

The Small Number of the Elect¹

by Jean-Baptiste Massillon (1663-1742)

“Many are called, but few are chosen.”

Matthew 22.14

THIS, MY BELOVED BRETHREN, is a sentence which is seldom reflected on with that serious attention which its importance requires. It is generally supposed that salvation is attainable at a much easier rate than we represent it to be; and that the number of the elect far surpasses the number of the reprobate. But the words of my text declare that “many are called, but few are chosen.”

Were it my intention to strike terror into your minds instead of consulting your improvement by instruction, I would in this discourse enumerate the alarming examples with which the Scriptures are filled on this subject: I would tell you that the prophet Isaiah compares the small number of the elect to the few bunches of grapes which escape the eye of the vintager, to the few ears of corn which chance only preserves from the sickle of the reaper. I would tell you, in the words of God himself, that there are two paths; the one, narrow, rugged, strewn with thorns, and frequented by very few—the other, broad, spacious, adorned with flowers, and trodden by the far greater part of mankind. I would tell you that the Gospel unreservedly declares that perdition is the fate of the multitude, and that the number of the elect bears no comparison with the number of the reprobate. But what profit would you reap from this discourse, were I to confine my observations to this subject alone? You would be informed of the danger, but you would not be acquainted with the means of escape. You would behold the sword of God’s wrath lifted over your heads, but you would not be empowered to avert the stroke. Your peace of mind would be destroyed, but you would not discover the irregularities of your moral conduct.

For your instruction, therefore, I shall examine the causes why the number of the elect is so small. I shall apply the subject individually to yourselves, and examine the foundation of which your hopes of salvation are established. Banish all foreign thoughts from your minds, and attend solely to my words. The subject is important, if any subject can be so, and more

¹ This sermon was preached at Versailles before the court of King Louis XIV—the Sun King—in 1704 on Septuagesima Sunday, that is, the third Sunday before Lent.

immediately relating to the concerns of your real and immortal welfare than anything, I believe, that has ever before occupied your attention.

The elect of God will be composed of people of two different descriptions: of those who have been so happy as to preserve their innocence spotless and undefiled by mortal sin, and of those who have regained their lost innocence by suitable works of penance. These are the elect. Heaven is open only to the innocent and to the truly penitent. Now, my brethren, of which description are you? Are you of the number of the innocent? Or are you of the number of the penitent? Faith assures you that nothing defiled can enter heaven. You must consequently either have avoided every defilement, or your defilements must have been washed away by sincere repentance. The first is a privilege which is enjoyed by very few; and the second requires a grace which, in the present general relaxation of morals and discipline, is neither seldom received nor seldom acted upon.

In those happy times when the Church was an assembly of saints, few of the faithful who had been cleansed by the laver of regeneration and had received the Holy Ghost relapsed into their former ways. Ananias and Sapphira were the only prevaricators we read of in the Church of Jerusalem: one incestuous man only is recorded to have dishonored the Church of Corinth. Seldom was it necessary to subject a disciple to rigour or canonical penance; or at least, the number of lepers who were banished from the presence of the altar and separated for the society of their brethren was very small in comparison with the rest of the faithful.

But those times are elapsed, and great is the change that has taken place. The Gospel indeed has extended its empire, but the reign of piety is confined within narrower boundaries: the number of believers is increased, but the number of the just is diminished; the world is the same now as it was from the beginning—corrupt and profligate; its conversion to the faith has produced no change in its manners and customs. When it entered the Church, it introduced likewise its immorality and profaneness. Yes, my beloved, true it is that the land, even the land of Christianity, is infected by the corruption of its inhabitants; all work iniquity, and seldom is there one who does good. Injustice, calumny, lying, adultery, and crimes of the blackest hue, lay waste the fair inheritance of Christ; hatreds are perpetual; reconciliations are seldom sincere; an enemy is seldom loved; detractions, and censures on the conduct of others, are indulged in all occasions; and the gifts which God intended for the support of the corporal frame are abused by the excesses too shameful for description.

All states and conditions have corrupted their ways. The poor murmur against the rich: the rich forget the Author of their abundance; the great seem

to exist only for themselves; and licentiousness is made the privilege of their independent station. Even the lamps of Jacob are extinguished; the salt has lost its savour; the priest has become like unto the people. Behold, my brethren, the state of Christianity. And, O God!, is this the Church, thy Spouse, thy beloved inheritance? Is this thy delightful vineyard, the object of thy tenderest care? Ah! More heinous or more enormous crimes were not committed in Jerusalem, when thou pronounced against it the sentence of its condemnation.

Thus, one gate, the gate of innocence, is irrevocably shut against us. We have all gone astray. There probably was a time when sin defiled the heart of every individual of this assembly. The impetuosity of the passions has perhaps subsided in some; the world has perhaps become disgusting to others; grace, perhaps, has wrought the conversion of others; but there probably was a period which we all look back upon with regret, and would gladly consent that it were forever blotted out from the history of our lives. But why do I waste my time in attempting to prove the loss of our baptismal innocence? We know that we are sinners; we dread the scrutinizing eye of an omniscient God; and we have too much reason to fear that he beholds innumerable stains even in that part of our lives which appears to us unsullied by any crime. It is vain, therefore, to claim heaven on the score of innocence: consequently, there is only one road to salvation left, which is that of penance. After the shipwreck of sin, this is the only plank, say the holy Fathers that can save us.

Now let me ask, where are the penitents in this assembly? Are their numbers considerable? There are more, said a holy Father, who never lost their baptismal innocence than have recovered it again by true repentance. A dreadful sentence, my dear brethren, but, I hope, not to be too strictly enforced, however respectable the authority. We will not run into extremes. There are sufficient motives for alarm in the exposition of the known truth, without adding to them by unnecessary declamations. Let us only examine whether the greater number of us have any right to expect eternal happiness on the score of repentance.

In the first place, what is penitent? A penitent says Tertullian, is one who every hour calls to mind in the bitterness of his soul the sins of his past life, who takes part with the justice of God against himself, and renounces innocent pleasures in order to atone for the criminal excesses which he formerly committed. A penitent is one who treats his body as an obstinate enemy, as a rebel whom he must bring into subjection, as a dishonest debtor, from whom he must exact the last farthing. A penitent is one who considers himself a malefactor condemned by the justice of God to death, and is

convinced that his only portion in this life ought to be sufferings and contempt. A penitent is one who is ready to submit the loss of health and property, as to the just privations of blessings which he has criminally abused—to crosses and afflictions, as to a punishment due to him on account of his transgressions—to corporal pains, as to a foretaste of the eternal torments which his sins have deserved. This is the description of a true penitent. Now let me ask, where are the men in this assembly who answer this description?

Are they prostrate in the porch of the temple? Are they covered with sackcloth and ashes? Do they supplicate the brethren, who are entitled to enter the sanctuary, to offer up their prayers to the Father of mercies in their behalf? Have they spent whole years in the exercises of prayer, of fasting, of mortification, and of other penitential austerities? Are they excluded from the Church, and forbidden to assist at the celebration of the tremendous mysteries? Are they treated as the outcast of men, and deprived of every consolation but that of their tears and repentance? This, at least, was the course of atonement prescribed to the ancient penitents, and scrupulously fulfilled by them.

I admit that the Church has long since authorized a relaxation of this discipline, and my motive for hinting at the severities of those times was not to lead you into a supposition that the observance of them was still necessary, or to cast reflections on the mild condescension of the Church in abolishing them, but to stigmatize the general corruption of the Christian world which rendered the abolition necessary. External discipline must be accommodated to the manners and customs of the times. But although laws framed by men are liable to change, the laws of penance are founded on the Gospel and can never change. We may satisfy the Church without the rigours of public penance; but we cannot satisfy either the Church or God, unless by our private penance we make full atonement for our crimes. Now, my brethren, what is your private penance? It is proportionate to the penance of the primitive Christians? Is it proportionate to the number and the enormity of your sins? You, perhaps, may say that you endure the cares and anxieties inseparable from your state of life, that solicitude for the present and future well being of yourselves and families embitters your days, that you labour from morning till night, and that, in spite of all your endeavours, you are frequently the victims of want, of wretchedness, of infirmities, and of other numberless evils. This, perhaps, may be true. But do you submit to these trials with a truly Christian spirit, without murmurings, without complaints? Do you submit to them in the spirit of penance, and offer them up to God as an atonement of your sins? If not, they will be found

deficient in the scales of unerring justice, and they will not be entitled to a reward. But supposing that you did not offend in any of these points, would you rank in the number of penitents? Would nothing more be required of you? Your merit, I allow, would be great. You would offer up an acceptable sacrifice of atonement to the justice of God. But would his justice be completely satisfied? The primitive Christians endured the ordinary trials of life with patience and, in addition, submitted to all the rigours of canonical penance, and yet did not do too much. Can your reconciliation be effected by easier means? Are not voluntary mortifications in private required of you? You know that the penance of every individual must be proportionate to his guilt: and can you reasonably entertain hopes of salvation, when your own penance is not regulated according to this maxim? Oh! be not deceived. The ways of repentance are far more painful than you imagine: the road to heaven presents far greater difficulties to the sinner than you have hitherto experienced. This is the real truth; and yet you spend our days in perfect tranquility and peace!

You are not, indeed, singular in this respect. You do nothing more than follow the example of a great majority of your fellow Christians. You are not more attached to worldly pleasures, more averse to sufferings and crosses, more deficient in the works of repentance, than they. I allow that there are men of more dissolute characters: for I will not suppose that you are either destitute of religion or unconcerned about salvation. But where are the men that are more penitent? Alas! the few that are of this description, I fear, are chiefly to be found in the shades of sequestered solitude. Among the people of the world there is only a small number who, by a little stricter attention to religious duties, attract the notice, and perhaps the censures and ridicule, of the public. All the rest tread the same beaten path: children inherit the false security of their parents; seldom is there one that lives innocent; and seldom is there one that dies penitent. Good God! if thou hast not deceived us—if every precept of the Gospel must be fulfilled to an iota—if the number of the reprobate will not induce thee to relax something of the severity of thy law, what becomes of that multitude of people which daily drop into eternity before our eyes! What is become of our parents, our relations, our friends? What is their eternal lot?

Formerly, when a prophet complained to the Lord that all Israel had abandoned his alliance, the Lord assured him, that he had reserved to himself seven thousand men who had not bent their knee before Baal. But can the faithful servants of Jesus be comforted with the same assurance in these days? There are undoubtedly many chosen vessels of election: the priesthood, the army, the court, the cottage, have their ornaments, men

according to God's own heart, with whom he delighteth to dwell; for the world exists only for the sake of the elect, and when their number is complete, the final dissolution will take place. But how few are they, when compared with that immense multitude which is hurried headlong into the deep abyss!

You, perhaps, have been encouraged to rely with confidence on your state, and to conclude that nothing more was required of you, because you perceived that you were as regular, as moral, as attentive to your duty as other people. But, my beloved, this, instead of being a subject to consolation, ought to strike you with dismay. Others, that is the generality of people, live in a state of tepidity and spiritual sloth; they are the slaves of pride and vain-glory; they are attracted to detraction, hatred, and other vices; the love neither God nor their neighbour in the manner they ought; in a word, they walk in the broad road that leadeth to damnation. And you can imagine that you are secure, because you walk in the same path as them? The small number of the elect walk in the narrow path: their lives are regulated, not by the conduct of the multitude, but by the precepts of the Gospel: their fervent piety, their strict morality, their penitential austerity, exalt them far above the rank of other people; they are, and have been in every age, men of singular lives; they shine like lights in the midst of darkness; they are spectacles worthy both of angels and men; they hold in abhorrence the ways, the maxims, the pleasures, and the vanities of the world; they live, says Saint Paul, not they, but Christ liveth in them.

Perhaps you will say that the saints are exceptions to the general rule, worthy indeed of your admiration, but not fit for your imitation. That they are exceptions I will readily allow. But they are exceptions only from that the general rule of walking in the broad road of perdition. A chosen soul, in the midst of the world, must necessarily be an exception. Are we then obliged to walk in the footsteps of the saints? We are. It is the duty of every one to be holy and to be a saint. Heaven is open only to saints. There is no other Gospel to be followed, no other duties to be fulfilled, no other promises to be hoped for, than those proposed to the saints. Every one is obliged to love God above all things, and his neighbour as himself: every one is obliged to seek heaven in the first place, to be meek and humble of the heart, to comply with every precept of the Gospel, to avoid sin as the greatest of all evils, and to do condign works of penance for the sins into which he has fallen; every one is obliged to do good, to advance forward in the ways of virtue, and to be perfect, as his Heavenly Father is perfect. These are obligations imposed on all: these are the same that were imposed on the saints, and the fulfilling them alone made the saints. Oh! if there were an

easier road to heaven, it would certainly have been pointed out to us; it would have been traced out in the Gospel; there would have been saints who would have walked it, and encouragements would have been held out to us by the Church to follow their easy example. But you know that there has been nothing of this kind. Good God! How little do men consult the dictates of reason when their eternal salvation is at stake!

Be not, therefore, lulled into a fatal security by the assurance that you are virtuous as other people. On the contrary, beware the multitude, lest you share not the same fate. Take your model from the saints, and imitate their virtues and sanctity. If you are innocent, continue to fulfil every precept of the Gospel, and by self-denial and prayer prepare yourselves for the future temptations. If you are sinners, bewail your sins without ceasing; water your couch every night with your tears; put on the weeds of mourning; and anticipate the judgments of God by mortification and penance. Enter on this penitential time [i.e., Lent] with alacrity and joy; and instead of seeking to increase or even to avail yourselves of the relaxations which the multitude has extorted, vie with the penitents of old: make it a truly penitential time. Be not seduced by the examples of the impenitent, but, with the chosen few, devote both body and soul to the painful works of fasting and penance. Then you may confidently hope that you will receive the reward promised by the truly penitent, and you will be united to their company hereafter in the joys of a blissful immortality. ❧