esau was the son of Isaac, who was born according to the promise: yet you know they were both cut off from the blessing to which they apprehended they had a kind of hereditary claim.

You may remember that our Lord does not only speak of one who would call "Abraham father," who "tormented in flames," (Luke 16:24) but expressly declares that many of the children of the kingdom shall be shut out of it; and when others come from the most distant parts to sit down in it, shall be distinguished from their companions in misery only by louder accents of lamentation, and more furious "gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 8:11,12) 4. Nor will you then presume to plead "that you had exercised your thoughts about the speculative parts of religion."

For to what end can this serve, but to increase your condemnation? Since you have broken God's law, since you have contradicted the most obvious and apparent obligations of religion, to have inquired into it, and argued upon it, is a circumstance that proves your guilt more audacious. What! did you think religion was merely an exercise of men's wit, and the amusement of their curiosity? If you argued about it on the principles of common sense, you must have judged and proved it to be a practical thing; and if it was so, why did you not practice accordingly?

You knew the particular branches of it; and why then did you not attend to every one of them? To have pleaded an unavoidable ignorance would have been their happiest plea that could have remained for you; nay, an actual, though faulty ignorance, would have been some little allay of your guilt. But if; by your own confession, you have "known your Master's will, and have not done it," you bear witness against yourself, that you deserve to be "beaten with many stripes." (Luke, 12:47) 5.

Nor yet, again, will it suffice to say "that you have had right notions both of the doctrines and the precepts of religion." Your advantage for practicing it was therefore the greater; but understanding and acting right can never go for the same thing in the judgment of God or of man. In "believing there is one God," you have done well; but the "devils also believe and tremble." (Jam. 2:19) In acknowledging Christ to be the Son of God and the Holy One, you have done well too; but you know the unclean spirits made this very orthodox confession; (Luke 4:34,41) and yet they are "reserved in everlasting chains, under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day." (Jude, ver. 6) And will you place any secret confidence in that which might be pleaded by the infernal spirits as well as by you? 6.

But perhaps you may think of pleading that "you have actually done something in religion." Having judged what faith was the soundest, and what worship the purest, "you entered yourself into those societies where such articles of faith were professed, and such forms of worship were practiced: and among these you have signalized yourself by exactness of your attendance, by the zeal with which you have espoused their cause, and by the earnestness with which you have contended for such principles and practices."

O sinner! I much fear that this zeal of thine about the circumstantial of religion will swell thine account, rather than be allowed in abatement of it. He that searches thine heart knows from whence it arose, and how far it extended. Perhaps he sees that it was all hypocrisy, an artful veil under which thou wast carrying on thy mean designs for this world, while the sacred name of God and religion were profaned and prostituted in the basest manner: and if so, thou art cursed with a distinguished curse for so daring an insult on the Divine omniscience as well as justice.

Or perhaps the earnestness with which you have been "contending for the faith and worship which was once delivered to the saints," (Jude, ver. 3) or which, it is possible, you may have rashly concluded to be that, might be mere pride and bitterness of spirit; and all the zeal you have expressed might possibly arise from a confidence of your own judgment, from an impatience of contradiction, or some secret malignity of spirit, which delighteth itself in condemning, and even in worrying others; yea, which, if I may be allowed the expression, fiercely preys upon religion, as the tiger upon the lamb, to turn it into a nature most contrary to its own.

And shall this screen you before the great tribunal? Shall it not rather awaken the displeasure it is pleaded to avert? 7. But say that this zeal for notions and forms has been ever so well intended, and, so far as it has gone ever so well conducted too; what will that avail toward vindicating thee in so many instances or negligence and disobedience as are recorded against thee in the book of God's remembrance? Were the revealed doctrines of the Gospel to be earnestly maintained, (as indeed they ought) and was the great practical purpose for which they were revealed to be forgot?

Was the very mint, and anise, and cummin to be tithed; and were "the weightier matters of the law to be omitted," (Matt. 23:23) even that love to God which is its "first and great command?" (Matt. 22:38) O! how wilt thou be able to vindicate even the justest sentence thou hast passed on others for their infidelity, or for their disobedience, without being "condemned out of thine own mouth?" (Luke 19:22) 8. Will you then plead "your fair moral character, your works of righteousness and of mercy?"

Had your obedience to the law of God been complete, the plea might be allowed as important and valid. But I have supposed, and proved above, that conscience testifies to the contrary; and you will not now dare to contradict it. I add farther, had these works of yours, which you now urge, proceeded from a sincere love to God, and a genuine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you would not have thought of pleading

them any otherwise than as an evidence of your interest in the Gospel-covenant and in the blessings of it, procured by the righteousness and blood of the Redeemer; and that faith, had it been sincere, would have been attended with such deep humility, and with such solemn apprehensions of the Divine holiness and glory, that, instead of pleading any works of your own before God, you would rather have implored his pardon for the mixture of sinful imperfection attending the very best of them.

Now, as you are a stranger to this humbling and sanctifying principle, (which here in this address I suppose my reader to be) it is absolutely necessary you should be plainly and faithfully told, that neither sobriety, nor honesty, nor humanity will justify you before the tribunal of God, when he "lays judgment to the line, and righteousness to the plummet," (Isa. 28:17) and examines all your actions and all your thoughts with the strictest severity. You have not been a drunkard, an adulterer, or a robber.

So far it is well. You stand before a righteous God, who will do you ample justice, and therefore will not condemn you for drunkenness, adultery, or robbery; but you have forgotten him, your Parent and your Benefactor; you have "cast off fear, and restrained prayer before him;" (Job 15:4) you have despised the blood of his Son, and all the immortal blessings that he purchased with it. For this, therefore, you are judged, and condemned. And as for any thing that has looked like virtue and humanity in your temper and conduct, the exercise of it has in great measure been its own reward, if there were any thing more than form and artifice in it; and the various bounties of Divine Providence to you, amidst all your numberless provocations, have been a thousand times more than an equivalent for such defective and imperfect virtues as these.

You remain therefore chargeable with the guilt of a thousand offences, for which you have no excuse, though there are some other instances in which you did not grossly offend. And those good works in which you have been so ready to trust, will no more vindicate you in his awful presence, than a man's kindness to his poor neighbors would be allowed as a plea in arrest of judgment, when he stood convicted of high treason against his prince. 9. But you will, perhaps, be ready to say, "you did not expect all this: you did not think the consequences of neglecting religion would have been so fatal."

And why did you not think it? Why did you not examine more attentively and more impartially? Why did you suffer the pride and folly of your vain heart to take up with such superficial appearances, and trust the light suggestions of your own prejudiced mind against the express declaration of the word of God? Had you reflected on his character as the supreme Governor of the world, you would have seen the necessity of such a day of retribution as we are now referring to. Had you regarded the Scripture, the divine authority of which you professed to believe, every page might have taught you to expect it.

"You did not think of religion!" and of what were you thinking when you forgot or neglected it? Had you so much employment of another kind? Of what kind, I beseech you! What end could you propose, by any thing else, of equal moment? Nay, with all your engagements, conscience will tell you that there have been seasons when, for want of thought, time and life have been a burden to you; yet you guarded against thought as against an enemy, and cast up, as it were, an entrenchment of inconsideration around you on every side, as if it had been to defend you from the most dangerous invasion.

God knew you were thoughtless, and therefore he sent you "line upon line, and precept upon precept," (Isa. 28:10) in such plain language that it needed no genius or study to understand it. He tried you too with afflictions as well as with mercies, to awaken you out of your fatal lethargy; and yet, when awakened, you would lie down again upon the bed of sloth. And now, pleasing as your dreams might be, "you must lie

down in sorrow." (Isa. 50:11) Reflection has at last overtaken you, and must be heard as a tormentor, since it might not be heard as a friend. 10.

But some may perhaps imagine that one important apology is yet unheard, and that there may be room to say, "you were, by the necessity of your nature, impelled to those things which are now charged upon you as crimes; and that it was not in your power to have avoided them, in the circumstances in which you were placed." If this will do any thing, it indeed promises to do much--so much that it will amount to nothing. If I were disposed to answer you upon the folly and madness of your own principles.

I might say that the same consideration which proves it was necessary for you to offend, proves also that it is necessary for God to punish you; and that, indeed, he cannot but do it: and I might farther say with an excellent writer, "that the same principles which destroy the injustice of sins, destroy the injustice of punishment too." But if you cannot admit this; if you should still reply, in spite of principle, that it must be unjust to punish you for an action utterly and absolutely unavoidable, I really think you would answer right.

But in that answer you will contradict your own scheme, as I observed above; and I leave your conscience to judge what sort of a scheme that must be which would make all kind of punishment unjust; for the argument will on the whole be the same, whether with regard to human punishment or divine. It is a scheme full of confusion and horror. You would not, I am sure, take it from a servant who had robbed you and then fired your house; you would never inwardly believe that he could not have helped it or think that he had fairly excused himself by such a plea; and I am persuaded you would be so far from presuming to offer it to God at the great day, that you would not venture to turn it into a prayer even now.

Imagine that you saw a malefactor dying with such words as these in his mouth: "O God! it is true I did indeed rob and murder my fellow-creatures; but thou knowest, that, as my circumstances were ordered, I could not do otherwise; my will was irresistibly determined by the motives which thou didst set before me, and I could as well have shaken the foundations of the earth, or darkened the sun in the firmament, as have resisted the impulse which bore me on." I put it to your conscience whether you would not look on such a speech as this with detestation, as one enormity added to another.

Yet, if the excuse would have any weight in your mouth, it would have equal weight in his; or would be equally applicable to any, the most shocking occasions. But indeed it is so contrary to the plainest principles of common reason, that I can hardly persuade myself that any one could seriously and thoroughly believe it; and should imagine my time very ill employed here if I were to set myself to combat those pretences to argument by which the wantonness of human wit has attempted to varnish it over. 11.

You-see then, on the whole, the vanity of all your pleas; and how easily the most plausible or them might be silenced by a mortal man like yourself; how much more then by Him who searches all hearts, and can; in a moment, flash in upon the conscience a most powerful and irresistible conviction? What then can you do, while you stand convicted in the presence of God? What should you do, but hold your peace under an inward sense of your inexcusable guilt, and prepare yourself to hear the sentence which his law pronounces against you? You must feel the execution of it, if the Gospel does not at length deliver you; and you must feel something of the terror of it before you can be excited to seek to that Gospel for deliverance.

The Meditation of a convinced Sinner giving up his vain pleas before God.

"Deplorable condition to which I am indeed reduced! I have sinned, and what shall I say unto thee, O thou Preserver of men?" (Job 7:20) What shall I dare to say? Fool that I was, to amuse myself with such trifling excuses as these, and to imagine they could have any weight in thy tremendous presence, or that I should be able so much as to mention them there. I cannot presume to do it. I am silent and confounded: my hopes, alas! are slain, and my soul itself is ready to die too, so far as an immortal soul can die; and I am almost ready to say, O that it could die entirely!

I am indeed a criminal in the hands of justice, quite disarmed, and stripped of the weapons in which I trusted. Dissimulation can only add provocation to provocation. I will therefore plainly and freely own it. I have acted as if I thought God was altogether such a one as myself: but he hath said, I will reprove thee; I will set thy sins in order before thine eyes; (Psal. 50:21) will marshal them in battle array. And, oh! what a terrible kind of host do they appear! and how do they surround me beyond any possibility of an escape!

O my soul they have, as it were, taken thee prisoner, and they are bearing thee away to the divine tribunal. "Thou must appear before it! thou must see the awful, the eternal Judge, who tries the very reins," (Jer. 27:10) and who needs no other evidence, for he has himself been witness to all thy rebellion.' (Jer. 29:23) Thou must see him, O my soul! sitting in judgment upon thee; and, when He is strict to mark iniquity,' (Psal. 130:8) how wilt thou answer him for one of a thousand!' (Job 9:3) And if thou canst not answer him, in what language will he speak to thee!

Lord, as things at present stand, I can expect no other language than that of condemnation. And what a condemnation is it! Let me reflect upon it! Let me read my sentence before I hear it finally and irreversibly passed. I know he has recorded it in his word, and I know, in the general, that the representation is made with gracious design. I know that he would have us alarmed, that we may not be destroyed. Speak to me, therefore, O God! while thou speakest not for the last time, and in circumstances when thou wilt hear me no more.

Speak in the language of effectual error, so that it be not to speak me into final despair. And let thy word, however painful in its operation, be quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword.' (Heb. 4:12) Let me not vainly flatter myself let me not be left a wretched prey to those who would prophecy smooth things to me,' (Isa. 30:10) till I am sealed up under wrath, and feel thy justice piercing my soul, and the poison of thine arrows drinking up all my spirits.' (Job 6:4) "Before I enter upon the particular view, I know, in the general, that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' (Heb. 10:31) O thou living God! in one sense I am already fallen into thine hands.

I am become obnoxious to thy displeasure, justly obnoxious to it and whatever thy sentence may be, when it comes forth from thy presence (Psal. 17:2) I must condemn myself and justify thee. Thou canst not treat me with more severity than mine iniquities have deserved; and how bitter soever that cup of trembling may be (Isa. 51:17) which thou shalt appoint for me, I give judgment against myself, that I deserve to wring out the very dregs of it." (Psal. 75:8)

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