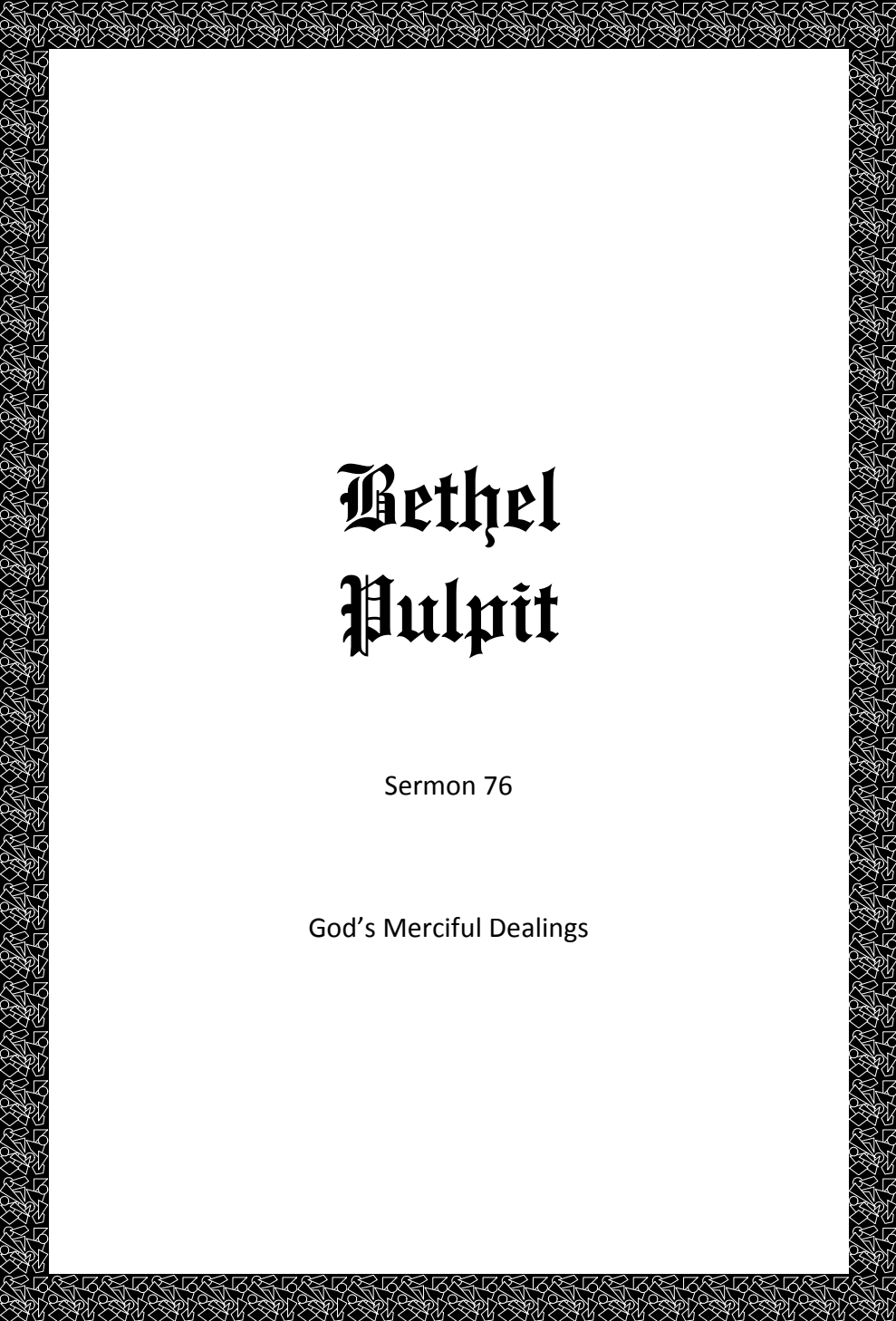




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 76

God's Merciful Dealings

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 12th September, 1991**

Text: *“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103. 10).*

There is an implication in this verse, a very clear implication, and that is that God deals with His people. And beloved friends, He does. That is really the difference between true religion and false, between a religion in the spirit and a religion in the letter, between a religion which will take you to heaven and a religion which sets you down short. The gracious dealings of the Lord with our souls in love and mercy, do we know anything of them? And if so, how much do we know of them, and how long is it since we had any dealings with heaven? And how long is it since God had any dealings with us?

All the Lord’s chosen, all the Lord’s redeemed, all those whom He is fitting and preparing for heaven, He takes and deals with them. There are so many lessons they have to learn, so many things they have to be taught. They need to be dealt with, to be fitted and prepared for heaven. So the Lord takes them one by one and His dealings are so various, but they are all to the same end, for the honour and glory of His name, and for their real, true, lasting good. O but these dealings of the Lord with His people, as He takes hold of them, humbles them, subdues them, leads them along fair Zion’s road, puts them forth in the footsteps of the flock! That is the implication, that is at the foundation of this verse, that God has dealings personally, graciously, savingly, with all His people.

Of course, you can follow this out all the way through Scripture. Really, the Word of God is an account of God’s dealings with His people, His dealings with the patriarchs, His dealings with ancient Israel. We come to the New Testament, and we have this: “God dealeth with you as with sons,” as a father dealing with his children. Well, that is the implication, the foundation of this word, that God has dealings with all His people.

But then you see, the great point of the verse is this: what is the standard of God’s dealings with His people? On what ground does He

deal with them? In what way does He deal with them? It is answered here in a negative way, that God never deals with His people on the ground of what they deserve. That is a fundamental point. God does not deal with His people on the ground of what they deserve. He does not deal with them on the ground of any worthiness they have, or any unworthiness in them. That is not the ground of His dealings. If they are able to walk tenderly in His fear, it does not make Him love them any better, though a tender walk is so pleasing in His sight. But,

“Not all the wanderings of their hearts
Can make His love from them depart.”

It is put so clearly here, that the ground of God’s dealings in love and mercy with His people in bringing them to heaven is not on the ground of what they deserve. So He says, “He hath not dealt with us after our sins.” It is a mercy, isn’t it? He has not dealt with us according to what we deserve, what we earn, what we have merited, nor has He rewarded us according to our iniquities. That is not God’s standard of working with His people, anything good in them, or anything bad in them. Some of you have liked to read the lives of those godly people connected with the Gilpins and James Bourne and Sukey Harley. Bernard Gilpin, in dealing with an enquiring soul, always dealt with him in this way; he felt it was the vital point:

“Sick sinner, expect no balm but Christ’s blood;
Thy own works reject, the bad and the good.”

This is the ground on which He saves them and blesses them and brings them to heaven at last.

It is put negatively here: not after their sins, not according to their iniquities. If the Lord were to deal with us on that ground, there would not be one of us here tonight. We should long since have been in a deserved hell. But that is not the ground on which He deals with His people. “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” The ground on which God deals with His people is the ground of mercy. It is on that ground He always deals with His people, the ground of mercy, sovereign mercy, free mercy, undeserved mercy, mercy in Jesus, mercy through blood.

So you have those two who went up to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a publican. The Pharisee wanted Him to deal with him on different grounds, on law grounds, what he had done. Let us be clear, the things which the Pharisee said he had done were good things. But that is not the ground on which God deals with sinners. That is not the ground of any blessing, any favour. The Pharisee did not realise that his best was stained and dyed with sin, his all was nothing worth. But the publican did. He did not want the Lord to deal with him on law grounds, and he certainly did not want the Lord to deal with him according to what he deserved. "God be merciful to me a sinner." He came on gospel ground, and he obtained the blessing.

"Mercy, through blood, I make my plea;
O God, be merciful to me."

"This man went down to his house justified rather than the other." If you ever go before the Lord on the ground of who you are, or what you have done, or what you might do, or your repentance, or your faith, or anything else, you are putting your soul to be dealt with on the ground of the covenant of works. It is broken. It was broken when Adam fell. But if you go on the ground of the publican ("Mercy, through blood, I make my plea"), you are wanting the Lord to deal with you on the ground of the covenant of grace, on gospel grounds. May we have that clear distinction between the two covenants, the clear distinction between law and gospel.

I remember when I was about nineteen, there was an aged man who lent me a book, and he said, "Read that and you will never forget it." I did read it, and I never have forgotten it: William Romaine on the law and the gospel. Perhaps it was his introduction more than anything else. He set it out so clearly, the difference between the two covenants, the difference between law and gospel. Now I learnt it in those days at the feet of William Romaine. I thought there was no one like him. I suppose, in one sense, there was no one like him. He was perhaps the leading preacher in England in his day, though on one point of truth he did wander. But the Lord established me on the difference between the law and the gospel, and the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. This is gospel ground. This is the ground of grace. This is the covenant of grace.

"He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities." Let me try to trace this out. So we go right

back to eternity, the Father viewing His people in the ruins of the Fall, and “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Otherwise He would have destroyed the world He created, which once He had seen to be very good. But He entered into a covenant with His dear Son and all His people in Christ. He was going to deal with them and bless them and bring them to heaven, not on the ground of anything they could do, or might do, or would do. Not even on their foreseen repentance and faith, certainly not on the grounds of any foreseen works, but entirely on the grounds of mercy. So from all eternity, He blessed them with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, and He adopted them into His family.

“In covenant from of old,
The sons of God they were;
The feeblest lamb in Jesus’ fold
Was blessed in Jesus there.”

He saw them ruined in the Fall, and yet He loved them. That was His standard from all eternity, in His choice, in His everlasting love to His people, in His purpose to bring them to heaven. “He hath not dealt with us after our sins.” It is nothing to do with merit, or worthiness, or unworthiness. “Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” It was all of grace. Merit had no place here. Really, the psalmist has this in view when he says, “For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him.” Well then, the covenant ordered in all things and sure, the covenant of grace, the covenant of mercy, and we are told this: “He will ever be mindful of His covenant.” He keeps it in sight in all His dealings with His people; whatever they are, He keeps this everlasting covenant in sight. He will ever be mindful of it. You and I would be more established in the truth if we were enabled more and more ever to be mindful of His covenant.

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Well then, one by one His people are born into this world. They are dead in sin. They are strangers to God. They are aliens by wicked works. Now in that time between their first birth and their second birth, He does not deal with them after their sins, nor reward them according to their iniquities. If it had been so, then He would not spare their lives to the appointed moment. He would cut them off. Many

of God's people are brought to look back to the days of their unregeneracy, without God and without hope in the world, slaves, blind slaves to sin and Satan, with no desire after the knowledge of God's ways. And they realise that if they had been cut down then, they would have sunk to the bottomless pit. Looking back with wonder and amazement, they see how their unworthy lives were spared. Perhaps some of them had so-called accidents. You might have been killed, but you were not. There was a watchful providence over you. The Lord was watching over you. He was not dealing with you after your sins, nor rewarding you according to your iniquities. His love was watching over you until the appointed moment should come. Perhaps tonight you look back, and say,

“Preserved in Jesus when
My feet made haste to hell;
And there should I have gone,
But Thou dost all things well.”

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” “He will ever be mindful of His covenant.” This is His standard of dealing – sovereign, undeserved mercy.

Then so it is when the new birth takes place, when He calls them by His grace, when their lives are completely changed. Now do they deserve it? Did you deserve that the Lord should deal with you in love and mercy, that He should stop you in your mad career? Others, perhaps your friends, went on headlong to a lost eternity. But you were stopped. Why? “Who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive?” You see the riches of sovereign mercy in it. Amazed, you see that hand that stopped you in your mad career.

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Then that time when you were raised up to a sweet hope in the Lord Jesus, to a sweet hope of mercy, and pardon, and love, an interest in His precious blood, heaven at last. Did you deserve it? Was there any merit, was there any worthiness in it? You can go back to that sweet time. He did not deal with you after your sins, or He would never have heard and answered your prayer, never have heard your plea for mercy. O but there you see the riches of His grace in the way in which He blessed you, and sweetly raised you up, and delivered you! The riches of free mercy! He received you on that one ground alone:

“Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.”

He did not deal with you after your sins, nor did He reward you according to your iniquities.

Tonight you look back, and from that day to this you can see this word written across the whole of your experience, your joys and your sorrows, your dark days and your sunny days, your ups and your downs, things in the church of God, in your family, in your life, in providence, in your business, in your relationships with others. Perhaps you could not see it at the time, but tonight you look back and you can say this: “Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” You can say this: “Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day.” You can add this: “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” You think of His wonderful kindness, His wonderful mercy. You think of your poor returns, your faults, your failures, your sins, your shortcomings, your sins against light and knowledge, against love and blood. Mercifully, perhaps you have been kept from openly falling, but where would you have been if the Lord had not held His restraining hand upon you? You think of the indwelling sin and the evil within. Then you think of your slips and your falls and your failures and your faults, and you are still here on praying ground. You are still out of that place where hope and mercy can never come. If the Lord had dealt with you and me even after our call by grace as we deserved, He would have cut us off, or He would have exposed us as wretched hypocrites and awful sinners. O but the love and the mercy and the kindness!

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” If you feel anything of this tonight, it will make your heart soft. It will humble you. It will lay you low at the Saviour’s feet. You think of all His mercy and kindness to you, so undeserved. You think of those prayers heard and answered. You think of those promises fulfilled. You think of those needs supplied. You think of those deliverances granted. You think of the blessings in your soul. You

think of your blessings in providence. Do you deserve them? Are you worthy of them? “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” O to admire matchless mercy and free grace and forgiving love! But when you look back especially at your faults and failures and sins and falls, “He hath not dealt with us after our sins.” You have probably noticed (almost every Sabbath, I think) in prayer I mention this word. We need to be reminded of it. As we look back, as we seek to bless the Lord for His kindness and love and mercy, we need to be reminded of those two wonders: the wonder of our own sinful unworthiness, and the wonder of His matchless mercy.

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Now David (and of course David wrote this Psalm), David in a special way could say it, because he was permitted to fall. He was permitted to fall dreadfully, openly; more than that, he went a long, long time completely self-righteous, completely insensible of his guilt. Sometimes the Lord will deal with you like this. Satan will tempt you to commit some sin, and he will tell you you can repent afterwards and you know God will forgive you. Well, I think you will find this, that if you wilfully and deliberately act wrongly, you will not repent of it afterwards. Your heart will be hard, impenitent. David’s was. He would have gone on so, remained so. But the Lord sent Nathan with this: “Thou art the man.” David fell under it. Our carnal hearts do not like it when the word comes and touches our hearts and says, “This is you; you are the guilty one.” You remember the parable of the poor man and his little ewe lamb, and the traveller who took it. David said, “The man that hath done this thing shall surely die.” He was outraged. “Thou art the man.” Then David’s heart was touched with sorrow and repentance and remorse. And David said, “I have sinned.” Nathan answered, “The Lord also hath put away thy sin.” He said it immediately. He did not wait until he felt better or until he proved the reality of it, or had performed some acts of penance. “Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger for ever, because He delighteth in mercy.” Now He did not deal with David according to his sin, and He did not reward him according to his iniquity. He touched his heart, made it soft with repentance and godly sorrow. Then he sent forth the sentence of free pardon. You can see it written right across Psalm 51: “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor

rewarded us according to our iniquities.” David’s prayer for forgiveness, for cleansing in the blood, was clearly answered.

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins.” Beloved, can you look back tonight, can you look back over your life, all your life, can you see your faults and failures, your sin, your guilt, and can you also see the riches of God’s mercy, what you deserved, and yet what the Lord did? “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Well, beloved friends, all that is past, all that is looking back. Now this is the way the Lord still deals with His people. This is the way He will still deal with you – on mercy’s ground. You will have to realise it, right to your dying day. “Mercy through blood.”

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” There is perhaps one of you here tonight, and you feel your unworthiness, your sin, your guilt. Of necessity you have to go to the mercy seat, the throne of grace, confessing your sin, telling the Lord you are sorry, praying for forgiveness and pardon, asking to be cleansed in His precious blood. Now beloved friends, this is the ground on which He will deal with you; this is the way He will receive you: He will not deal with you after your sins, nor reward you according to your iniquity. Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound. You will find that as a venturing sinner, it is mercy and forgiveness. It is love. There is no frown on His face.

“Why art thou afraid to come?
Why afraid to tell thy case?
He will not pronounce thy doom;
Smiles are seated on His face.”

Well, you can venture on this ground, as a sinner pleading nothing but mercy through blood, that He will not deal with you after your sins. That would be to cut you off; that would be to cast you away; that would be to send you away empty. He will not deal with you like that. That is not God’s way in dealing with a venturing, confessing sinner.

There may be one of you with a hard cause tonight. You may be in trouble. You may have difficulties. You have got to pray. The Lord in love and mercy will incline His ear and hear you, and answer your prayer, and deliver you, and help you. But often when we pray in our troubles, we

have that whisper from Satan, or perhaps a roar from Satan: “You do not deserve that the Lord should do this for you. You do not deserve it.” Or Satan will say, “It is completely your own fault. You brought yourself into this trouble. It is only through your own foolishness and sin and guilt.” “We are not ignorant of his devices.” But if only you could see this, the freeness of grace, the freeness of the gospel, and turn to Satan and say, “Satan, all that you say is true. It is true my sin is great. It is true I do not deserve the answer. It is true I brought this trouble upon myself. But this is not the ground on which the Lord hears and answers prayer. It is on mercy’s ground.” Once in the life of Martin Luther, Satan assailed him: “Your sins are so black you must perish,” to which Luther replied, “The first part is true, but the second part does not follow.” This is the foundation of the throne of grace, that when a venturing sinner comes on an errand of mercy, comes in prayer, the Lord does not deal with him according to what he deserves or does not deserve. But it is on mercy’s ground, for Jesus’ sake. Then pray on.

“Venture on Him, venture wholly;
Let no other trust intrude.”

He will not deal with you after your sins, nor reward you according to your iniquities.

Then, you see, in the unknown way; we are still in the flesh, we shall still falter, we shall still fail. But the Lord will not take His love and mercy away from us. He will not deal with us after our sins, nor reward us according to our iniquities. You have it so often in the prophets. Just take Isaiah, the end of chapter 42 and beginning of 43. His people would not walk in His ways. They were not obedient unto His law. How is He going to deal with them? Not according to their sins, not to reward them according to their iniquities. “But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine” (Isaiah 43. 1). You have it again in chapter 43 at the end, a prayerless people, a people forgetting God. “Thou hast not called upon Me, O Jacob; but thou hast been weary of Me, O Israel.” That is not just Israel’s condemnation: it is yours; it is mine. He goes on: “Thou hast not brought Me the small cattle of thy burnt offerings; neither hast thou honoured Me with thy sacrifices. I have not caused thee to serve with an offering, nor wearied

thee with incense. Thou hast brought Me no sweet cane with money, neither hast thou filled Me with the fat of thy sacrifices.” So he goes on. And the conclusion: “But thou hast made Me to serve with thy sins, thou hast wearied Me with thine iniquities.” You would think the very next verse would cut them off. Do you know what comes next? “I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” This is mercy.

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Just one other instance, in Hosea – although really Hosea is full of it. Really, Hosea is a beautiful commentary on this point: backsliding Israel, but He does not deal with them after their sins; He does not reward them according to their iniquities. Now there is one place where the sin of Israel is so bad. You feel sure that the very next verse will be one of complete condemnation, complete cutting them off. “My people are bent to backsliding from Me.” Now what follows in the next verse? “How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim?” – Admah and Zeboim being two cities which were destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah. “Mine heart is turned within Me, My repentings are kindled together.”

“Rebellious thou hast been,
And art rebellious still;
But since in love I took thee in,
My promise I’ll fulfil.

“I’ve bound thee up secure,
’Midst all the rage of hell;
The curse thou never shalt endure,
For I’m unchangeable.”

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Now when you wilfully sin, go against Him, He will chastise you, and there will be times when you feel the rod. But even under the Lord’s chastising hand, and even when you feel the rod, He is not dealing with you after your sins, or rewarding you according to your iniquities.

“But when, like a sheep that strays from the fold,
To Jesus thy Lord thy love shall grow cold,
Think not He’ll reject thee, howe’er He reprove;
For though He correct thee, He’ll rest in His love.”

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” But beloved friends, there is a secret here. You know it, some of you, don’t you? You know what the secret is, the vital point, the most important point here. I mean this. Why is it that a holy, righteous, sovereign God can deal with sinners, and yet not deal with them after their sin, not reward them according to their iniquity? You know the secret, don’t you? Because in Gethsemane and at Calvary He dealt with His beloved Son. He dealt with Him as His people’s Surety, His people’s substitute. And he *did* deal with Him after His people’s sin. He *did* deal with the Lord Jesus, He *did* reward Him according to His people’s iniquity.

So you “behold that scene of matchless grace, ‘tis Jesus in the sinner’s place.” “He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb so He openeth not His mouth.” He stands there, the innocent Sufferer. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way.” But the Lord has not dealt with us according to those sins, nor rewarded us according to those iniquities. “The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all,” and punished that iniquity in the Person of His dear Son, suffering, bleeding, dying on the cross. O the value of a substitutionary atonement – He instead of me, the lamb instead of Isaac! “Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust.” O the wonders of substitution! O the wonders of the suffering suretyship of the suffering Son of God! This is the secret of it, the ground of it, why a holy God does not deal with His people as their sins deserve. He does not reward them as their iniquities deserve. Why? Because all His penal wrath has been poured out upon His beloved Son and has spent itself there.

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” So the Psalm is one of rejoicing and thankfulness and gratitude. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.” Sweetly constrained by love, may we know the spirit of the Psalm tonight, and may we love and honour and adore and bless Him, and

may we walk it out in the ways of obedience. If this sweetly drops into our hearts tonight, we shall. “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.”