

~Other Speakers S-Z: Alexander Whyte:

'Sin poisons all our enjoyments.' —Rutherford.

Jean Brown was one of the selectest associates of the famous Rutherford circle. We do not know so much of Jean Brown outside of the Rutherford Letters as we would like to know, but her son, John Brown of Wamphray, is very well known to every student of the theology and ecclesiastical history of Scotland in the second half of the seventeenth century. 'I rejoice to hear about your son John. I had always a great love to dear John Brown. Remember my love to John Brown. I never could get my love off that man.' And all Rutherford's esteem and affection for Jean Brown's gifted and amiable son was fully justified in the subsequent history of the hard-working and well-persecuted parish minister of Wamphray. Letter 81 is a very remarkable piece of writing even in Rutherford, and the readers of this letter would gladly learn more than even its eloquent pages tell them about the woman who could draw such a letter out of Samuel Rutherford's mind and heart, the woman who was also the honoured mother of such a student and such a minister as John Brown of Wamphray. This letter has a bite in it—to use one of Rutherford's own words in the course of it—all its own. And it is just that profound and pungent element in this letter, that bite in it, that has led me to take this remarkable letter for my topic to-night.

There had been some sin in Samuel Rutherford's student days, or some stumble sufficiently of the nature of sin, to secretly poison the whole of his subsequent life. Sin is such a poisonous thing that even a mustard-seed of it planted in a man's youth will sometimes spring up into a thicket of terrible trouble both to himself and to many other people all his and all their days. An almost invisible drop of sin let fall into the wellhead of life will sometimes poison the whole broad stream of life, as well as all the houses and fields and gardens, with all their flowers and fruits, that are watered out of it.

When any misfortune falls upon a Hebrew household, when any Jewish man or woman's sin finds them out, they say that there is an ounce of the golden calf on it. They open their Exodus and they read there in their bitterness of how Moses in his hot anger took the calf, which the children of Israel had polluted themselves with, and burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strewed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel to drink of it. And, though God turned the poisoned, dust-laden waters of Samuel Rutherford's life into very milk and wine, yet to Rutherford's subtle and detective taste there was always a certain tang of the unclean and accursed thing in it. The best waled and most tenderly substituted cross in Rutherford's chastised life had always a certain galling corner in it that recalled to him, as he bled inwardly under it, the lack of complete purity and strict regularity in his youth.

And it is to be feared that there are but too few men or women either who have not some Rutherford-like memory behind them that still clouds their now sheltered life and secretly poisons their good conscience. Some disingenuity, some simulation or dissimulation of affection, some downright or constructive dishonesty, some lack towards some one of open and entire integrity, some breach of good faith in spirit if not in letter, some still stinging trespass of the golden rule, some horn or hoof of the golden calf, the bitter dust of which they taste to this day in their sweetest cup and at their most grace-spread table. There are more men and women in the Church of Christ than any one would believe who sing with a broken heart at every communion table: He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us.

And even after such men and women might have learned a lesson, how soon we see all that lesson forgotten. Even after God's own hand has so conspicuously cut the bars of iron in sunder; after He has made the solitary to dwell in families; we still see sin continuing in new shapes and in other forms to poison the sweetest things in human life. What selfishness we see in family life, and that, too, after the vow and the intention of what self-suppression and self-denial. What impatience with one another, what bad temper, what cruel and cutting words, what coldness and rudeness and neglect, in how many ways our abiding sinfulness continues to poison the sweetest springs of life! And, then, how soon such unhappy men begin to see themselves reproduced and multiplied in their children. How many fathers see, with a secret bitterness of spirit that never can be told, their own worst vices of character and conduct reproduced and perpetuated in their children! One father sees his constitutional and unextirpated sensuality coming out in the gluttony, the drunkenness, and the lust of his son; while another sees his pride, his moroseness, his kept-up anger and his cruelty all coming out in one who is his very image. While many a mother sees her own youthful shallowness, frivolity, untruthfulness, deceit and parsimony in her daughter, for whose morality and religion she would willingly give up her own soul.

And then our children, who were to be our staff and our crown, so early take their own so wilful and so unfilial

way in life. They betake themselves, for no reason so much as just for intended disobedience and impudent independence, to other pursuits and pleasures, to other political and ecclesiastical parties than we have ever gone with. And when it is too late we see how we have again mishandled and mismanaged our families as we had mishandled and mismanaged our own youth, till it is only one grey head here and another there that does not go down to the grave under a crushing load of domestic sorrow. When the best things in life are so poisoned by sin, how bitter is that poison!

If an unpoisoned youth and an unembittered family life are some of the sweetest things this earth can taste, then a circle of close and true and dear friendships does not come very far behind them. Rutherford had plenty of trouble in his family life that he used to set down to the sins of his youth; and then the way he poisoned so many of his best friendships by his so poisonous party spirit is a humbling history to read. He quarrelled irreconcilably with his very best friends over matters that were soon to be as dead as Aaron's golden calf, and which never had much more life or decency in them. The matters were so small and miserable over which Rutherford quarrelled with such men as David Dickson and Robert Blair that I could not interest you in them at this time of day even if I tried. They were as parochial, as unsubstantial, and as much made up of prejudice and ill-will as were some of those matters that have served under Satan to poison so often our own private and public and religious life. Rutherford actually refused to assist Robert Blair at the Lord's Supper, so embittered and so black was his mind against his dearest friend. 'I would rather,' said sweet-tempered Robert Blair, 'have had my right hand hacked off at the cross of Edinburgh than have written such things.' 'My wife and I,' wrote dear John Livingstone, 'have had more bitterness together over these matters than we have ever had since we knew what bitterness was.' And no one in that day had a deeper hand in spreading that bitterness than just the hand that wrote Rutherford's letters. There is no fear of our calling any man master if we once look facts fair in the face.

The precariousness of our best friendships, the brittle substance out of which they are all composed and constructed, and the daily accidents and injuries to which they are all exposed—all this is the daily distress of all true and loving hearts. What a little thing will sometimes embitter and poison what promised to be a loyal and lifelong friendship! A passing misunderstanding about some matter that will soon be as dead to us both as the Resolutions and Protestations of Rutherford's day now are to all men; an accidental oversight; our simple indolence in letting an absent friendship go too much out of repair for want of a call, or a written message, or a timely gift: a thing that only a too scrupulous mind would go the length of calling sin, will yet poison an old friendship and embitter it beyond all our power again to sweeten it.

And, then, how party spirit poisons our best enjoyments as it did Rutherford's. How all our minds are poisoned against all the writers and the speakers, the statesmen and the journalists of the opposite camp, and even against the theologians and preachers of the opposite church. And, then, inside our own camp and church how new and still more malignant kinds of poison begin to distil out of our incurably wicked hearts to eat out the heart of our own nearest and dearest friendships. Envy, for one thing, which no preacher, not even Pascal or Newman, no moralist, no satirist, no cynic has yet dared to tell the half of the horrible truth about: drip, drip, drip, its hell-sprung venom soaks secretly into the oldest, the dearest and the truest friendship. Yes, let it be for once said, the viper-like venom of envy—the most loyal, the most honourable, the most self-forgetting and self-obliterating friendship is never in this life for one moment proof against it. We live by admiration; yes, but even where we admire our most and live our best this mildew still falls with its deadly damp. What did you suppose Rutherford meant when he wrote as he did write about himself and about herself to that so capable and so saintly woman, Jean Brown? Do you accuse Samuel Rutherford of unmeaning cant? Was he mouthing big Bible words without any meaning? Or, was he not drinking at that moment of the poison-filled cup of his own youthful, family, and friendship sins? Nobody will persuade me that Rutherford was a canting hypocrite when he wrote those terrible and still unparaphrased words: 'Sin sin, this body of sin and corruption embittereth and poisoneth all our enjoyments. Oh that I were home where I shall sin no more!'

Puritan was an English nickname rather than a Scottish, but our Scots Presbyterians were Puritans at bottom like their English brethren both in their statesmanship and in their churchmanship, as well as in their family and personal religion. And they held the same protest as the English Puritans held against the way in which the scandalous corruptions of the secular court, and the equally scandalous corruptions of the sacred bench, were together fast poisoning the public enjoyments of England and of Scotland. You will hear cheap, shallow, vinous speeches at public dinners and suchlike resorts about the Puritans, and about how they denounced so much of the literature and the art of that day.

When, if those who so find fault had but the intelligence and the honesty to look an inch beneath the surface of things they would see that it was not the Puritans but their persecutors who really took away from the serious-minded people of Scotland and England both the dance and the drama, as well as so many far more

important things in that day. Had the Puritans and their fathers always had their own way, especially in England, those sources of public and private enjoyment would never have been poisoned to the people as they were and are, and that cleft would never have been cut between the conscience and some kinds of culture and delight which still exists for so many of the best of our people. Charles Kingsley was no ascetic, and his famous North British article, 'Plays and Puritans,' was but a popular admission of what a free and religious-minded England owes on one side of their many-sided service to the Puritans of that impure day. Christina Rossetti is no Calvinist, but she puts the Calvinistic and Puritan position about the sin-poisoned enjoyments of this life in her own beautiful way: 'Yes, all our life long we shall be bound to refrain our soul, and keep it low; but what then? For the books we now forbear to read we shall one day be endued with wisdom and knowledge. For the music we will not now listen to we shall join in the song of the redeemed. For the pictures from which we turn we shall gaze unabashed on the beatific vision. For the companionship we shun we shall be welcomed into angelic society and the companionship of triumphant saints. For the amusements we avoid we shall keep the supreme jubilee. For all the pleasure we miss we shall abide, and for ever abide, in the rapture of heaven.'

All through Rutherford's lifetime preaching was his chiefest enjoyment and his most exquisite delight. He was a born preacher, and his enjoyment of preaching was correspondingly great. Even when he was removed from Anwoth to St. Andrews, where, what with his professorship and principalship together, one would have thought that he had his hands full enough, he yet stipulated with the Assembly that he should be allowed to preach regularly every Sabbath-day. But sin, again, that dreadful, and, to Rutherford, omnipresent evil, poisoned all his preaching also and made it one of the heaviest burdens of his conscience and his heart and his life. There is a proverb to the effect that when the best things become corrupt then that is corruption indeed. And so Rutherford discovered it to be in the matter of his preaching. Do what he would, Rutherford, like Shepard, could not keep the thought of what men would think out of his weak and evil mind, both before, and during, but more especially after his preaching. And that poisoned and corrupted and filled the pulpit with death to Rutherford, in a way and to a degree that nobody but a self-seeking preacher will believe or understand. Rutherford often wondered that he had not been eaten up of worms in his pulpit like King Herod on his throne, and that for the very same atheistical and blasphemous reason.

Those in this house who have followed all this with that intense and intelligent sympathy that a somewhat similar experience alone will give, will not be stumbled to read what Rutherford says in his letter to his near neighbour, William Glendinning: 'I see nothing in this life but sin, sin and the sour fruits of sin. O what a miserable bondage it is to be at the nod and beck of Sin!' Nor will they wonder to read in his letter to Lady Boyd, that she is to be sorry all her days on account of her inborn and abiding corruptions. Nor, again, that he himself was sick at his heart, and at the very yolk of his heart, at sin, dead-sick with hatred and disgust at sin, and correspondingly sick with love and longing after Jesus Christ. Nor, again, that he awoke ill every morning to discover that he had not yet awakened in his Saviour's sinless likeness.

Nor will you wonder, again, at the seraphic flights of love and worship that Samuel Rutherford, who was so poisoned with sin, takes at the name and the thought of his divine Physician. For to Rutherford that divine Physician has promised to come 'the second time without sin unto salvation.' The first time He came He sucked the poison of sin out of the souls of sinners with His own lips, and out of all the enjoyments that He had sanctified and prepared for them in heaven. And He is coming back—He has now for a long time come back and taken Rutherford home to that sanctification that seemed to go further and further away from Rutherford the longer he lived in this sin-poisoned world. And, amongst all those who are now home in heaven, I cannot think there can be many who are enjoying heaven with a deeper joy than Samuel Rutherford's sheer, solid, uninterrupted, unadulterated, and unmitigated joy.