

Sermon IV

by
William Nevins

***"Who is a God like unto thee,
that pardons iniquity?"***
(Micah 7:18)

Ah, my hearers, if you only believed the truth! If you did but give credit to the statements of the Bible, if you even believed what perhaps you profess to believe, if you held such views of yourselves as the Bible expresses and such as accord with the matter of fact, and such as your Creator entertains of you, how deeply interested you would all be in what I am going to say today. How would you be all eye, ear, attention and interest! God regards you, and the Bible describes you, as sinners; and so you are. It is seen. Is it not sometimes *felt*? I am certain it is confessed. Yes, sinners condemned and needing pardon, for condemnation follows sin as a matter of course. And to say that condemned persons need pardon is almost superfluous. When a man has sinned there remains only the alternative of pardon or punishment. He must receive a pardon or suffer the penalty. This is a perfectly clear case. I defy anybody to get away from this dilemma. Therefore you, as having sinned, need pardon. You can have no expectation [of it], but [except it come] from mercy. Unless that prerogative is exercised by the proper authority in forgiving you, you are gone and lost, inevitably and irrecoverably. You must suffer the penalty. Your reason teaches you this.

Now one great object of revelation is to tell you that you may be pardoned. It was always known that God had the power of pardoning. It could not be lodged elsewhere. The legislative, judicial, and executive authority of the universe meet in him. But revelation informs us that God will and does exercise the prerogative of pardon. Nor does it merely reveal the fact, but [it] declares the ground, the manner, and the conditions of pardon; *why, how, and when* he pardons. Now, how a discourse on this subject would interest you, did you really believe yourselves condemned and did you duly appreciate your need of pardon!

But my object is not merely to present God before you as a pardoning God, but to show you what there is peculiar and distinguishing in his exercise of pardon. *"Who is like thee, pardoning iniquity?"* There are not many points in which creatures resemble God. In intelligence and in holiness we bear some faint resemblance to him. But the attributes and ways of creatures are for the most part in contrast to those of God. God is from everlasting; we are of yesterday. *His* understanding is infinite; we know nothing. We are unstable in all our ways; he [is] without variableness or shadow of turning. But in nothing is God more unlike other beings than in pardoning. I would call your attention to an illustration of this truth.

1. No being pardons with such honor to the law broken, and with such security to the government offended, as God. The considerations which induce others to pardon are totally different from those which move God. It is not any thing which does honor to the law. The government that pardons is weakened. Justice is not satisfied. Its satisfaction is dispensed with. The penalty is not executed but remitted. There is no atonement made. But God lays a foundation for pardon which involves the exaction of the penalty and the full satisfaction of justice. He magnifies the law whose violation he forgives, and honors the government while he spares the

rebel against its authority. He is as just in showing mercy as in exacting righteousness. Our iniquities, in being taken off of us, are laid on Christ. They are nonetheless borne, though not borne by us. We are not made a curse, but he was made a curse for us. We are healed, but it is by stripes inflicted on him. The Christian mind delights to dwell on this theme.

Nothing inspires the mind with such confidence as this. It is this chiefly which gives us boldness in approaching the throne of grace to obtain mercy. If we had to reflect that justice is not satisfied while mercy is exercised, and that God's character and government suffer in our being saved, we could feel no such confidence. But now we have not only mercy to appeal to, but [we have] merit--the merit of Christ--to plead. We bring a righteousness, though not our own; yet all the better for not being our own. If God would not accept us, yet he will not fail to accept Christ for us, especially when it is his own plan and proposition.

2. No one pardons at such an expense to himself as God does. With others it is but saying the word or signing the name, and the person is pardoned. And the reason of this facility is that no attempt is made to reconcile the exercise of pardon with the claims of law and justice. If any satisfaction is required, it is not made by the power that pardons. It must be made by the person needing the pardon. But God, while he requires satisfaction, sees to the making of it. He takes the whole business of atonement into his own hands. He takes the pains. He bears the expense. The problem to reconcile the claim of justice with the exercise of mercy he undertakes to solve; and he does it. The idea of pardoning originated with him. The preliminaries of pardon were accomplished by him. Nothing was left to the sinner. Nothing now remains to him but gratefully and cordially to accept the pardon. *"God spared not his own son."* Suppose we had been assembled and it had been announced to us that we could only be pardoned on condition of God's sending his own dear Son into the world to be insulted and despised, and to die ignominiously on the cross. We should have had no hope. We would have said, "He will never do that." But he did it. Who is like him?

3. No one pardons with such a good effect on the sinner pardoned. Men can pardon, but they cannot do it in a way to reform the criminal and to secure his future obedience. And therefore they have often to regret that in particular cases they did not let justice take its course. They are not infrequently sadly disappointed in those they pardon. But God was never disappointed in a sinner he pardoned. Everyone he pardons becomes his servant, and though subject to many imperfections and fluctuations, perseveres in his service to the end. Whenever he remits sins, he reforms the sinner. This result he secures in part by *motives*. There is much in the fact, and more in the manner, of our being pardoned to bring us to repentance. There is a softening and melting influence in the cross, as well as a saving one. It is hard to go on sinning against such love and pity, to continue in a course which rendered such sorrows necessary. But chiefly he secures this result by his *Spirit*, by whose influence the heart of the pardoned sinner is renewed and sanctified. It is a part of God's compassion to subdue our iniquities, as it is said in the next verse. We see then how it is that he has never to regret an exercise of pardon, and that he never loses a soul whose sins he has forgiven.

4. No one pardons so many as God. The prerogative of mercy among men is exercised generally with respect to a few. A selection is made out of a number of criminals, generally on the principle of inferior guilt or circumstances of mitigation in their cases, and not even the offer of pardon is made to the others. The reason is obvious--justice must have its satisfaction, if not of all, yet of some. No human government ever proposed to pardon all its offenders. But God's proclamation runs, *"Whosoever will, let him come and take of the waters of life freely."* He offers a

universal pardon. He excepts no one. Those who are not pardoned except themselves. And many, many are actually pardoned. What proportion will be finally, I do not know (and never thought calculations on that subject productive of any good). But there is an immense multitude in heaven already, and a great company on their way thither. And the reason that there is yet room both there and here is that the accommodations are magnificently ample.

5. But not only does God pardon many sinners, but he pardons each many sins. A second offense is not often pardoned among men, much more a third or fourth. Men soon get weary of the exercise of mercy, but God pardons numberless offenses--*all*, as many as they may be. And they are very many, as anyone may easily calculate; "more than the hairs of my head," David says his iniquities were. He speaks of one of a thousand. He seems to have divided them into thousands. There are a great many *kinds* and *classes* of sins, to say nothing of the individual sins under these classes. Oh, how many sins and kinds of sin God has pardoned some of us! How many we can remember, and how many more he has pardoned than we can remember! How it would astound us could they be set in order before us, as they are in the light of his countenance! Well is it said that he *abundantly* pardons!

But he not only pardons many sins, but the same sin many times. How often we have repeated some sins, and yet as often he has pardoned. Men deem it derogatory to their self respect to forgive the same offense often. But God appears not to be influenced by that consideration. Peter came once to our Lord with this question: "*Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Until seven times?*" He thought he proposed a large number. But Christ replied, "*I say not unto you until seven times, but until seventy times seven.*" So often are we to forgive, four hundred and ninety times; that is, for so doubtless it was intended, as often as he sins. And in another place we are directed to forgive seven times in the compass of a day. Now does God direct us to outdo him in pardoning? May it not be inferred that he pardons at least as often? Yea, more! For who is a God like unto thee?

6. Something ought to be said of the peculiar character of the sins which God pardons. He does not merely pardon our sins among ourselves, but our sins immediately against him, our impieties, our sins against his Spirit and his Son. He pardons (what who [else] ever did?) the very sin of rejecting the terms of pardon. [He] pardons after the offer of pardon has been many times despised. How much unbelief he has pardoned in all who are now his people!

7. He *forgets* as well as forgives. Men remember the sins they pardon, but God remembers our sins no more. It is with him as if it had never been committed. None so effectually puts out of the way the sins he forgives. "*Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.*" There shall be no finding them any more. He pardons without upbraiding, which parents and others, we know, do not always.

8. God makes provision for the pardon of future sins. It is as certain that your future sins will be forgiven as that your past sins have been. God never condemns after pardoning. When he begins to pardon, he goes on.

9. God more than pardons. He *justifies*, which (besides pardon) includes gracious adjudication to eternal life. And he subdues our iniquities. He adopts us and sanctifies us, and, ultimately, glorifies every pardoned sinner. Who is like him?

10. God pardons on the most reasonable conditions. They are such that without them the

pardon could not be used by us. To dispense with them would defeat the very design of the pardon. No pardoned sinner would have them dispensed with. He acquiesces in them equally as in the pardon itself. The conditions are privileges. What are they? To repent, to believe in Christ, to approve of the plan of salvation, and (what makes angels happy) to love and serve God. Do you not pronounce them reasonable?

11. There is one thing more. These very conditions of pardon God fulfills in us. He gives us repentance, and our faith is the gift of God. If a person says, "I will forgive you provided you do such and such reasonable things," we think that enough. But God even inclines and enables us to do these things. *"Who is a God like unto thee?"*

And now in making use of this subject, the first thing I have to say is,

1. How glorious a subject we have here! If God's ways in pardoning were like ours, what hope could there be for us? If we stood related to any other government, however clement, as we do to that of God, our case would be desperate. Under such circumstances we could not expect any civil power or even a father to forgive.
2. How worthy of our supreme attachment and love is the God who not only pardons, but so pardons--so *abundantly*.
3. Does any sinner here desire pardon? We may learn hence the encouragement he has to seek it, and the probability of his obtaining it. He can have it. There is no difficulty unless he chooses to make one. He can have it without any injury to justice. Why should not God pardon you? Because he would honor his law and justice by punishing you? But that he had done already. There is nothing in heaven in the way of your being pardoned; nor under it, unless you will put yourself in the way. If you will submit to the terms, or even seek them, you will succeed. Surely we ought to submit to God in the prescription of the terms of salvation, as in the dispensations of his providence.
4. We see from this subject how unnecessary it is that any should be lost. Justice does not require it, nor truth. There is nothing rendering it necessary. There is no limit to the power of God to pardon.
5. How very dreadful it will be to be lost under such circumstances--lost when pardon was tendered and salvation offered, lost by one's own obstinacy. What an effect it will have when, on the day of judgment, it shall be made known to the universe that all the sinners in Christendom had the free offer of pardon made them; and that those who perish, perish because they rejected it. What a hallelujah of praise to God will follow that disclosure, in which even the consciences of those who are about to be cast away, though not their hearts, will unite.
6. It appears from this subject that religion is not so very gloomy a thing as is sometimes supposed. No, but irreligion is a very gloomy condition. To be in a dungeon, as it were, under sentence of death, unpardoned, is gloomy. But to be released and to breathe the air of liberty, and to have the freedom of the universe and the privilege of calling God "Father," I should say was rather cheerful.

If a man is condemned, nothing can require his attention more immediately than to secure a pardon. The idea of a man, under sentence of death, putting off efforts to obtain a pardon is

preposterous. What should he not rather put off? This [pardon] is not only first, but everything in his case. Suppose a person when in prison under sentence of death, when urged to apply for a pardon should say, "Oh, I am young yet. Don't press me on that subject." What has his youth to do with it? Cannot he die young? Or [if he should say], "I am strong and hearty, don't trouble me about pardon," you would take him for a mad man! Or [if he should say], "I have something else which I must do first,"--[just imagine] the idea of such a man's putting anything before pardon! Or, "I cannot give up this prison, I am so attached to it," or "I'll plead for pardon when I am on the scaffold," or "I don't like the terms,"--as if they could be as bad as death! Sinners are doing the like of all this. They are young, they are strong, have something else to do, or they are attached to the world, or they don't like the terms. Well, then they must put up with the other part of the alternative--punishment. How will they like that? They cannot decline pardon and punishment both. The latter will come. God will pardon, but he will by no means clear the guilty. I would like to ask you why you suppose God, in proclaiming his name (Ex. 34: 6, 7), after declaring himself merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, and forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, concluded the account with, "*and that will by no means clear the guilty?*" Did he not intend to put the reader on his guard? It is as if he had said, "I am well disposed to pardon, but do not infer thence impunity in impenitence." Pardon or punishment is the alternative presented today. Choose ye.

This is Sermon IV of *Sermons by the Late Rev. William Nevins, D.D.* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.