

## PAUL THE CHIEF OF SINNERS.

*I Tim. i. 15.*

The confession of Saint Paul—I am the chief of sinners—must seem at first sight to be a mere hypocritical depreciation of himself, inconsistent with other parts of his writings in which he boasts that he was not a whit behind the very chiefest Apostles. How, we ask, could Paul say that he was the chief of sinners?

He had indeed persecuted the saints and treated with great violence the church of God. He had been foremost of those who sought the destruction of Christ's cause. But this was in the days of ignorance. He knew no better. He had been guilty of grievous wrongs; but what he sought was not a selfish end, was not earthly applause. His zeal was for God.

But Paul must have seen among the heathen of his day, among the Jews, among the Christian converts, many who were guilty of gross sins for which no such excuse could be tendered—who gave themselves up to lie, to steal, to live sensual lives, to indulge in the most debasing sins, who loved sin and committed it contrary to the remonstrances of conscience—in extenuation of whose crimes neither ignorance nor a blind zeal for God could be alleged. How could Paul say, I am the chief of sinners?

And again, if Paul had grievously transgressed God's law and offended God's majesty by slaughtering his people, were there not many of the Jews as violent in their persecutions who had never repented? Were there not many of the heathen who scoffed more loudly than ever he did at the despised of Nazareth, who wrought more woe to the disciples of Christ, and had never repented of their sins? How could Paul say, I am the chief of sinners?

If Paul had been comparing himself with others he could easily have found multitudes of sinners with whom he would have shrunk from being named in the same sentence. Would he have allowed that he exceeded in sin the drunkard, the thief, the sensualist? Would he have allowed that his life, either before his conversion or, much more, after it, was no better than the life of such as Judas or Herod?

It is not in comparing himself with other men that Paul pronounced himself the chief of sinners. It is when he appears at the tribunal of the Most High God that he feels as though he stood in the ranks of the vilest of mankind. It is when he proclaims

Christ to be his Saviour that he owns himself as little deserving of salvation as the man whose life has been steeped in crime, as worthy of eternal punishment as the man who has openly violated all laws human and divine.

If we compare two men, actors in human society, as men, without reference to the holiness of God, we shall readily recognize a vast difference between them. We would scarcely place in the same category the patriot who has lost his whole worldly estate and not even counted his life dear for the sake of his country, and the man who is so eagerly intent on his own aggrandizement as to sell himself and his friends for some paltry honour. We would scarcely mention in the same breath the respectable member of society who attends church, and religiously observes all statutes and ordinances, and the ruffian whose talk is blasphemy, whose heart wells out a filthy stream of corruptions, who bids defiance to the laws of society and pours contempt on all the restraints which render society a blessing. To compare these would be as if we should set a rock of the sea in comparison with all Britain, or the water of an inland lake with the ocean that girds the world. Yet we know that to one who should take his station on the sun and fix his gaze on the earth, the little rock and the great island, the inland lake and the vast boundless ocean sink into equal insignificance. In like manner to one of spotless purity, the perfection of human virtue and the extreme of human vice seem to be separated by a very narrow strait. The holiness, the devotion, the piety of the saint appears extraordinary to us. He rises among men, towering high above his generation as the Alps overtop other mountains. But in His eye who sees the working of the inmost soul, from whom the naked heart can hide none of its secrets, who discerns the worldliness, impurity and duplicity of even the saintliest, the holiness of the most perfect among us is altogether mean and contemptible. Let a man bring his best offerings to God. Let him present himself in holiest mood, in his most spiritual frame. What are such offerings to Him who made the universes? What is the sum of all human holiness in His sight before whom angel and archangel bow, and the cherubim and seraphim veil their faces with their wings, *cy*, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Sabaoth.

In this point of view we can readily un-