

Horatius Bonar:

You are in earnest now; but I fear you are making your earnestness your Christ, and actually using it as a reason for not trusting Christ immediately. You think your earnestness will lead on to faith, if it be but intense enough, and long enough persisted in.

But there is such a thing as earnestness in the wrong direction; earnestness in unbelief, and a substitution of earnestness for simple faith in Jesus. You must not soothe the alarms of conscience by this earnestness of yours. It is unbelieving earnestness; and that will not do. What God demands is simple faith in the record which he has given you of his Son. You say, "I can't give him faith, but I can give him earnestness; and by giving him earnestness, I hope to persuade him to give me faith." This is self-righteousness. It shows that you regard both faith and earnestness as something to be done in order to please God, and secure his good will. You say, faith is the gift of God, but earnestness is not; it is in my own power; therefore I will earnestly labor, and struggle, and pray, hoping that ere long God will take pity on my earnest struggles, nay, feeling secretly that it would be hardly fair to him to disregard such earnestness. Now, if God has anywhere said that unbelieving earnestness and the unbelieving use of means is the way of procuring faith, I cannot object to such proceeding on your part. But I do not find that he has said so, or that the apostle in dealing with inquirers set them upon this preliminary process for acquiring faith. I find that the apostles shut up their hearers to immediate faith and repentance, bringing them face to face with the great object of faith, and commanding them in the name of the living God to believe, just as Jesus commanded the man with the withered arm to stretch out his hand. The man was thoroughly helpless, yet he is, on the spot, commanded to do the very thing which he could least of all do, the thing which Jesus only could enable him to do. The Lord did not give him any directions as to a preliminary work, or preparatory efforts, and struggles, and using of means. These are man's attempts to bridge over the great gulf by human appliances; man's ways of evading the awful question of his own utter impotence; man's unscriptural devices for sliding out of inability into ability, out of unbelief into faith; man's plan for helping God to save him; man's self-made ladder for climbing up a little way out of the horrible pit, in the hope that God will so commiserate his earnest struggles as to do all the rest that is needed.

Now God has commanded all men everywhere to repent; but he has nowhere given us any directions for obtaining repentance. God has commanded sinners to believe, but has not prescribed for them any preparatory steps or process by means of which he may be induced to give them something which he is not from the first most willing to do. It is thus that he shuts them up to faith, by concluding them in unbelief. It is thus that he brings them to feel both the greatness and the guilt of their inability; and so constrains them to give up every hope of doing anything to save themselves; - driving them out of every refuge of lies, and showing them that these prolonged efforts of theirs are hindrances, not helps, and are just so many rejections of his own immediate help, - so many distrustful attempts to persuade him to do what he is already most willing to do in their behalf.

The great manifestation of self-righteousness, is this struggle to believe. Believing is not a work, but a ceasing from work; and this struggle to believe, is just the sinner's attempt to make a work out of that which is no work at all, to make a labor out of that which is a resting from labor. Sinners will not let go their hold of their former confidence, and drop into Christ's arms. Why? Because they still trust these confidences, and do not trust him who speaks to them in the gospel. Instead, therefore, of encouraging you to embrace more and more earnestly these preliminary efforts, I tell you they are all the sad indications of self-righteousness. They take for granted that Christ has not done his work sufficiently, and that God is not willing to give you faith till you have plied him with the arguments and importunities of months or years. God is at this moment willing to bless you; and these struggles of yours are not, as you fancy, humble attempts on your part to take the blessing, but proud attempts either to put it from you or to get hold of it in some way of your own. You cannot, with all your struggles, make the Holy Spirit more willing to give you faith than he is at this moment. But our self-righteousness rejects this blessed truth; and if I were to encourage you in these efforts, I should be fostering your self-righteousness and your rejection of this grace of the Spirit.

You say you cannot change your heart or do any good thing. So say I. But I say more. I say that you are not at all aware of the extent of your helplessness and of your guilt. These are far greater and far worse than you suppose. And it is your imperfect view of these that leads you to resort to these appliances. You are not yet sensible of your weakness, in spite of all you say. It is this that is keeping you from God and God from you.

God commands you to believe and to repent. It is at our peril that you attempt to alter this imperative and immediate obligation by the substitution of something preliminary, the performance of which may perhaps soothe your terrors and lull your conscience to asleep, but will not avail either to propitiate God or to life you

into a safer, or more salvable condition, as you imaging. For we are saved by faith, not by efforts to induce an unwilling God to give us faith.

God commands you to believe; and, so long as you do not believe, you are making him a liar, you are rejecting the truth, you are believing a lie; for unbelief is, in reality, the belief in a lie. Yes, God commands you to believe; and your not believing is your worst sin; and it is by exhibiting it as your worst sin, that God shuts you up to faith. Now, if you try to extenuate this sin; if you lay this flattering unction to your soul, that, by making all these earnest and laborious efforts to believe, you are lessening this awful sin, and rendering your unbelieving state a less guilty one; you are deluding your conscience, and thrusting away from you that divine hand which, by this conviction of unbelief, is shutting you up to faith.

I do not remember to have seen this better stated anywhere than in Fuller's "Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation." I give just a few sentences: - "It is the duty of ministers not only to exhort their carnal hearers to believe in Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls, but it is at our peril to exhort them to anything short of it, or which does not involve or imply it. We have sunk into such a compromising way of dealing with the unconverted, as to have well nigh lost the spirit of the primitive preachers; and hence it is that sinners of every description can sit so quietly as they do in our places of worship. Christ and his apostles, without any hesitation, called on sinners to repent and believe the gospel; but we, considering them as poor, impotent, and depraved creatures, have been disposed to drop this part of the Christian ministry. Considering such things as beyond the powers of their hearers, they seem to have contented themselves with pressing on them the things they could perform, still continuing enemies of Christ; such as behaving decently in society, reading the Scriptures, and attending the means of grace. Thus it is that hearers of this description sit at ease in our congregations. But as this implies no guilt on their part, they sit unconcerned, conceiving that all that is required of them is to lie in the way and wait the Lord's time. But is this the religion of the Scriptures? Where does it appear that the prophets or apostles treated that kind of inability, which is merely the effect of reigning aversion, as affording any excuse? And where have they descended in their exhortations to things which might be done, and the parties still continue the enemies of God? Instead of leaving out everything of a spiritual nature, because their hearers could not find in their hearts to comply with it, it may be safely affirmed that they exhorted to nothing else, treating such inability not only as of no account with regard to the lessening of obligation, but as rendering the subjects of it worthy of the severest rebuke."...Repentance toward God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, are allowed to be duties, but not immediate duties. The sinner is considered as unable to comply with them, and therefore they are not urged upon him; but instead of them, he is directed to pray for the Holy Spirit to enable him to repent and believe! This, it seems, he can do, notwithstanding the aversion of his heart from everything of the kind. But if any man be required to pray for the Holy Spirit, it must be either sincerely and in the name of Jesus, or insincerely and in some other way. The latter, I suppose, will be allowed to be an abomination in the sight of God; he cannot, therefore, be required to do this; and as to the former, it is just as difficult and as opposite to the carnal heart as repentance and faith themselves. Indeed, it amounts to the same thing; for a sincere desire after a spiritual blessing, presented in the name of Jesus, is no other than the prayer of faith."

The great thing which I would press upon our conscience is the awful guilt that there is in unbelief. Continuance in unbelief is continuance in the very worst of sins; and continuance in it because (as you say) you cannot help it, is the worst aggravation of your sin. The habitual drunkard says, he cannot help it; the habitual swearer says, he cannot help it; the habitual unbeliever says, he cannot help it. Do you admit the drunkard's excuse? Or do you not tell him that it is the worst feature of his case, and that he ought to be utterly ashamed of himself for using such a plea? Do you say, I know you can't give up your drunken habits, but you can go and pray to God to enable you to give up these habits, and perhaps God will hear you and enable you to do so. What would this be but to tell him to go on drinking and praying alternately; and that, possibly, God may hear his drunken prayers, and give him sobriety? You would not deal with drunkenness in this way; ought you to deal thus with unbelief? Ought you not to press home the unutterable guilt of unbelief; and to show a sinner that, when he says I can't help my unbelief, he is uttering his most dreadful condemnation, and saying, I can't help distrusting God, I can't help hating God, I can't help making God a liar; and that he might just as well say, I can't help stealing and lying, and swearing.

Never let unbelief be spoken of as a misfortune. It is awfully sinful; and its root is the desperate wickedness of the heart. How resolutely evil must that heart be, when it will not even believe! For this depravity of soul and need of a heavenly Quickener, cannot palliate our unbelief, or make it less truly the sin of sins. If our helplessness and hardness of heart lessened our guilt, then the more wicked we became, the less guilty we should be. The sinner who loves sin so much that he cannot part with it, is the most guilty of all. The man who says, I cannot love God, is proclaiming himself one of the worst of sinners; but he who says, I cannot even believe, is taking to himself a guilt which we may truly call the darkest and most damnable of all.

BELIEVE JUST NOW

Oh, the unutterable guilt involved even in one moment's unbelief - one single act of an unbelieving soul! How much more in the continuous unbelief of twenty or sixty years! To steal once is bad enough, how much more to be a thief by habit and repute! We think it bad enough when a man is overtaken with drunkenness; how much more when we have to say of him, he is never sober. Such is our charge against the man who has not yet known Christ. He is a continuous unbeliever. His life is one unbroken course of unbelief, and hence of false worship, if he worships at all.[24] Every new moment is a new act of unbelief; a new commission of the worst of sins; the sin of sins; a sin in comparison with which stealing and drunkenness, and murder, awful as they are, becomes as trifles.

Let the thought of this guilt, Oh, anxious soul, cut your conscience to the quick! Oh! tremble as you think of what it is to be, not for a day or an hour, but for a whole lifetime, an unbelieving man!