

~Other Speakers M-R: Thomas Reade:

34. ON PASSIVE IMPRESSIONS AND ACTIVE HABITS

It is very important to distinguish rightly between passive impressions and active habits. We are continually liable to receive impressions of one kind or another—impressions of love and aversion; joy and grief; hope and fear. A pleasing representation of a person produces a favorable impression upon the mind, bordering upon love. How common to hear it said, "Your description makes me quite love him;" and yet this is often but a mere impression. The description and the feeling are soon lost in the succeeding objects which crowd upon the mind. Thus, many people are deeply impressed by awful representations of the day of judgment and the horrors of hell, who yet never break off from their sins, or turn truly to God.

We often hear of an impressive sermon; a sermon calculated deeply to affect the mind and heart of the congregation. And yet, how seldom do we hear of conversions, which are the consequences of abiding impressions, producing active habits. It is a truth, that impressions, if only passive, and forming no active habits in the soul, lose their power by repetition.

Hence many people, who were much affected when first they heard the Gospel, and, in consequence, made some considerable profession; yet, owing to this impression being simply passive, and not leading to the formation of gracious habits in the soul, have become, by degrees, so Gospel-hardened, that the sharpest rebuke, as well as the most affectionate entreaty, has lost its edge and influence on their minds: they hear as though they heard not. This view of the subject may lead us to distinguish between what is the operation of natural causes, and what is the operation of the Spirit of God.

Impressions, however strong at the time, if merely the result of lively description upon the imagination, will soon wear away, as the imagination loses the vivid coloring which fascinated it; just as the beautiful tints of an evening sky gradually disappear, as the sun retires beneath the horizon.

But the impressions made on the soul by the Spirit of God, being of a nature peculiar to themselves, produce an immediate change (though apparently small at first) on the views and feelings of the person affected; which, deepening by repetition, form those active habits that give a new character to the whole man.

Hatred of sin; a holy fear of God; love to the Savior; joy in the Holy Spirit; delight in holiness; patience under suffering; and deadness to the world, are the result of those saving, quickening impressions, which are made on the heart by the almighty energy of the Divine Spirit.

When this is the case, the same subjects which at first impressed, continue to impress. The habits of the soul become more active and holy. Faith waxes stronger; love abounds yet more and more; hope becomes more lively; and obedience in heart and life more regular and delightful.

But the same subjects are heard with complete indifference after a time, when the impressions are passive, and occasioned by the simple effect of natural eloquence on the mind.

This proves that no oratory, however fascinating; can truly reach the heart, or produce gracious habits in the soul if unaccompanied by a divine power. The understanding may be convinced, the conscience may tremble; but the affections can never be firmly fixed upon God, through the power of human eloquence, or the arts of moral persuasion.

"A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you," is both the promise and work of almighty love. Popular ministers of the Gospel, who gather crowds of admiring auditors around them, may learn from this subject both humility and dependance.

No eloquence of language, no force of expression, no pathetic appeals to the emotions, can produce one saving impression upon that adamant rock which lies within the human breast. He who commanded Moses to strike the rock, must graciously accompany the stroke with his supernatural power, or the waters of true contrition will never flow.

The humble and comparatively weak instrument may from hence take encouragement; knowing that it is not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord, that Satan is dislodged from his stronghold, and the sinner saved.

The weakest instrument becomes effective, in proportion to the skill and power of him who wields it. Hence, Infinite Wisdom is pleased, in general, to employ the weak things of the world, to confound the things that are mighty, that no flesh may glory in his presence.

Instances not infrequently occur, in the experience of faithful ministers, of sermons, which they had rejected for their supposed lack of good style and arrangement, but which they afterwards preached, for lack of time to write better, being made the blessed instruments of fastening conviction on the conscience, and leading the sinner to the cross of Christ; while many an elaborate discourse, on which they had bestowed hours of thought, and from which they expected great results, produced no other effect than that of drawing forth flattering commendation or critical remarks.

We are taught in the word of God not to despise the day of small things, nor to lean unto our own understanding, nor trust to an arm of flesh. Those holy precepts operated powerfully on the mind and practice

of the great apostle to the gentiles. "I came not," said he to the Corinthians, "with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God; for I determined not to know anything among you, but Jesus Christ and him crucified. My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God!"

And again, to the Thessalonians he writes, "As we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the Gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God which tries our hearts; for neither at any time used we flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak of covetousness, God is witness."

And while declaring that the Gospel came not unto them in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance, he rejoiced that they received the word, which they heard of him, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually works in those who believe.

Thus I am taught, that while the ambassadors of Christ are willing to spend and be spent in the blessed work of proclaiming the Gospel of peace; it is God alone who can give efficacy to the word of his grace, according to the purpose of his own will; for his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure.

Let me then learn to cease from depending on man. May all my expectations be from God, whose power change the heart, and who can form a people unto himself; who shall show forth his praise. "Lord, preserve me from transient feelings and momentary impressions. Give me a deep and an abiding conviction of the evil of sin; a growing love for the blessed Savior; and an increasing relish for holy duties. May I be rooted and grounded in love; established and built up in Christ: and thus enabled to hold the beginning of my confidence steadfast unto the end. The habitual frame of my heart, and the daily tenor of my life, will then prove the genuineness of my faith, and keep me, through the power of the indwelling Spirit, from those awful falls, which bring such misery on false professors, and cause so many to stumble, and forsake the right way of the Lord.

Give me, Oh Lord, that holy fear,
That constant dread of sin;
The brightest evidence of grace,
Of light and love within.
Guide me along the narrow way,
Conduct me by your grace
To Jesus, my almighty friend,
The sinner's hiding-place.
Oh! for a seraph's tongue to speak
The praises of my God;
Lord, fit my heart to sing your praise
In heaven, your blest abode.
Until then, I would in lisping notes
Chant forth your matchless love;
Adore you in the church below
Then join the church above.