

The Mercy of God

by

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*For God has bound everyone over to disobedience
so that he may have mercy on them.
(Romans 11.32, NIV)*

This text condenses the teaching of the Bible into its two fundamental articles; the misery of man and the mercy of God. Last Sunday I have dealt with the first part, by establishing the misery of man. Today, I shall deal with the second part; I shall show you the remedy to this misery in the mercy of God. In order to have a good understanding of this discourse, you have to remember the first, of which it is the sequel. Thus I shall begin by summarising what I have said so far.

The text underlying this first discourse was the first clause of the whole verse: “God has bound everyone over to disobedience ...”

First of all I have explained the text and I have shown that the thought it contains can be expressed in the following terms: God has declared that every man in his natural state is a sinner. This does not mean that every man is vicious, because one could not make such a statement without contradicting oneself, since vice distinguishes a man from the others; it means that every man has gone astray, in that he ought to love God more than anything else but, in his natural state, he loves other things more than God.

I have first established those two points from the Scriptures. On the one hand, the Scriptures relate the whole law of God to the fundamental commandment to love God more than anything else, and they subject all the other duties, including love to our neighbour, to this commandment; on the other hand, they teach that man in his natural state loves other things more than God, and they do so not only in isolated declarations, but as a whole and especially in those passages where they develop these principles most completely, in particular in the first three chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. Secondly, I have established the same points from reason. On the one hand, reason shows man that God is absolutely worthy of love, both in himself and in the relationship he has with us, which I have condensed in the relationship between the Creator and his creature, which relationship ought to control our whole existence; reason also shows that man cannot stop loving God above everything else without his inner being being completely turned upside down. On the other hand, we only have to imagine what our life would be like if we loved God more than anything else, in order to understand that man in his natural state does not love him in such a way, and that all he offers God is some cold esteem, whereas he reserves his first love to some other object: most people to the world – the worldly sinners; some to the affections of the heart – the affectionate sinners; and some to conscience separated from God, and, therefore, misled – the virtuous sinners.

Thus, both in the name of reason and of the Bible, we have concluded with St Paul that man in his natural state is a sinner. This is the sad conclusion to which my first discourse has led us.

You then, whom I have been able to persuade, thanks to the grace of God, that your natural state is a state of sin, and who cannot recall a moment of your life when you experienced a conversion, that is, a transition from a first direction towards a new one, and have to admit that you are still in your natural state, in your state of sin, you should not, if you are wise, have a single moment of peace before having left this state. As a matter of fact, this state is bad in a twofold manner: it is both a state of condemnation and a state of misery. It is a state of condemnation that exposes you to the just punishment of God, because you are guilty. I will not try to establish that by reason because you feel it, provided you have a conscience, and a memory. It is also a state of misery, in which your sin makes you miserable, even if God was not to punish your sin, and in which God himself cannot make you happy, because even God cannot make that something is and simultaneously is not – that you are both sinners, and, therefore, opposed to his will, and happy, that is, pleased with his way of conducting the world. Thus, being both guilty and miserable, both unworthy and unable of being happy, you need to be delivered from *both the penalty of sin and sin itself*. So far there is no happiness available to you, and what you call happiness is nothing but means to escape reality. Do you think you can find this double deliverance in yourself? Experience will soon show you – but you could also come to this conclusion by thinking it over – that you would not be able to find it there. You cannot free yourself from the penalty of sin, because you cannot blot out the sin of your first disobedience by means of a later obedience. Even if the latter was perfect, it could not be supererogatory and provide some excess that could make up for the past. You cannot free yourself from sin itself either, because regardless of your determination to be obedient to God from now on, very much like a soil that is soaked with harmful liquids cannot produce healthy plants, the flesh, according to Jesus-Christ, can only give birth to flesh¹; i.e. sin cannot produce holiness, and your degenerated will cannot reform your degenerated will. Thus, without hope in yourself and being obliged to seek elsewhere, you will cry out in anguish: Who then will deliver me?

God. He only exposes your state of sin because he wants to deliver you from it. He has only “bound you to disobedience” because he wants “to have mercy on you”. This is what his Word declares to you, and here is the plan that his mercy has developed in view of your deliverance, such as it is revealed to you by the same Word. I say “as it is revealed to us” because in what follows I intend to show you only the thoughts of the Bible, without seeking the approval of human reason. Obviously God has not asked sinful man for advice for delivering sinful man but has found “ways that are higher than our ways and thoughts that higher than our thoughts”². When we had to establish our natural misery, reason could be summoned to add its feeble testimony to God’s almighty authority. Reason has its own way of establishing our need for the Gospel, and the marks of divinity that this Gospel bears. But once it has done so,

¹ John 3.6

² Isaiah 55.8 : this verse, which is invariably applied to the doctrine of *afflictions* refers, in the mind of the prophet, to the doctrine of *free forgiveness*; the context does not leave any doubt in this regard.

it has done all it can do, and its testimony is exhausted. Let reason be quiet today, let it listen to the word of God and not pretend to judge its judge. And you, Lord, please display your “foolishness that is wiser than man’s wisdom”¹ and by which it pleased you to save them!

First of all, the prophets of the Old Testament announce, and the Gospel begins by a proclamation of, a dispensation of divine mercy that comforts sinful man so much and which he could expect so little that it has given the Gospel its name, which means: *good news*. You have been granted the first of the two deliverances which you seek: God agrees to remit the punishment of your sins: he forgives you.

This does not mean that the fact that your conscience condemns you is not just according to the Bible: far from overturning the conviction, the Bible, on the contrary, condemns you even more strongly. Let us give only one example. In the very same chapter in which we heard it declare, last Sunday, that every man is a sinner, it also proclaims that every sinner is “without excuse”², and it proves this point by the manner in which the peoples of old have degenerated. Although this proof is taken from the history of populations rather than individuals, it still applies to any man in particular in St Paul’s conclusion because the history of populations is found in miniature in the history of individuals. For just as the degeneration of those peoples began because they had closed their eyes to the light which God had granted them, and thus forced God to withdraw this light and leave them in their darkness, which led them to the most horrible excesses, any sincere man will acknowledge that he himself has nourished sin in his heart by wilfully rejecting the light which God had granted to him, thereby forcing God to withdraw this light and to leave him in his ignorance, which has given him over to sin. This is why, according to St Paul, all men are guilty and have irremediably lost the possibility of “justification by works”, i.e. the possibility to earn eternal life by a conduct that is in conformity with the law of God.

But now, adds St Paul, God, seeing that no man had attained – nor could attain, from now on, a blissful eternity by this first path, opens another one, completely different, and offers man “justification by faith”, that is to say, eternal life granted as a grace to a culprit. Why? Just because he is merciful, “gratuitously by grace” (the pleonasm is St Paul’s)³ and not because of any merit or dignity in man, but despite his lack of merit and dignity. And how? By means of the redemption that is in Jesus-Christ. “Christ is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. – He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross. – Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering. He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all; the punishment that brought us peace was on him.”⁴ My brothers, let us not twist Scripture – these declarations can only have one meaning: Jesus-Christ has suffered in our place the death that we all deserved, so that we

¹ 1 Corinthians 1.25

² Romans 1.20

³ Romans 3.23

⁴ John 1.29 ; 1 John 2.2 ; 1 Peter 2.24 ; Isaiah 53.4-6

could receive, thanks to him, the eternal life only he deserved. God deals with his innocent Son as if he was as guilty as man, in order to be able to treat man as if he were as innocent as his Son. Thereby he wants to “remove our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west, hurl them into the depth of the sea and remember them no more”¹, and restore us from our state of condemnation.

It is at this point that you should remember that I only invoke the authority of Scripture. I do not ask for the assent of reason, which I might not obtain, and which I do not need, because what I expose here is not what I think but what God thinks, and I present it not in my own language but in the language of the Bible. If you ask me how the forgiveness of our sins is related to the death of Jesus-Christ; by what strange dissociation divine justice can be satisfied with punishing sin, but not the sinner; and how God can strike the innocent instead of the guilty and forgive the guilty on account of the innocent – I have only one answer: I do not know. And if you asked me to explain redemption in a speech, I would follow the example of that philosopher of antiquity who had been asked for a definition of God. First of all, I would ask you for a week in order to prepare that speech; once this week had gone, I would ask you for another, and after the second, for a third, and so on, until I would finally declare that I would never come to an end. This is because the more the philosopher contemplated God, the more he found it difficult to explain him. As for me, the more I meditate on redemption, the less I can explain it. However, despite the fact that I am not capable of explaining redemption directly, I have an indirect way of explaining it; even though I cannot conceive it in itself and via its constituents, I conceive it, so to speak, by what precedes it and what follows it: by what precedes it, that is, the needs of my conscience which it addresses; and by what follows it, that is, by the peace it restores. When God, whom Moses had asked to reveal his glory to him, made all his goodness pass in front of him, Moses knew that God would pass, before he did, and he knew that God had passed after he had done so; but while he was passing, he did not see him, because, as Scripture tells us², God had covered him with his hand. It is the same with redemption. God passes in front of us, offering up his Son for the atonement of our sins. While the sacrifice is being made, we do not see anything; God has covered our eyes with his hand. But before it is accomplished, we contemplate it because our anguished conscience senses it; and once it has been accomplished, God takes away his hand and we contemplate it through the peace it has restored in us. Let us content ourselves. Let us not be so unreasonable as to be surprised that God did not wish to, or could not, reveal everything to us in our present state. There will be a day when “we will know fully, even as we are fully known”³. For the time being, let us believe in his word; let us accept the good news as news. God accepts to pardon everything to all, in view of the fact that Jesus-Christ has suffered everything for all.

But it is in vain that the sinner is delivered from the penalty of sin if he is not delivered from sin itself; therefore, God offers us also this second deliverance. At the very same time he pardons us, and – which is admirable – by the very same means, he deposits the seed of holiness

¹ Psalm 103 ; Hebrews 8.12

² Exodus 33.18-23

³ 1 Corinthians 13.12

in our soul, according to this profound assertion of Psalm 130: "But with you there is forgiveness, so that you will be feared."¹

The second part of the plan of God's mercy, the purpose of which is to free man from sin itself, or, in other words, to bring him back to love God with his supreme love, is founded on a divinely simple and fruitful principle, which may be called the theory of evangelical sanctification : *Love cannot be commanded; it comes into existence without effort, as a result of exposure to certain qualities that attract it of their own motion.* If a being appears to lack these qualities, if it does not appear to be lovable, we cannot love it, no matter what we do. If, however, a being appears to possess these qualities, if it appears to be lovable, we will not only love it without effort but we cannot help loving it. Therefore, if we sin, if we do not love God, it is because he does not appear loveable to us. But if God does not appear loveable to us, it is because we do not know him. For if we knew him, we would know that he possesses, to the highest degree, that quality of all that is most suitable to attract our love: a great love for us. « Whoever sins », or « whoever does not love », says John², « does not know God, because God is love. » Therefore, in order to bring back man to love God, all that is needed is to show him how much God loves him. For this purpose, God, in order to reveal his true name, which is Father, to man, has sent them his Son Jesus-Christ, who, having always been in the closest relationship with the Father, was the only one to see him and to know all in him that is paternal.

How well Jesus-Christ has accomplished that mission! how impossible it is to contemplate the Son and doubt the Father's love! Christ has come ; he has spoken of God for three and a half years, and all he has said about him can be summarised in this single expression : God loves you. Then he has shown in his death what he had proclaimed in his life, and on the cross he does not only say : God loves you!, but : See how much God loves you!

For what love equals the love that God has shown us in the sacrifice of his Son! When I want a glimpse of it, I first imagine a poor sinner such as I am, walking to God's tribunal, remembering all the sins of his life, and finding, in the small part of them he can recall, enough to condemn him a thousand times; considering that³ if his *heart condemns* him, then God who is *greater than his heart*, will condemn him even more severely, because he sees in him all the evil that he himself cannot see, and remembers everything that he himself has forgotten; hearing the terrible warnings of Scripture, the anticipations of the judgements of an eternal justice that curses him who transgresses the law⁴, and who considers him who has transgressed only one commandment to have broken the entire law⁵; absorbed in these thoughts, full of remorse and anxiety of what is to come, yet compelled to go on, his despair increasing with each step; arriving in the Holy of Holies, he who is the greatest of all sinners, finding in his judge, to whom he dares not lift up his eyes and from whom he awaits in gloomy silence a

¹ Psalm 130.4

² 1 John 3.6 ; 4.8

³ 1 John 3.20

⁴ Galatians 3.10

⁵ James 2.10

terrible sentence, a father who says to him: "My son, go in peace, your sins are forgiven." If this single sentence changes his whole existence; if an unbearable weight falls from his heart; if peace and hope enter or, may I say, rush into his soul; if he lifts up his eyes to his fatherly judge, his eyes in which surprise may prevail over joy, will not the first words that he utters be: "What love! Oh my God, what love!" – Well, I say to myself, the love that God has shown me in this vision is pale compared to the love that he has shown me through the death of his Son. Here, his most tender mercy is amplified by his most terrible holiness. Here while I learn that he pardons me, I also learn that his law is so inflexible and my sin so enormous that he did not want to pardon without doing justice, that my debt had to be paid, and that he was the only one who could pay it for me. Here, pardon is a sacrifice, where his love for the sinner, expressed in the forgiveness of the culprit, is measured in terms of his hatred of sin, expressed in the shedding of blood. What love! Oh my God, what love! – And who is the victim he sacrifices for me? Is it a man? No, says Scripture. Is it an angel? No, says Scripture. Is it a creature? No, says Scripture. It is the Son of God, his only Son, whom he loves, who was with God in the beginning, who is one with God, who is God¹. The Creator gives himself in the person of his Son. What love! Oh my God, what love! – But finally, why so much love? Is there something in me which has deserved it? Or have I loved him before he loved me? No, *he first loved me*². The secret of his mercy is wholly in his mercy itself; he only forgives because it pleases him to forgive; he only saves me because I was lost. It is when I was *a rebel and deserving of wrath, his enemy*³, that he has chosen to sacrifice his Son for me. What love! Oh my God, what love! – Yet I only see the fringe of this love⁴: it is an abyss the bottom of which I cannot see⁵; but there is nothing in this abyss that is not filled with love. In the fringes I can see I discover a love that goes well beyond my imagination; and in the bottom which I cannot see, I sense a love that confounds, absorbs and annihilates all my thoughts ... *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. – God is love. – Whoever does not love him does not know him*⁶. But I who have known him, I who have contemplated Christ, the love of the Father, how could I not love him? *I was bought at a price, I am not my own*⁷, and I give him all of my heart!

By showing the love of God for sinful man so vividly, Jesus-Christ would have done all that is necessary for converting sinful man to loving God, if sinful man's mind was open to accepting this demonstration; but this is not the case. God's thoughts as they are expressed in redemption are so remote from our human thoughts that they cannot have any impact on our soul unless it has been specially prepared. The demonstration is clear and irresistible, but it is put in a language which we do not understand, so that in order to understand it, we first need to receive an interpreter within us. This agent who prepares our mind, this interpreter of redemption, he has been promised to us as the Holy Spirit.

¹ Matthew 3.17 ; John 1.1-2 ; 3.16 ; 10.30

² 1 John 4.19

³ Ephesians 2.3 ; Colossians 1.21

⁴ Job 26.14

⁵ 1 Peter 1.12

⁶ John 3.16 ; 1 John 2.2 ; 4.8-10 ; 1 Corinthians 8.3

⁷ 1 Corinthians 6.19s

Please do not think that the promise of the Holy Spirit was for the apostles alone: it is for all Christians of all times. Among the spiritual gifts given to the apostles, that which was required by the rapid propagation of Christianity, that which they received for the sake of the others, we do not need it, and it has not been promised to us. But, among the spiritual gifts of the apostles, that which was required by the conversion of their hearts, that which they received for themselves, we need it as much as they did, and we have been promised it as it had been promised to them. It was before a whole people that Jesus-Christ said: *God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*¹ It is in epistles that were sent to whole Churches that the apostles have written: *You have an anointing from the Holy One*², that is to say, from the Holy Spirit; *your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you*³; if anyone does *not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ*⁴. If these clear assertions still left you in doubt, you will not doubt any more after this declaration of St Peter by which he concluded his Pentecost discourse and which shows that he precisely wanted to avoid his listeners to make the mistake which I try to oppose in your mind: *you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.*⁵ My brothers, when God has spoken, let us not resist any more: the Holy Spirit is promised to all Christians.

And do you know who the Holy Spirit is? Let us learn it from the Bible. Let us listen to it without unbelief; let us not weaken the meaning of its expressions; let us not ask for more but also, let us not expect less than what God has clearly promised us. The Holy Spirit is not a reaction of our spirit to itself in meditation or prayer. The Holy Spirit is not an impression that true or salutary thoughts naturally make on our spirit either. The Holy Spirit is a direct, real and supernatural action that is exerted on the spirit of man by a God who is master over our hearts very much as he is master over nature, and who can give to us or take from us feelings and thoughts, if he wishes to do so. Or, to keep more closely to the expressions of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God thinking, willing, loving, acting in the spirit of man. The Holy Spirit is God in man⁶.

The Scriptures attribute to this Spirit several ways of influencing our spirit, and in particular the one the necessity of which we have acknowledged just before: it opens it to the display of the love of God expressed in redemption. It says that *the Spirit of God pours the love of God into our hearts*, that is, [the Spirit] reveals, or better: communicates to us God's love towards us; that *this Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children*, reconciled to him by the death of his Son, so that by this Spirit, and by him alone, we can receive Jesus-Christ as Lord⁷, Messiah and our Redeemer. Listen to St Paul as he directly deals with this doctrine when he writes to the Corinthians: *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except*

¹ Luke 11.13

² 1 John 2.20

³ 1 Corinthians 6.19

⁴ Romans 8.9

⁵ Acts 2.39

⁶ 1 Corinthians 3.16 ; Ezechiel 36.26s ; John 14.17 ; 17.21 ; 1 John 4.12s : “God lives in us ... This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.”

⁷ Romans 5.5 ; 8.16 ; 1 Corinthians 12.3

Jesus-Christ and him crucified ... These are things that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and that no human mind has conceived. You will note that the apostle speaks of redemption and that he declares that the spirit of man on its own is not capable of receiving it. *But now,* he adds, *God has revealed these things to us by his Spirit ... We have received the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us*¹. Thus when you will have received the Spirit, you will be able to believe in redemption and to feel it. When you do so, you will experience a strong impression of God's love for you; your heart will turn to him of its own motion, and you will in your turn begin to love him. Then something completely new will occur in you: there will be new light, new feelings, new tastes, new memories, new hopes, in a word, as the Scriptures say, "a new life". Although, according to the Scriptures², you will still have to fight sin, you will not be the slaves of sin any more, according to the same Scriptures³; you will still stumble on the path of salvation, but you will not follow the path of perdition any more; you will increasingly strip off "any appearance of evil". Thus you will finally be among those which the Scriptures call "righteous, converted, regenerated, redeemed by Jesus-Christ, children of God", weaned from this world and ready for another, knowing how to live and yet ready to die.

Thus God's mercy has provided all that is needed for the salvation of sinful man, who needs a twofold liberation. Because he is guilty, he needs forgiveness; because he is miserable, he needs a new heart: God offers him both in Jesus-Christ. He forgives him on account of Jesus-Christ, who suffered in his place the punishment due to his sins. He changes his heart by showing his love in the redemption, which the Holy Spirit has made him believe and experience.

But is there nothing we have to do on our side in order to become part of this plan of mercy? Or what do we have to do?

Yes, there is something we have to do. God, who has created us without us does not want to save us without us⁴. Whosoever wishes to receive the two graces that Jesus offers – forgiveness and change of heart – he has to have a certain disposition of the soul that is called *faith*. The Scriptures clearly require it, but they do not require anything else. I shall not provide manifold proof; it is only necessary for me to recall the characteristic features of the ministry of Jesus-Christ and of his apostles. When sick people asked Jesus-Christ to offer them healing of their body, by which he referred to the healing of the soul, he asked them⁵: Do you believe? *Everything is possible for one who believes.* And when St Paul was questioned by the jailer of Philippi on what he had to do to be saved, he replied⁶: *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.* Thus, one the one side you cannot be saved except by grace, on the other side you cannot participate in this grace except by faith⁷.

¹ 1 Corinthians 2.2, 9, 10, 12

² James 3.2 ; Proverbs 24.16 ; Philippians 3.12s

³ 1 John 3.9 ; 5.18

⁴ Saint Augustine

⁵ Mark 9.23

⁶ Acts 16.31

⁷ Ephesians 2.8 : "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ..."

But what then is faith? Learn again from the Scriptures, where faith has two meanings, depending on whether it is considered in its principle or in its application. Faith, considered in its principle, is the general conviction that the Bible is the Word of God, so that all its statements are true: this is faith in God. Faith, considered in its application, is the special conviction that it is true that we are lost and that we can be saved by Jesus-Christ, because God has said so in his Word: this is faith in Jesus-Christ. The latter – faith in Jesus-Christ – which, incidentally, is only a consequence of faith in God, is what St Paul requires of the jailer of Philippi, and which is also required of us, in order to be saved. If you are looking for the most precise and at the same time the most simple expression of this faith, you will find it in the words a leper uttered to Jesus-Christ¹: “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” I am lost, I cannot save myself; you can save me – save me, Lord! This is faith. Once you have adopted this attitude, there is nothing in the promises of Scripture that you cannot apply to yourself; and Jesus-Christ will not only be the Saviour, but also your Saviour.

But how can we get hold of this faith? Must God give it to us? Yes, because the Scriptures say²: ... *it has been granted to you ... to believe ...* So do we have to wait passively until it overcomes us? No, because the Scriptures also say³: *Make every effort, seek the Lord, work out your salvation.* But how can we reconcile two things that appear to be so contrary? In theory, I find this impossible, but in practice, it is easy. You can reconcile them by asking for faith. This is because when we ask, we acknowledge that we need to be given; at the same time, asking is seeking, is being active. So ask, pray for being granted faith. In order to answer your prayer, God will ask you only one question, the question Jesus asked the invalid of Bethesda⁴ : *Do you want to get well?* Do you want to believe? Not only: do you wish, do you desire, but are you willing? Are you willing, above all and whatever the cost is? Are you willing to know the truth? In other words, are you willing to make any sacrifice that God will require of you, in order to know it? The sacrifice of your laziness, of your thoughtlessness, of your worries, of your interests, of your affections, and even of your personal opinions and of your alleged independence? Are you willing to listen to God in the Scriptures with a sincere resolution to accept his testimony, irrespective of whether it is in line with what you have believed so far or not? Are you willing to be forgiven? Are you willing to be forgiven like a vile criminal? Are you willing to be absolved together with bandits, *tax collectors and sinners*⁵. Are you willing to be sanctified? Are you willing to do everything that is prescribed in the Word of God, whether it pleases or displeases your inclinations? To have no own will but to follow God's will only, and to give him all that you have and all that you are? To say it in one word, are you willing to – o bitterness! o cross of

¹ Luke 5.12 ; Mark 1.40-42

² Philippians 1.29 ; Ephesians 2.8

³ 2 Peter 3.14 ; Isaiah 55.6 ; Philippians 2.12

⁴ John 5.6

⁵ *Sinners (des pécheurs)*: literal translation of the original term, which is less precisely rendered in our [French] versions by « people living a bad life » (*des gens de mauvaise vie*). This is a contemptuous expression which the self-righteous Pharisees used for that segment of the Jewish society that had been most thoroughly pervaded by pagan elements. It characterised both as a *corrupt* and a *secular* class, and perhaps the latter notion even prevailed (Galatians 2.15). This may be the reason why the common expression *sinners and tax collectors* is sometimes replaced by *people living a bad life* (Matthew 21.31) and sometimes by *pagans* (Matthew 18.17).

nature! – are you willing to renounce yourself? Are you willing to be worth nothing, to merit nothing, to know nothing, to be able to do nothing, to be nothing, and to keep nothing for yourself, nothing at all? If this is your will, if you are disposed in this way, then boldly ask God for faith; do not fear to be too bold in this prayer, fear not being bold enough, because to doubt that God will answer your prayer is to doubt his formal promise. If, on the contrary, this is not your will, if you are not disposed in this way ... But why discourage your souls? Ah! if you do not feel disposed in this way, but if you feel at least the beginnings of such a disposition, if you only feel the desire of them, very well, then present these beginnings and this desire to God. When you stand before him, invoke the example of the poor father who, having implored Jesus to heal his child, answered the question of whether he believed by crying¹ *I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!* but who nevertheless was not rejected. You, too, pray, if not with faith, at least with the little faith you have; if not with self-renouncement, at least with the little self-renouncement you have. These first imperfect prayers will obtain first graces, no doubt as imperfect as your prayers; these graces will stimulate better prayers, which will obtain more abundant graces; thus, from prayers to graces and from graces to prayers, you will slowly come into the truth, and you will finally reach the path of divine mercy.

My brothers, in this discourse and in the preceding one I have explained the need for and the path to salvation through Jesus-Christ.

If somebody was to dismiss these discourses, I would first ask him what exactly he dismissed. Is it the form, the language, the way in which the ideas are linked? Anybody is free to dismiss this, because it comes from me. Or is it the substance, the ideas themselves? Do you think that it is wrong that natural man is a sinner? that he needs a forgiveness that can only be obtained by the atoning death of the Son of God? that he needs a change of heart that can only be brought about by the Spirit of God? that he is lost and can only be saved in Jesus-Christ, *by grace, through faith?* If this is what you dismiss, I have only one thought to add. At least act knowingly, and know what you dismiss: it is not a man, it is not a word of man; it is the gospel; it is Jesus-Christ. There is indeed only one gospel², and this gospel teaches precisely what you dismiss: man [is] lost, God [is] the saviour, Christ [is] the victim, the Holy Spirit [is] the renewer. This is what all men who drew their faith from the Scriptures have always agreed upon. It is the gospel of the Reformed Church of France; it is the gospel of Calvin; it is the gospel of Luther; it is the gospel of Pascal; it is the gospel of Fénelon; it is the gospel of *The Imitation*; it is the gospel of John Hus; it is the gospel of St Bernard; it is the gospel of St Augustine; it is the gospel of St Polycarp; it is the gospel of St Paul; it is the gospel of St John; it is the gospel of St James; it is the gospel of Jesus-Christ; it is the gospel of God. If you dismiss it, you may very well be called Christians, you may even believe that you are Christians, but you are no more Christians than a philosopher who dismisses the Platonic teachings is a disciple of Plato. What I have preached to you is not my opinion; it is the truth. It is not a doctrine; it is *the* doctrine. It is more: it is life; and if you do not believe it, you abide in death. What am I saying? If you do not believe this, what do you believe? What are you? To whom do you belong? Where do you

¹ Mark 9.24

² Galatians 1.7 : ... a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all ... ; Ephesians 4.5 ; 2 Corinthians 11.4

come from? What are you doing here? If we keep quiet, the stones of this church will cry out that the worship they see you offering here to God makes no sense. For, not to mention communion days, where this liturgy – in the name of which you are invited to approach the holy table, and which you acknowledge to be true by accepting this invitation – declares that you are “miserable sinners” who have no hope except “in divine mercy”, that “Jesus-Christ is the true paschal lamb that has been sacrificed for you” and that you need “the Spirit of God to transform you into new creatures”, each Sunday it is not your heart but only your hands that accompany the prayer opening the service. This prayer has two parts, the first of which summarises my first discourse, and the second, the second. When the pastor says aloud: “We acknowledge before your holy majesty that we are poor sinners, born in corruption, inclined to evil, incapable of doing what is good of our own motion, and who transgress your holy commandments every day and in many ways, thereby bringing upon us condemnation and death, through your just judgement”. If you dismiss my first discourse, you have to whisper: “I am not a poor sinner, I was not born in corruption, nor am I inclined to evil; I am not incapable of doing what is good of my own motion; I do not transgress God’s commandments every day and in many ways, and I do not deserve death and condemnation.” Again, when the pastor says aloud: “We humbly resort to your grace, and we implore you to help us in our misery. Have mercy upon us, God, good father of mercies, and forgive our sins for the sake of your Son, Jesus-Christ, our Lord! Grant us also, and continually increase in us the graces of your Holy Spirit!” If you dismiss my second discourse, you have to whisper: “As I do not deserve to be condemned, I do not have to ask for grace; as I am not born in corruption, I do not need to be renewed by the Holy Spirit; and as I do not think that the innocent suffers in place of the guilty, I certainly do not ask for forgiveness in the name of Jesus-Christ.” So, as long as you dismiss this doctrine, you cannot agree with the protestant Church, nor with the Reformers, nor with the pious among the Catholic, nor with the Christians of all times, nor with the Church Fathers, nor with the early Church, nor with the apostles, nor with Jesus-Christ, nor with God, nor with yourselves. You have to somehow get out of so wrong a situation; you must either go ahead, or go backwards; either take it or give up the name; either receive this doctrine or give up Christianity.

Oh! you in this assembly whom God has made thoughtful by these discourses, make good use of this disposition. *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*¹ Who knows, perhaps this is the *time of your favour, your day of salvation*² which, if you neglect it, may never return, but which, if you faithfully receive it, will be for you the era of a new life? Forget all human influence, all human impressions; see only God and yourself, tell him: “My God! Until now, I thought I was a Christian, but now I begin to see that I was it only in name. I feel that all is not well with me, that I am not at peace with you. Give me this peace, Lord! even if this means that I will have to give up all the rest. Do you want my wealth? Here it is. Do you want my reputation? Here it is. Do you want my well-being? Here it is. Do you want the things I cherish? Do I have to split up with my friend, my father, my mother, my wife, my child?”

¹ Hebrews 4.7s

² 2 Corinthians 6.2

I accept the sacrifice. Your will first. Your truth first. Your spirit first. My conversion first.
*Restore me, and I will return.*¹"

My God! If anybody prays to you in this way, he is not far from the kingdom of heaven. Make him take the only step he still has to take, by sending into his heart the Holy Spirit, the heavenly advocate of truth, without whom the earthly advocate would only have been a *resounding gong or a clanging cymbal*, so that he may urge him, and annoy him, continue the work and achieve it. Amen!

¹ Jeremiah 31.18 ; Lamentations 5.21