

**Sermon preached by Mr. J. S. Green
at Gower Street Memorial Chapel, London,
on Sunday morning, 8th March 1959.**

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"I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."

Luke 15:7

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The Lord Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees and scribes, those people who constantly found fault with Him. Whatever He did, it displeased these Pharisees and scribes; they saw no beauty in the Lord Jesus Christ. They did not feel their need of His merits, and when He had compassion upon publicans and sinners, it displeased them more than ever. We read in this chapter, "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him." What a vast difference in the hearts of these publicans and sinners! Many of them were, I believe, *real* sinners, convicted sinners, convinced of their sins by the Holy Ghost. They saw something attractive in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ as He would preach to them about His errand here on earth, and His sufferings on the cross; as He would set forth that He must be lifted up; and that "God so loved the world that he gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish."

Now such truths were very attractive to these poor sinners and these publicans. And as the truth from Christ's lips entered their hearts, so they were drawn to Him, attracted to Him, and in this way they were taught to love Him. And in this chapter we read that the "Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them." They thought themselves so much better than these poor publicans and sinners. They were so very, very religious, and they said, 'We are the people, the religious people; we have the law of Moses and other things; we give tithes of all that we possess; we are

the people. Surely this Man, if he were the true Messiah, would have to do with us, and not with these out-of-the-way people!' What a sad and solemn thing, friends, to be deceived, isn't it? To think we are safe and secure, and never to be tried about it, and to go on in this state and condition.

I thanked God on Friday night that He makes me know and feel the plague of my own heart. My friends, to know the plague of your own heart will shake you out of a mere fleshly religion. It will shake you out of the spirit of the Pharisees, and shake that spirit out of you. And wholesome and good is such knowledge! And you will have no superficial religion then; in fact, you will sometimes feel that you have not got as much religion as you should have, and you will have to pray that God will give you more. Now what a difference there is in the heart of one that is tried and tempted, to that of the Pharisees and the scribes!

What a wonderful truth, really, that expresses: "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them." Now we believe this Man to be the same who is now in heaven at God's right hand; and what He did when He was here on earth He is still doing in heaven - He still receives sinners. And as we may be helped, we should like to look and see according to the Scriptures what a real sinner is. It is true that we are all sinners in God's sight, but how few are sinners in their own. One of our hymnwriters said:

'They're only sinners who repent' -

that is, who truly repent. (And that is what we need - true repentance.) **They** are the sinners who this blessed Jesus will receive. And as He receives them, so He will bless and favour them. And when He was on earth, He condescended to eat with sinners. I suppose the Pharisees thought it really beneath their dignity to do such things, and they wondered that the Lord Jesus Christ condescended to do such things. But He received sinners, and He even condescended to eat with them. And so, my friends, He receives sinners today and He grants sinners communion and fellowship with Himself. And in this way they learn to love Him and to adore Him - to think that He should look upon such as have to confess with Job, saying, "Behold, I am vile!" One good man said:

'He brings a poor vile sinner
Into his house of wine.'

What condescension! What matchless love that this glorious Man should receive sinners and eat with them! The Pharisees did not know what His errand here on earth really was. They did not know that it is "a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Now after these things, the Lord was pleased to speak these parables unto them. But alas, the truth which is set forth in them did not enter into their hearts! "And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find, it?" Like a parent. One might lose a child for the time being, and their whole heart and affection would be set upon that lost child. Not but that they would still continue to love the others, but it would be the lost one that would be such a trouble to them; and such a joy to them when they were favoured to find it. And so the Lord in this parable - He shows that the shepherd would go into the wilderness and would seek for the lost sheep. Thankful he would be for the sheep that were not lost, but so thankful that he had recovered that which was lost. "When he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing" - thankful that his efforts were rewarded in seeking out that lost sheep. "When he cometh home he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." A time of rejoicing, a time of thankfulness!

And the Lord goes on from this to preach unto them a most solemn, searching, and yet blessed truth: "I say unto you that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth." Further down in this chapter we read, "Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" - over one sinner that truly repents of his sins. So the holy angels - those heavenly messengers of God, who continually wait upon Him - they observe what takes place on earth, what takes place in the hearts of sinners when the Holy Ghost is pleased to convict them and to lay them low; when they are called to experience what is in the 3rd

chapter of John: "Ye must be born again." And when a sinner is born again of the Holy Spirit and is given true repentance, then there is joy in the presence of the holy angels. I have often thought that if this is so – and it is so because of what Christ says – then what a priceless blessing repentance is. People keep telling us that we must believe, we ought to believe, and so forth. True. But O, alas, it seems that repentance is largely left out! Good Mr. Philpot says ministers may leave repentance out, books may leave repentance out, but God will not leave it out. What an essential grace it is! And without it, my friends, we shall never be forgiven, we shall never taste the sweets of God's forgiving love and mercy.

What is real repentance? It is a complete change; a complete changing round in the life and the experience of a sinner. Now, can we say that we can trace in our hearts this change? Once sin was no burden to us; we were not grieved on account of it; we may have almost found unhallowed joy in it, as many do. But what a great blessing if we can look back and remember when the Lord began to break our hard and rocky hearts, when we began to feel what an exceedingly sinful thing sin is! What a difference there is then in that sinner's heart! And in secret that sinner begins to mourn over his or her sins. And what does the Lord say in Matthew 5? "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." A blessed thing to be a real mourner in secret before God!

My dear friends, it will be much better for you to spend your days mourning over your sins and after the Lord Jesus Christ, than to go on in a flippant way in religion, never being affected by your sins. Better to be a mourner all our days, and find forgiveness when you come to die, than to be left as the Pharisees and scribes were left – self-satisfied and expecting that God would receive them for their fancied good deeds. Now, a truly repenting sinner feels he has no good works; conscious that he or she can do nothing in any way to merit the esteem of God. It is a blessed thing, to know our helplessness, our inability to do anything.

Now, it may be some time before you are completely separated from the world. God's dear people sometimes find much conflict within:

there is much secret prayer, but O! how the world seems to attract! And it is difficult to get well separated from the world. But where there is true repentance, there will be true prayer, and that sinner will desire to obey the word we read this morning, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord." Do we, then, find this separation? My dear friend, do not say you are a repenting sinner, if there is no striving against the world and the spirit of the world. If you can go along with the world, and more or less enjoy it secretly, you stand exposed to God's just wrath. You will find that where God gives this spirit of true repentance there will be – not there may be – there will be, a turning from the world.

Real repentance is a turning; a turning brought about by the blessed Spirit of God. And so, where there is true repentance, you will begin to feel that things you once loved, things you once esteemed, you now begin to hate. You cannot find real pleasure in them. Somehow or other there is a worm at the root. You can see that all earthly pleasures have a canker in them. And there is a gradual turning.

What about those things that once gave you no pleasure, even the preaching of the word? You may have said, 'I am about fed up with hearing ministers talk about sin and sinners and affliction, and so forth.' But now you say, 'What a blessed sound that is to me. Sometimes it cheers me a little to hear that wonderful, blessed truth proclaimed, that God is merciful to sinners.' You say, 'I love to hear the sinner put in his right place, and Christ exalted. This is the ministry I love.' What a vast difference there is in your heart, fellow sinner, to what there once was! What a turning there has been in your whole life.

And this turning goes on and on. The more repentance you and I receive, the more graciously manifested we shall be as God's people. Sad indeed is the case of these professors who can go on, and say anything, perhaps, to the hurt of others, and never repent, never say they are sorry. They are on the road to eternal damnation. Their profession won't save them in that great day. Solemn thought! How is it with us friends? Is there that repentance in our hearts? Is there

that gracious tenderness of heart? At times some of you may have to complain, as I have to complain, 'O! the hardness of my heart!' Why, it seems sometimes that rocks can rend, everything move –

Of feeling, all things show some sign
But this unfeeling heart of mine.

We know that we cannot exercise repentance as we like; we learn that it is a heavenly gift, and the more we receive of this gift, the more our life will reflect that we have been with Jesus. There is nothing, my friends, that causes love to flow from heart to heart like this spirit of repentance. Let one deal hardly with you or sin against you perhaps, and then let them come to you having been convinced of their wrong, and say how sorry they feel, and, 'Will you forgive me?' It is this spirit that enables you to forgive. Let us come to the point. Are these things found in our lives? Have we repented? Do we repent? Is there that turning? Do we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness? Are we true, sober mourners before God?

"I say unto you that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth." What, a wonderful thing this is, that these holy angels should find joy in the presence of their God when they behold a sinner truly repenting of his sins. They know that this is another sinner saved by grace. They know that this is one more sinner for whom the Lord Jesus Christ shed His precious blood. They know that ere long one more sinner will join them in heaven and will sing of free grace to the honour and glory of their God. O friends! has there been joy in heaven over you in the presence of the angels? Do you really feel that they have rejoiced over you?

Can you say this morning that there have been times when you have had to get away from everything and everyone and bow before your God? And perhaps with a broken heart and tears streaming from your eyes you have been so sorry because you have sinned against God; and you may have felt that because you have sinned against Him, heaven's doors are closed for ever against you, and you will never be able to enter there. You say, 'I spend the night watches sometimes doing that: mourning over my sins, fearing that my sins

will shut me out of heaven.' Poor sinner, there is joy in heaven when the holy angels behold you doing this. It is grace that enables you thus to mourn; grace that enables you thus to repent.

I trust there has been joy in heaven over the poor sinner that stands before you. I should not speak the truth were I to say that I have not had a broken heart because of my sins. It would not be true were I to say I have never mourned in secret over my sins. I thank God that I trust He has given me to experience something of this true repentance. My greatest trouble is that I do not experience more of it, because I have such a stony heart. I can read sometimes of the sufferings of Christ, and yet have no feeling. Isn't it sad? And I have a few companions. Perhaps some of you have heard the Lord's servants preach Gethsemane and Calvary so sweetly, but your heart has not been affected by these things. Perhaps you have said, 'Hard, hard, rocky heart, won't you ever break? Won't anything move you to shed a tear?' Friends, it is no small mercy to know this path, and to be seeking repentance, true spiritual contrition, praying that God will in His mercy turn you from the world and the things of the world to Himself.

We read of one good woman: the Lord blessed her, broke her heart, favoured her, and she sweetly repented. And there is something sweet in real repentance, because it is a heavenly gift. It is a covenant gift. God made this provision in the covenant for all His people, and so there is something most sacred in real repentance. It is heaven on earth to be found where that woman was found. She loved much, because she had much forgiven, and she was found at Jesus' feet, and with tears she washed His feet and wiped them with the hairs of her head. That is godly sorrow. That is real repentance. If you have been found at His feet, one day you will be found with Him in heaven.

Now this woman, she did love the Lord Jesus Christ; and it was that love in her heart that constrained her to do what she did. Methinks that when she did it, there was joy in the presence of the angels of God. They rejoiced, they praised their Maker when they beheld that sinner at the feet of Christ, washing them, wiping them, and blessing

and praising Him; thanking Him for His grace and His mercy towards her.

Now, my friends, all who thus truly repent, who are humbled, who are made gracious mourners, they will be forgiven. We sometimes sing:

'Repentance flows freely thro' Calvary's blood,
Produced by the Spirit and goodness of God.
The living possess it, thro' faith, hope and love,
And own it a blessing sent down from above.'

And it is sent down from above.

"I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth." Now I do believe this: that when we are overcome by sin and Satan and by our own wicked hearts; when perhaps we have been hardened for a time through the workings of unbelief and sin within, and perhaps a giving way to the flesh, what a good thing it is to be brought to real contrition. When, like David in the 51st Psalm, we are brought again to feel our sinfulness and, after so much mercy manifested to us, to come once again to His feet. Hasn't this broken some of your hearts? Haven't you read that Psalm with some sweet feeling, with some real, inward contrition? Then there has been joy in heaven over you. The Lord grant that we may know more of this as we journey on.

Then further on in this chapter the Lord Jesus Christ gives another parable. He speaks of a man who had two sons. The younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance in riotous living. But presently he begins to feel want, pinched with hunger, and no man gave unto him. But he is brought to his senses and he begins to feel what a sad character he is, where he has got to; and he begins to think of his father's past kindness and love towards him. And now what can he do? Well, he is driven, as it were, to return. He says, 'If I do not return I shall perish with hunger.' And so he goes home with a broken and a contrite heart – so different to when he went out. He returns to his father, and says unto him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." That is

repentance. That is being humbled before God under a solemn, sacred sense of His goodness and mercy towards you.

Now those who answer to the character of publicans and sinners, they are they who feel to need repentance. And all who truly repent of their sins shall be pardoned through Calvary's blood. God will not leave one truly repenting sinner to die in his sins. No. In His own time and in His own way he will grant them peace and pardon through the blood of the Lamb.

"I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance." Really this was a very solemn word to these scribes and Pharisees, but they did not take it. By these solemn words the Lord sets forth their wrong, their self-righteousness – 'we are the people, we are all right, we have no need to repent, for we do this, that and the other.' Friends, it is sad when people speak like this; when they are left in this sad and awful state, and know not that God is infinitely holy and that their best is stained and dyed with sin, their all is nothing worth. O my friend! solemn it is to go like one did into the temple and despise the publican and say, "I thank God that I am not as this publican. I fast; I give tithes of all that I possess." The poor Pharisee did not make any petitions to God for repentance, for help, for blessing; he made no acknowledgement of the Lord having done anything for him. We read of the other that he smote upon his breast, and said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." I have felt a love and union to that publican. I feel I stand very much where he stood, and I feel my need of God's mercy. And some of you feel your need of God's mercy. You cannot do this, that and the other yourself, which is pleasing in God's sight. The Spirit alone can enable us to do things pleasing to God.

You learn that sin is displeasing in the eyes of that great God; and you feel your need of the Spirit's grace to work in you that true spirit of repentance that you may mourn over your sins, and leave the hateful ways of sin. You say to the world, 'You may have your pleasures.' You do not want the lusts of the flesh. You will be willing to let the worldling have them. But O! to be given that godly sorrow,

that broken and that contrite heart before God, to have that true repentance which needeth not to be repented of!

There shall be joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.

Amen.

[Reading: 2 Corinthians 6 & 7.]