

Passiontide Sermons
By Henry Parry Liddon, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D.
Late Canon and Chancellor of St. Paul's.

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SERMON I.
THE SINLESSNESS OF JESUS CHRIST.
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St. John viii. 46.
Which of you convinceth Me of sin?

It has sometimes been inferred from the context of these words that the word "sin" really means here intellectual rather than moral failure. "Which of you convinceth Me of error? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe Me?" The second question is thus made to repeat its meaning into the translation of the first. But the word translated "sin" means moral failure throughout the New Testament; and our Lord is arguing—if we may dare to apply our classifications of human arguments to His profound and sacred words—from the genus to the species, from the absence of moral evil in Him generally to the absence of a specific form of moral evil, namely, falsehood. He is maintaining that as they cannot detect in Him any kind of sin, they ought not by their disbelief to credit Him practically with falsehood, or, at least, indifference to truth, and His own means of attaining and proclaiming it.

It has also been thought that our Lord here only challenges the detective power of His Jewish opponents, and that He does not literally imply His Sinlessness. As though He had said: "You at least cannot point to any sin against veracity or some other virtue on My part which ought to forfeit your confidence. And as you know no moral reason for disbelieving Me, you ought to believe Me." But such a meaning would be strangely at variance with the general tenor of our Lord's teaching—with His repeated contrast between the deceptiveness of outward appearances and the inward truths and facts of human life. If indeed this had been His meaning, the Jews might have retorted that the Lord Himself taught them to distrust the outside appearance of goodness, and to account that only worth respect which is beyond the ken of human sight, and is known to the Father Which seeth in secret.

Besides which the challenge would hardly have been offered unless the Speaker had been conscious of something more than guiltlessness of public acts which might be pointed to as in some sense sinful. Sin, like holiness, is not merely a series of facts which may be measured and dated: it is a particular condition of the will, it is a moral atmosphere. The presence of sin is perceptible where there is no act of sin: it is breathed, it is implied, it is felt, it is responded to by sympathetic instincts when there is almost no visible or audible sign of its presence.

"The Powers of Ill have mysteries of their own,
Their Sacramental signs and prayers,
Their choral chants in many a winning tone,
Their watchwords, seals, processions, known

Far off to friend and foe; their lights and perfum'd airs,

And even as men, where warring hosts abide,
By faint and silent tokens learn
At distance whom to trust, from whom to hide,
So round us set on every side
The aerial sentinels our good and ill discern.

The lawless wish, the unaverted eye,
Are as a taint upon the breeze
To lure foul spirits: haughty brows and high
Are signals to invite him nigh,
Whose onset ever Saints await on bended knees.”¹

Our Lord claims, then, to be sinless in a very different sense from that in which a man might defy an opponent to prove against him a specific form of wrongdoing in a court of law. We are here in the atmosphere not of law but of morality; and morality is a question not of external facts merely, but of internal motives, postures of will, dispositions of affection.

But the question arises whether sinlessness is abstractedly possible. It has been argued that our experience goes to deny its possibility. To be human, so far as we individually come in contact with human life, is to be sinful—in very varying degrees, yet at least in some degree, sinful. In one individual and class, sin is outrageous, shocking, gross; in another, it is refined, and more or less attractive. But the essence of the thing—the contradiction between the free moral will and that Will of God which is the moral rule or order of the universe—is the same. “There is none righteous, no, not one,” is as true now as in the days of the Psalmist and of St. Paul. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,” applies as certainly to Christians of the nineteenth century as to Christians of the first. But this general experience is not really at variance with the existence of an exception to it: and our faith in humanity, in man’s proved capacity for moral improvement, in his experienced power of passing from one level of moral attainment to another, leads us up to the idea of One Who has reached the summit, or Who has always occupied it. Faith in humanity here coincides with faith in God. That God should have given man the capacities which he actually possesses for almost indefinite improvement, points to a purpose in the Divine Mind of which we should expect to see some typical realisation. These lines of thought are only interrupted by moral scepticism, expressing itself in such cynical proverbs as that “Every man has his price, if you only know it,” and that “No man’s character should be taken for granted until you have cross-questioned his valet.” Moral scepticism, which claims to be a very far-sighted common-sense, which repudiates all untenable ideals, and sits in judgment on human nature in a spirit of lofty impartiality, is in reality based not on experience, but on mistrust. It begins with mistrust, it does not merely end with it; and such mistrust blights within us fatally all the generous impulses of faith and love,—all the power we have of making self-sacrificing efforts for God’s glory and the welfare of our fellow-men. This mistrust once recognised and conquered, we shall not mistake either the nature or the wide dominion of evil, but we shall see in men, struggling with imperfection and against it, reasons for faith in humanity. We shall have, at the bottom of our thoughts, no

¹ *Lyr. Inn.* iv. 8.

insuperable bar to believing—upon sufficient evidence—that one Being has actually appeared upon the stage of history, in Whom evil found no place at all.

I.

All that we know about our Lord goes to show that He was Sinless. If certain portions of the text of the Gospels should be—for the sake of the argument, and in no other sense—admitted to be of inferior or no authority, whatever might remain, enough would remain to sustain the impression of the Sinlessness of Christ. This impression was produced most strongly on those who were brought into the closest contact with Him. Take St. Peter. After the miraculous draught of fishes, St. Peter's exclamation is noteworthy: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." St. Peter does not say, "I am a weak and failing," but "I am a sinful man, O Lord." He feels the interval that separates him from the wonder-working Christ: but it is not his Lord's power over nature, but His sanctity, which awes and distresses St. Peter. In the same way, when St. Peter had denied our Lord, a look from Jesus sufficed to produce in the soul of the apostle the extremest anguish: he "went out, and wept bitterly." Why should our Lord's "look" have had this power? Had St. Peter associated with the character of his Master any one trait of selfishness, or ambition, or untruthfulness, or heartlessness, he might have felt, in the tragic catastrophe which led to the Passion, the presence of something like a retributive justice. It was the absence of this, it was his conviction of the absolute purity of Christ's character, which filled him with remorse at the thought that he had borne a part in betraying Him. This impression of Christ's character is observable in the worldly judge who yielded to the wishes of Christ's enemies, while he admitted the innocence of their Victim; in the restless anxiety of the wife of Pilate, haunted in her dreams by the thought that the blood of "that Just Person" might be visited on her husband; in the lower sense of the pregnant declaration made by the centurion at the cross—"Truly this was the Son of God;" above all, in the remorse of Judas. Judas, who had known Christ as Peter had known Him for three years of intimate companionship; Judas, who would gladly, had it been possible, have justified his treachery to himself by any flaw that he could dwell on in his Master's character, was forced to confess that the "blood" which he had betrayed was "innocent," and was so burdened with his sense of guilt that he sought refuge from the agonies of thought and shame, in that which only makes shame and guilty thought irreversible—in suicide. In the hatred of the Sanhedrists, as described particularly in St. John's Gospel, the purity and force of Christ's character is not less discernible. It is the high prerogative of goodness, as of truth, in their loftier forms, that they can never be approached in a spirit of neutrality or indifference; they must perforce create a decided repulsion when they do not decidedly attract. The Pharisees would have treated an opposing teacher, in whom any moral flaw was really discernible, with contemptuous indifference: the sinless Jesus of Nazareth provoked their irreconcilable, implacable hostility. The Sinlessness of Christ is dwelt upon in the writings of the Apostles as a very important feature of the message about Him which it was their business to deliver to the world. St. Peter's earliest sermons dwell on the subject. Addressing the wondering multitude which had run together to witness the miracle performed by the two Apostles at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, St. Peter tells them that He Whom they had denied in the presence of Pilate was "the Holy One and the Just." The climax of St. Stephen's

indictment against his judges, which led to their violent interruption and his own immediate death, was that they had been the betrayers and murderers of “the Just One.” The title by which Ananias announces Christ as the future Master of his destiny to the converted but still blinded Saul of Tarsus, is “that Just One”—Whose will the convert should know, the voice of Whose mouth he should hearken to, Whom indeed, in inward spirit as in outward vision, he should see. The absolute holiness of Christ is equally assumed in the Epistles of each of the three great Apostles. St. Paul is careful to say that God sent His Son in the likeness only of sinful flesh—in true human nature, that is, without its sin. St. Peter dwells on our Lord’s sinlessness in its bearing both on His example and His atoning Death: the precious blood of Christ with which Christians are redeemed is, he says, the blood of a Lamb without blemish, and immaculate; the suffering Christ Who left all Christians, but particularly ill-treated slaves, an example that they should follow His steps, Himself “did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.” In St. John, Christ’s sinlessness is connected sometimes with His intercession: “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;”—sometimes with His regenerating power: “If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of Him;”—sometimes with the real moral force of His example: “Let no man deceive you; he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous.” Especially is the spotless sanctity of Christ connected in the Epistle to the Hebrews with Christ’s priestly office. Although the High Priest of Christendom was “tempted in all points like as we are,” yet is He “without sin.” “Holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners,” in His moral elevation not less than in His actual ascension, He needeth not daily, as did the priests of the old covenant, to offer up sacrifice, first for His own sins and then for the people’s; and His unsoiled robe of sanctity it is which makes His offering of Himself so perfectly acceptable to the Eternal Father.

II.

The Sinlessness of our Lord has been supposed to be compromised, sometimes by the conditions of the development of His life as man, sometimes by particular acts and sayings which are recorded of Him. When, for instance, we are told in the Epistle to the Hebrews that our Lord “learned obedience by the things that He suffered,” this, it is argued, means progress from moral deficiency to moral sufficiency; and, as a consequence, it implies in Him a time when He was morally imperfect. But although the growth of our Lord’s moral Nature as Man implies that as a truly human nature it was finite, it does not by any means follow that such a growth involved sin as its starting-point. A moral development may be perfectly pure and yet be a development; a progress from a less to a more expanded degree of perfection is not to be confounded with a progress from sin to holiness. In the latter case there is an element of antagonism within the will which is wholly wanting in the former.

Nor is there any reason for denying His moral Perfection on the ground that a change in His conception of His work is observable as having taken place between His earlier and His later ministry in consequence of disappointment. This theory makes Him the slave, not the master of circumstances, since it maintains that He only readied the idea of a purely spiritual kingdom of God when His earlier aims, which had, according to the hypothesis, a mere political element in them, had been proved to be impracticable by the

national hostility which they aroused. Against this whole theory we have to set the broad fact that the earliest allusions which our Lord made to His kingdom were as entirely indicative of its spiritual, heavenly, non-political character as the latest; and that the whole idea of a change of plan imposed upon Christ by the force of events is imported on purely *a priori* grounds into the history of the Gospels, and finds no support in the Sacred Text.

A more formidable difficulty, it has been urged, is presented by the Temptation. A *bona fide* temptation implies, it has been contended, at least a minimum of sympathy with evil, which is incompatible with perfect sinlessness. Either Jesus was not really tempted, in which case He fails as our example; or the reality of His temptation is fatal to His literal Sinlessness. That this dilemma would not have been admitted by the Apostolic writers is plain from the statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews, that "He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." It will be asked how this is possible. What, my brethren, is temptation? It is an influence by which a personal being on probation may receive a momentum in the direction of evil. It may be an evil inclination in the man's own soul; it may be a motive presented from without. The former, a corrupt inward inclination, was, we are maintaining, impossible in the case of Jesus Christ; but the motive from without could only have become a real temptation by making a place for itself in thought or in imagination. How was this practicable while leaving the Sinlessness of Christ intact? The answer is that an impression upon thought or imagination or sense is very possible indeed in very varying degrees short of producing a distinct determination of the will towards evil, and it is only when such a determination is produced that Sinlessness is compromised by the presence of temptation. So long as the will is not an accomplice, the impressions of the tempter upon our intellectual or sentient life do not touch the moral being itself; and whether we examine the temptations to which our Lord was exposed from without in the wilderness, or the temptations to which He was exposed from within in the struggle in Gethsemane, it is perfectly clear that deep as was the impression and reality of the trial in each case, in each case also the will maintained an attitude of resistance—here to external solicitations, there to internal shrinking from suffering. Nothing could be more certain than the reality of His trial, except the fact that He passed it unscathed.

Among particular acts which have been insisted on as incompatible with perfect sinlessness is His cursing the barren fig-tree. Here the idea that our Lord betrayed something like irritation could only be entertained when the nature of a prophetic act had been altogether lost sight of: the fig-tree was a symbol of the Jewish people, doomed, on account of its unfruitfulness, to a swift destruction. In driving the buyers and sellers from the Temple,² He was acting, not under the influence of any sudden personal passion, as has been imagined, but strictly in His prophetic character: the conscience of the traffickers ratified the strict justice of His act. When it is urged that His driving the devils into the swine in the country of the Gadarenes³ involved an interference with the rights of property, it must here be admitted that the act seems indefensible, unless it be perceived that Jesus, as Man, is God's Plenipotentiary, and that the act must be explained not simply with reference to the ordinary rules of human conduct, but by the laws of God's government of the universe. In that government material interests are strictly subordinated to moral interests, because in the view of the Self-Existent Moral Being the material universe is of less account than the moral. God does indeed, for great and

sufficient ends, inflict keen loss upon individuals and nations; the individual suffering can only be accounted for as forming part of a scheme of government which extends beyond our view. This applies no less to our Lord's relation to Judas. The supposition that He did not know what Judas was and would become is inconsistent with Christ's moral penetration, to say nothing of His higher Superhuman Knowledge. But, if our Lord had this Knowledge, why did He enrol Judas among the Apostles? No satisfactory answer can be given, except that here too He was acting as God acts in providence,—not only permitting evil, but overruling even its worst excesses for good—comprehending its whole destined range and history, yet making it serve His purposes of grace and mercy in the end.

Once indeed He used words which, taken at first sight, might seem to imply that He admitted moral imperfection in Himself. He rebuked the young man who addressed Him as "Good Master" on the ground that "there was none good save One, that is, God." But if we examine the moral condition of the young man, we shall conclude that no inference of this kind can be drawn from our Lord's expression. The young man's question betrays the levity of a shallow self-complacency. He addressed our Lord as "good" in the way of off-hand compliment, without meaning his words. It was not to such a soul that Jesus would reveal Himself; and when He rebukes the young man for his use of the epithet "good," He is addressing Himself to the young man's views and grasp of truth, He is not describing truth as it was present to Himself. God alone is good; but the Divinity of Jesus is a truth too high, as even the moral perfection of His Manhood is too high, for mastery by one whose eyes are not yet turned away from beholding vanity, Christ does not forget His own warning against casting pearls before swine.

On one side, indeed, our Lord's language is inconsistent with human perfectness, unless He is something more than man. His reiterated self-assertion,—His insisting that all should come to Him, cling to Him, listen to Him, love Him,—would not be human virtue in you or me. It would not be virtue in a sinless man. It implies a claim to the love and homage of humanity which is unjustifiable, unless the Speaker stand in a higher relation to man than is possible for any who is merely human. But then, granting this, the Life of Jesus as a sinless whole sustains the implication of this apparent exception to His general bearing. If we deny that He was more than man, we are likely to proceed, with an English deist, to accuse Him of "vanity and incipient sacerdotalism;"² but then, the absence of dependence in Him, the absence of localising and narrowing elements in His character, of any traceable conflict between flesh and spirit, between the intellectual and the moral life, above all, the purity and intensity of love in Him,—are, apart from His miracles and the mysteries of His Life, in perfect harmony with His statements about Himself.

His Life is a revelation of the Moral Life of God, completing all previous revelations, not merely teaching us what God is in formulae addressed to our understanding, but showing us what He is in characters which may be read by sense, and take possession of the heart. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us," cried an Apostle, "and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of Grace and Truth." "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father."

III.

² Mr. F. W. Newman, *Phases of Faith*, pp. 153, 154.

I. The Sinless Christ satisfies a deep want of the soul of man—the want of an ideal. No artist can attempt a painting, a statue, a building, without some ideal in view; and an ideal is not more necessary in art than in conduct. If men have not worthy ideals before their mind's eye, they furnish themselves with unworthy ones. Few things are more piteous in the recent history of mankind than the consideration that a character such as that of the first Napoleon should have been the ideal of three generations of a race so generous, so impulsive, so capable beyond other peoples of the heights of heroic virtue and of the depths of self-abasement as the French. Only now, if now, is that false ideal displaying itself, in its true historic outlines, before the eyes of a population disenchanted by unexampled suffering; and it will be well if no new master of all the sublime atrocities of government and war appeals to the imagination which has just unlearned the lesson of three quarters of a century. There is ground, too, for the apprehension lest Frederick the Great—the highest embodiment, perhaps, in modern Europe, of successful brutality—whose memory was for a while buried at Jena, but who has risen in his successors with greater splendour than before, should again become the ideal monarch of North Germany. As each nation has its ideals, so has each city, each family, each profession, each school of thought, and how powerfully these energetic phantoms of the past control and modify the present is obvious to all who observe and think. There is no truer test of a man's character than the ideals which excite his genuine enthusiasm: there is no surer measure of what he will become than a real knowledge of what he heartily admires. And like other societies, other families, other schools of thought, other centres of enthusiasm, Christendom has had its ideals, many and various,—some of them looked up to by a generation, some by centuries; some of them the inheritance of a village, a city, a country; some the common glories of all who acknowledge the Name of Jesus Christ. But these ideals, great as they are in their several ways, fall short of perfection in some particular, on some side, when we scan them closely, however reverently we scan them; there is One beyond them—only One—Who does not fail. They, standing beneath His throne, say each one of them to us, with St. Paul, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.”

But He, above them all, asks each generation of worshippers, each generation of critics, that passes beneath His throne, “Which of you convinceth Me of sin?” It is true that here and there a voice is raised which for a moment seems to attempt to fix on Him some flaw or stain that shall forfeit the homage of Christendom: but it dies away, that voice, into the silence of neglect, or amid the murmurs of indignation, and Christ remains in Christian thought, as in actual fact, alone on His throne of unassailable Perfection. “Thou only art holy; Thou only art the Lord; Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father.”

2. The Sinless Christ is also the true Reconciler between God and man. Our Lord did not leave it to His Apostles to insist upon the importance of His Death and Sufferings to the world. He spoke of His Death as an indispensable part of His work. The corn of wheat, He says, must fall into the earth and die, if it is not to abide alone, if it is to bring forth much fruit.² As of old Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness for the healing of the people, so must the Son of Man be lifted up upon the cross, and the effect of this will be that all who believe on Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.⁸ The Good Shepherd, when the hireling flees from the invading wolf, will lay down His life for the

sheep: He will give His life a ransom for many.⁵ His life-blood is the Blood of the New Covenant; by being shed it will procure remission of sins.⁶ This language falls hallowed and familiar on Christian ears, and it introduces us to the more explicit statements of the Apostolic Epistles. But like these statements it presupposes the absolute Sinlessness of Christ, if it is to be even tolerable. Let us conceive (if we may without irreverence) that some one single sin, untruthfulness, or vanity, or cruelty, could be really charged on Him, and what becomes of the atoning character of His Death? I do not ask what becomes of its efficacy, but how is it conceivable that He should have willed to die for a guilty world? For while, if we look at it on one side, His Death appears to have been determined by circumstances, on the other, it was as certainly the result of His own liberty of action. "No man taketh My life from Me, but I lay it down of Myself: I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." At once Priest and Sacrifice, Christ is represented in the Epistle to the Hebrews as "offering Himself without spot to God." It was the crowning act of a life which was throughout sacrificial; but had He been conscious of any inward stain, how could He have desired to offer Himself in sacrifice to free a world from sin? Had there been in Him any personal evil to purge away, His Death might have been endured on account of His own guilt: it is His absolute Sinlessness which makes it certain that He died for others.

3. Thus, as our Ideal and our Redeemer from sin and death, He is the heart and focus of the life of Christendom. Christendom is Christian so far as it lives consciously in companionship with Christ; not merely with Christ as a memory of the past depicted in its annals, but with Christ as a living Being—unseen, yet energetic—seeing all, comprehending all, forming a judgment upon all that passes in His Church at large day by day, and in each separate life that composes it. There is, alas! too much to wound Him—too much to compel those who know little or nothing of His real secret empire over souls to pronounce His work in the world at large a failure. Often, too, it happens that men who are one in their love and devotion to Him differ, inevitably it may be, as to the line of duty which, under a given set of circumstances, that devotion prescribes: so that their loyalty to Him is the very measure of their opposition to each other. The distracting controversies which agitate the Church, and in -which some of us, it may be sorely against our wills, are forced to take part by circumstances which we can neither explain nor control, are at this moment only too present to the minds of most men who take any interest in such questions at all. Not that these controversies are peculiar to Anglicanism, distracted as it is said to be by divisions, which are pointed to as the logical consequence of its original separation from the See which claims to be the normal centre of unity. They exist no less within the Roman unity itself—equal in point of intensity, although differing in their direction and their form. Even at this moment, the one theologian on the Continent to whose every utterance Europe, whether Catholic or Protestant, listens with a respect that is granted to no other—the great and noble Dollinger,—has but a few days left him to decide whether, in accepting the equal infallibility of a long line of self-contradicting Popes, he will renounce the highest certainties of history—of that history which furnishes the Gospel itself with the fundamental evidence of its truth—or accept the alternative ecclesiastical suspension and disgrace. To attempt to close questions, whether of doctrine or practice, which are, and have been, at least, open for centuries, is to inflict upon the Church as fatal an injury as to open questions which Revelation has closed. No such enterprises can be really carried out with impunity; and whether the

Vatican or Exeter Hall be bent upon its project of proscription—here in the interests of a usurping ecclesiastical autocracy, there of a narrow and illiterate theory—the result is necessarily and equally disastrous; since such proscription invites opposition, suffering, division, weakness—weakness in all that Christ’s true servants would fain see united and strong. It may indeed be impossible to agree altogether as to questions of Church order or questions of duty—now and here—during our brief day of life, without some sacrifice of that perfect sincerity which is one of the soul’s most precious jewels. Our controversies belong to an imperfect vision of truth: but they are likely to be tempered in such proportion as loyalty to our Sinless and Divine Lord, and not any one of the subtle forms of self-assertion which are so apt to beset us, is our real governing motive when we take part in them. In looking to Him, all Christians who merit the name meet and are one: just as men who are separated by seas and continents gaze on the same sun in the material heavens, and bask in his warmth and light. Whatever criticisms we may level at each other, or may deserve at each other’s hands—and none of us can suppose that we are not open to some, nay, rather to much, just criticism—we turn our eyes upwards towards the heavens, and fix them on Him Whom none has yet convinced of sin, even of the slightest—in Whose life on earth there was seen, eighteen centuries ago, as now on His throne in heaven, a perfect harmony between a human will and the moral law of the universe. In His Light we shall see light. The heaviness of our misunderstandings and our controversies may endure for a night: the joy of union will come with the eternal Morning.