

XI.

LUKE 14, 17.—“Come, for all things are now ready.”

WE have here, as in many other passages of Scripture, a most precious invitation, and a reason for accepting it. An invitation—“come;” a reason—“all things are now ready.” The first of these requires no explanation. In the spiritual sense or application of the parable from which the text is taken, “come” means, of course, come to the gospel feast, to the provision of God’s bounty, to the fountain, to the cross, to Christ himself. It is equivalent to saying, Be ye saved, and includes the exhortation to repent, believe, submit to the righteousness of God, and accept of the salvation that he offers. It is therefore the same call that is continually ringing in the ears of those who hear the gospel, and which needs not so much to be explained as to be enforced. For this very purpose, it is added, because all things are now ready. To this reason for yielding to the call of mercy I invite your attention. “Come, for all things are now ready.” In the parable, it obviously means that the precise time of enjoyment was now come, that the provision was complete and the arrangements perfect. A little earlier might have been too early. A

little later was too late forever. Such a time there is and must be in all human invitations. Such a time there is in every invitation of the gospel. But between the cases there is this momentous difference: In the one it may be equally amiss to come too early or too late. In the other we need only fear to come too late. It is impossible to come too early; because the provision is already and completely made for those who will receive it, and needs not to be constantly renewed, as in the other case. Oh, if our eyes could be unsealed, or these surrounding mists dispelled so as no longer to obstruct our view of the divine compassions, we might behold the banquet hall of mercy rise before us "like an exhalation," with its flashing lights, its music, and its odours,—making the outer darkness more profound by contrast, and the cold and hunger of the gazing crowd more keen and pinching! Before such displays of human splendour and festivity, the poor and wretched often stand in envious admiration. For to them that threshold is impassable. And even those who are allowed to feed there because full already, must await the appointed moment. But how different this feast of mercy. Those who do not enter will not hear the call or cannot see the bounties spread before them. If, when their eyes and ears are opened, they still linger, it is only for a moment, in the first feeling of incredulous surprise that this provision can be meant for them, and that they need no preparation or delay, but may partake of it at once. While they stand amazed at the sights and sounds so suddenly presented to their senses, as at something quite beyond their

reach, their hopes, and almost their desires, the doors fly open, a fresh flood of light, new waves of melody, new gales of odour, stream forth upon them, and loud yet gentle voices cry to them—not merely to others—but to them: Come and see; eat and drink, oh beloved; come, for all things are now ready. And from age to age the call is still the same. As one generation sweeps another off the stage,—some heeding, some despising, some not even hearing the benignant invitation,—it is still repeated: all things are now ready. Yes, at whatever moment the poor sin-sick, starved, exhausted sinner first begins to feel his want and turns his dim and haggard eyes towards that scene of splendour and festivity before unknown or madly disregarded—however untimely the appeal may seem—though the prayer be breathed at midnight, in the dark—from the beggar's hovel, the field of battle, or the dungeon, or the scaffold,—the response is still the same: come, for all things are now ready.

The resort to this supply can never be too early; it should never be too late. It can never be too early; for the soul is never without consciousness of want—a restless craving for enjoyments better than the best it has experienced. It should never be too late—as it is, alas! too late for thousands—because all things are now ready; and when all things are now ready, and the opportunity afforded of securing them but transient, it is self-destruction to refuse acceptance;—it is folly, it is madness, even to postpone it. Let us then consider the readiness of all things as a reason for coming to Christ now. And as the simplest way

of doing this, let us consider what it is that hinders us from coming. I speak not to those who are still utterly insensible—unconscious of their danger, or unwilling to confess it—for with such it is impossible to reason, and they must be left to the fearful consolation of that solemn irony: they that are whole need not a physician. But to you who own yourself a sinner, and in need of mercy, and expect to find it one day in the Saviour, to you I put the question—and would pray you to put it yourselves:—what prevents your coming now? what invisible hand drags you back when you are almost on the threshold?—holds your eyes fast shut when you begin to see light; stifles your very cries for mercy; and chokes down the throbbings of your bursting heart;—what is it? No external force; you act freely in refusing to come. What inward cause, then,—why do you not come? what keeps you still away? Alas! I need not ask; for in the way of every sinner who knows what it is to think, there always rises up one barrier which effectually stops his course till God removes it; it is guilt—the paralyzing and benumbing sense of guilt. The very same thing that creates the necessity of coming, seems to render it impossible. God is a holy God, a just God, and a Sovereign. His law is broken; we ourselves have broken it: He cannot but condemn us,—nay, we are condemned already. The conviction of this truth is like an iron yoke upon our necks, and chains around our limbs; we feel the pressure, and we would be delivered,—but we cannot move. We cannot willingly appear before the presence of our enemy—our judge—our executioner. As

long as this relation still subsists, or seems to do so, we will not, cannot, dare not come, whatever may be ready. Oh, my hearers, is there none among you before whom this conviction has shot up into a massive wall which you can neither scale, nor penetrate, nor go round,—and at the foot of which you are now lying, neither able to go further, nor yet willing to go back? Would to God this might be the experience of some who have not yet been brought so far, for they might then expect deliverance. All that you need is ready—even now ready. If you cannot look up, you can listen. What is that sound which comes forth from the darkness or the light inaccessible where God resides? Is it the muttering of distant thunder, or the premonition of a coming storm? It is indeed a voice like the voice of thunderings,—sweet yet solemn to the ear—but it speaks of mercy, not of wrath; it is a voice like the voice of many waters, saying: Come and see! Look up! Above, beyond these barriers, see the throne and Him who sits upon it; the cloud in which He wraps himself is not charged with tempest,—it is radiant with light; his diadem is not vindictive lightning, but the peaceful rainbow. He desireth not the death of the sinner, but that all should turn and live. He permits, he commands, he entreats you to be saved,—the strongest possible expression of his willingness. Oh, my hearers, if you are deterred by a sense of alienation and estrangement from your God, or by a doubt of his benignity, his willingness to pardon and be reconciled,—if this is what deters you, come, oh come without delay, for all things are now ready.

But, perhaps your way is not yet open; your obstacles are not yet all removed. Whatever you may think of the benevolence of God, you cannot lose sight of his justice. However his compassion might consent, his holiness, his truth, his righteousness, still stop the way. He cannot lie. His threatenings must be executed. He cannot deny himself. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The law is broken, and its awful penalty must be discharged. Whatever else is ready matters not while this vast debt remains unpaid. All these are certain and appalling truths. There is no danger of exaggerating their reality or fearful import. You can never gain relief from this discouragement by learning to extenuate the claims of the divine law, or the turpitude of sin, or the necessity of punishment, or the tremendous nature of the penalty annexed to all transgression, or your utter incapacity to evade it or to heal the vast breach of the violated law. You may tamper as you will with your understanding and your conscience, but the only fruit of such attempts, when most successful, is delusion or despair. The dream of self-deception must be followed soon or late by a fearful waking; and however often or however long you may forget yourself in sleep, the awful truth will still rush back upon your waking thoughts, only rendered more intolerable by the brief oblivion which preceded. If the pressure of pecuniary debt can rob men of their sleep, embitter their enjoyments, mar their peace, make life a burden, drive them mad, and even arm them with the weapon of self-murder, so that cowards against others become brave against themselves, and

they who shrink from the sufferings of this life rashly venture on the next—if these are but familiar consequences of the agony produced by consciousness of mere pecuniary debt beyond the man's ability to pay, oh, what would be the issue, if the vast account-books between us and God should be completely opened and made fully legible? by what arithmetic could we compute, or in what terms express the terrible result? It is impossible; and partly for the reason that it is impossible, we shut our eyes, and stop our ears, and turn away our thoughts from this confounding theme; and even when we do attempt to scan it, and to plead the greatness of our debt as an excuse for not accepting Christ, it is not because we have, but because we have not, any adequate conception of that debt, which, if we saw it as it is, instead of filling our mouth with arguments against God, would strike us dumb, and strike us blind, and strike us dead before him. In this direction you are right in seeing no escape; there is none; you are right in denying that this debt must be discharged—it must; and that you cannot pay it, for you never, never can. If you are only partially and superficially convinced of this, you will remain where I now leave you, and continue to excuse yourself by pleading that your sins are inexcusable. But if you are really and thoroughly persuaded that you must and cannot pay this awful debt, the very darkness of your self-despair may give you light or serve to make it visible; at first a dim spark,—then a faint gleam,—then a glow—a flame—a blaze—and in the focus of that blaze you may behold,—as the ancient persecutor saw amidst the white heat of his own de-

vouring furnace, a form like that of the Son of God, standing erect beside the way which leads you to the throne of mercy. You must pass by him, or you cannot reach the footstool. Who is he that thus awaits you? his eye moist with pity, but his features pallid, as one risen from the dead. And in his outstretched hand the eye of faith can discern something shining; something precious; something priceless; not the glare of gold or silver, or the sparkle of invaluable gems, but something wet with tears and stained with blood; the blood still oozing from that stricken heart. It is the purchase of your life; it is the ransom of your soul; it is the price which you could never pay; which men and angels could not have paid for you; in default of which you had resigned yourself to perish. See, he holds it out; he presses it upon you; and the turning point is—can you reject it? If you can, oh let your lips be sealed forever from all mention of the penalty of God's law, as deterring you from mercy; for, as you plunge into the gulf of self-destruction, the last sound from above that reaches you, may be the dripping of that blood, one touch of which would have sufficed to cancel your vast debt forever. Oh, if this alone is wanting to embolden your approach to God, I say again, my hearer, "come, for all things are now ready."

But now, perhaps, you feel another hinderance; one of which you took but little note before. Though God be ready to forgive you for the sake of Christ's atoning sacrifice, you find a hinderance in yourself, in your heart, in your very dispositions and affections. Besides being guilty, righteously condemned, just-

ly exposed to punishment, unable to atone for your transgressions; you are polluted, your very nature is corrupt, averse from good, disposed to evil. How can you come into the presence of a holy God? How can you fail to be an object of abhorrence to him? How can you love what you detest, or find your happiness in that which is directly contradictory to all your nature? Here again the fact alleged is true and awful beyond your worst conceptions. There are depths,—there are abysses of defilement, which you need not undertake to fathom; into which you cannot even look without bewilderment and sickness of spirit. If God should lift the veil which hides them, and permit the light to shine directly on them, you would be unable to endure it. Oh, look away from that heart-rending spectacle. Here is another object to contemplate. Over against that blood-stained form which proffers ransom, what is this? A gushing spring, a flowing stream, a flood, a sea, of purifying virtue. Plunge into it, and you are cleansed already. You come up out of its waters changed, and yet the same. Coercion is no longer needed; for your very dispositions and desires are revolutionized. Old things are passed away; all things are become new; new without and new within; new heavens and a new earth; a clean heart and a right spirit; this is indeed a new creation, a new creature, a new birth, born again, born from above, born of God; the washing of regeneration, the renewing of the Holy Ghost. Be not deterred then by the sense of what you are, any more than by the sense of what you cannot do, or what you have already done.

The provision of God's mercy includes this as well as every other want. A new heart is as much his gift as expiation and forgiveness. Come, then, and receive what he vouchsafes to offer. Come without reserve, without delay, for all things are now ready.

But I hear you say you cannot come alone, you cannot struggle by yourself, you cannot brave alone the thunderings and lightnings of Mount Sinai, you cannot stand with Moses on the smoking and the quaking summit, you must mingle with the multitude below. You are not even willing to be saved alone. Having followed a multitude so long to do evil, you still feel the need of communion and example, of mutual incitement and restraint. And you shall have it. You shall have it in perfection if you will but come. For ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven. The Church of Christ stands open to receive you, to protect you, and to nourish you. Her institutions, her examples, her worship, her ordinances, her communion, all, all are ready for you. This is a want for which the grace that rescues you has specially provided. You are not asked to be saved alone, though that were surely better than to perish. You may bring as many with you as you will, and you will find many entered in before you. When we bid you *come*, you are invited to a feast, of which many, thanks be to God, are after all partakers, and though many that are bidden make excuse or even venture to make light of it, the giver of the banquet shall be still supplied with guests; for while the

broad way that leadeth to destruction remains crowded with infatuated victims, another concourse is seen streaming from the bye-ways and the hedges to the table of the Lord, where they shall sit down, clothed and in their right minds, washed and beautified, ennobled and refined, while many who appeared to be hereditary children of the kingdom, are excluded or exclude themselves from all participation in the banquet. Of the company thus gathered and transformed you are to form a part. The doors stand open, open to receive you, and yet there is room. If all obstructions have now vanished from without and from within, if atonement, and forgiveness, and renewal are accessible, and if the Church is ready to receive you into its communion of saints, what remaining pretext for delay can be imagined? Come, for all things are now ready.

Do you still object that these are only temporary institutions? that they do not reach as far as your necessities and fears? Do you ask, When these fail, whither shall I go, and who shall then receive me unto everlasting habitations? I still reply, but in a higher sense, that ye are come unto Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, and to the spirits of the just made perfect. Heaven is ready to receive you, and in that assurance all is comprehended. Whatever local and material associations you may have with heaven, they are but the veil, the hull, the casket. We use heaven to denote a state, in which place other circumstances may be comprehended, but oh how much more! All goodness and all blessedness. All wrong and suffer-

ing shut out forever. Let memory and imagination do their worst in multiplying images of evil, and in calling up before the mind the forms and the occasion of distress; then add that all these will be wanting. Give indulgence to your boldest flights and wildest dreams of happiness, apart from sin, then add that all, and infinitely more than all you can imagine, will be yours and yours forever, without the fear or possibility of change, or loss, or diminution. Every pure wish gratified, all lofty aspirations more than realized, and what is past or present still as nothing in comparison with what is yet to come. All attempts to heighten such an object, only lower it, and leave our apprehensions of it less defined and satisfactory than at first. But if this ineffable condition, this negation of all evil, this perpetual fruition of the highest good awaits you, stands prepared for you; then surely it may well be said to you, Come, oh come, for all things are now ready. Expiation, pardon, renovation, the grace of the Father, the merit of the Son, the influence of the Spirit, the Church on earth, and the Church in heaven, safety in life, peace in death, and glory through eternity; a good hope here, and an ineffable reality hereafter; all things, all things, are now ready.

Will you come? If not, you must turn back, you must retrace your steps, and take another view of this momentous invitation. Higher we cannot rise in the conception or the presentation of inducements. If you must have others, they must be sought in a lower region. Let us then descend from this exalted point of observation whence you have surveyed the glorious

things now ready to receive you, and surveyed them, it may be, without emotion or effect; let us descend, and from a different position, take a momentary view of certain other preparations no less real in themselves, and no less everlasting in their issues. I have already mentioned one important difference between the ideal feast and others, namely, that at these we may arrive too early, while at that, the only fear is, we may be too late. Another striking difference is this, that the refusal of an earthly feast involves at most the loss of some enjoyment, or at most the alienation of the giver. But in those parables of Christ, where this is the predominant image, the refusal of the feast is represented as a crime, and they who would not partake of the supper are cast into outer darkness, where is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. The reason is obvious. The feast is a figure for salvation or deliverance from ruin. To refuse it, therefore, is to choose destruction. This must be taken into view, if we would estimate the motives here presented. All things are ready, and in all is included more perhaps than you imagine. There are other things ready besides pardon, expiation, renovation, the communion of saints, and the joys of heaven. I shall mention only two.

Such is the brevity of life, and such the transitory nature of the offer of salvation, that even the youngest who decides this question, may be said to decide it in the prospect of death, and on the confines of eternity. However numerous and long the years that stretch before you may appear when viewed in comparison with this world's trifling interests, they vanish into nothing

when confronted with eternity. I say then to you, who even now are balancing the reasons for consenting and refusing to obey the exhortation of the text, that you are really so balancing with death immediately before you, that among the things now ready and awaiting your decision, this is one. Of some this is doubtless true, even according to your customary method of computing time. An eye endowed with supernatural perception, might detect among those youthful forms and beautiful countenances, some for whom the grave, almost without a figure, may be said to be already open. But of all, of all without exception, for the reason before given, the same thing may be affirmed, because the space which intervenes between the fatal resolution, to reject this gracious invitation either finally, or till a more convenient season, and the actual close of your probation, will hereafter seem, and ought now to seem, so short and evanescent, and contemptible, that he who now rejects Christ may be fairly represented as rejecting him with one foot in the grave, or with the body half submerged in the cold waters of the river of death. Whoever you may be, then, whether young or old, in sickness or in health, I tell you plainly, that among the things "now ready," and awaiting your decision, is the grave, the grave; the cold, damp earth, is ready to receive you. If you impatiently repel this suggestion, as untimely or irrelevant, this only shows how unprepared you are to meet the fearful spectre that it raises. Even true believers may be all their lifetime subject to bondage, through fear of death, even in this restricted sense; how much more natural and rational

is such a fear in you who are unwilling to obey the invitations of the gospel. Death is the king of terrors, and however we may hate his presence, it is better to encounter it, when such encounter may be possibly of use to us, than when all hope of victory or rescue is extinguished.

Look then, my hearer, with as steady and as bold an eye as your philosophy can furnish, look into those shadowy recesses which even poetry describes to you as overhung by the funeral cypress, tenanted only by the dead, and vocal only with the dirge, the voice of weeping, and the solemn noises which accompany the rites of burial. Look at that silent shadow or the earth which it enshrouds, as your appointed place, your long home, and at that narrow chasm as the very bed in which your limbs are to repose perhaps for ages. Claim it as your own, assert your right to it, and give it place among the things now ready for you and awaiting your decision. Do you say that all this is as true of one as of another, and that die you must, whether you accept or refuse the invitation of the text? This is indeed theoretically true, but it is practically false. Go tell the prisoner, as he enters his dark dungeon for the last night of repose before he mounts the scaffold, that his cell is no whit darker, or his couch harder, or his chains heavier than those of his next neighbour, whose captivity expires on the morrow. Go read the countenances of the two men as they enter the same comfortless abode of crime, each knowing that the morrow is to break his chains. To both, the filth, and darkness, and confinement may be now as nothing, but

how different the reason. To the one the filth seems splendour, and the darkness light, and the confinement freedom, in the rapturous anticipation of deliverance, and as he falls asleep, he hugs the very chains that bind him, in the certainty that he shall never lie down chained again; while to the other, all these same things are absorbed and annihilated in the prospect of a doom compared with which captivity itself seems perfect freedom. Go persuade yourself that when those two men enter their dark dungeons and lie down to sleep, they are alike in their condition; then come back, and we will hear you say death comes alike to all, and deny that the grave's being ready to receive you is a reason which should govern your decision. Death comes alike to all; but know, O vain man, the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. It *is* appointed unto *all men* once to die, and after that the judgment; but oh how different the case of those who can abide that judgment, and of those who cannot; of those who die but once, and of those who die self-doomed and self-predestined to the second death. It is appointed unto all men *once* to die, but some die twice, some die again, some die forever, and if this is your doom, you may well shrink back and shudder at the grave before you, as the vestibule, the entrance to another. For, after all, it is not the terrestrial sepulchre considered in itself that I would set before you, any further than as shutting the door forever on all choice. I look not merely into it, but through and beyond it, into that mysterious world which seems to yawn beneath it. There with the eye of fancy or of faith, you may see a deeper,

darker, ghastlier grave, ready for your soul, and for your soul and body when again united. You may turn from this as a diseased imagination, but imagination as it is, the day is coming when to some it will seem poor and weak indeed contrasted with the dread reality. The grave is ready both for body and for soul. I do not ask you to look into it, or listen to the wailings that come up from it, or breathe its sulphurous vapours. I only ask you to believe, and to remember that the grave and the abyss are as truly ready if you will not come, as pardon, and redemption, and sanctification, and the church, and heaven, are ready if you will come. On both sides, therefore, all things are ready. The world of bliss and the world of woe spread out their motives in your sight. If you will die, death is easy, for the grave is ready both for soul and body; it is hollowed for you both in time and in eternity. The earth, to which you must return, is open, and the narrow house already yawning to receive you, while beneath—far off in yonder shadowy world—a funeral pile begins to send up its thick smoke, and to project its lurid flames into the air. On that pile there is room enough for you, beneath it, fire enough for your destruction. Tophet is ordained of old, he hath made it deep and large, the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it. These are strong figures, but if such be the figures, what must be the reality? Whatever it be, know that it is ready for you if you will not come, and if you choose death rather than life. Are you willing to live? Life is no less attainable. Your guilt, your

weakness, your corruption, the justice, truth, and holiness of God, are all against you where you stand. But come, and all things that you need are ready for you. Come, oh come, and expiation, pardon, renovation, the church on earth, and the church in heaven ; all things are *ready*, all things are *yours*, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come, all are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's.