

~Other Speakers M-R: Thomas Reade:

## 72. ON TRUE RELIGION

True religion neither courts the observation, nor seeks the applause of men. It grows and thrives most in retirement. Its effects, indeed, are widely felt, and its blessings extensively diffused; but its salutary streams are fed by communion with God, by holy meditation, fervent prayer, and much converse with the holy Scriptures. It aims at the glory of God. Jesus Christ is its sum and substance; and to promote the happiness of the whole human race, is its delightful occupation.

True religion is the very opposite to hypocrisy and formality. It is made up of truth and sincerity, and its love is without pretense. It hates every false glare, all ostentatious parade, all desire to be seen; and labors to approve itself to Him who looks at the heart, and examines the motives of men.

True religion is founded on the truth of God's holy word. There, man is declared to do not be only guilty, but unable to save himself; and wholly indebted to the sovereign grace of God for life and salvation. To know God in his word, to love him in the heart, and to honor him in the life, is the daily work of every real believer. Hence, to love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, is the essence of true religion.

Many fatally deceive themselves respecting the nature of genuine Christianity.

True religion does not consist in having a name to live; a reputation for godliness. "You have a name that you live, and are dead."

It does not consist in outward forms, however excellent. "Having the form of godliness, but denying the power thereof; from such turn away." "The kingdom of God is not food and drink; but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

It does not consist in attending divine ordinances. "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." "My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain."

It does not consist in outward profession. "They profess that they know God, but in works deny him."

It does not consist in the mere performance of moral duties. "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

It does not consist in head knowledge, great gifts, liberality to the poor, or even martyrdom itself. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels; though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains; though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor; and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profits me nothing."

The religion of the Bible is pure, spiritual, experimental, and practical. It is the devotion of the heart; for God is a spirit, and requires those who worship him to worship him in spirit and in truth.

It is then evident, that the whole of evangelical religion may be summed up in four short words—"Faith working by love." Without love, faith is dead, like a tree destitute of sap. Without faith, love can have no existence; for the sap cannot exist, if the root be wanting. Good works are the blessed fruits of faith, and prove the existence and soundness both of faith and love.

God, in grace, as in nature, is the Creator of the root, the sap, and the fruit. He gives life and fertility. Without him, we are nothing, and can do nothing. Hence, believers are called "trees of righteousness, of the Lord's planting, that he may be glorified;"—and branches in Jesus Christ, the true vine; who has said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he that abides in me and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without me, you can do nothing."

True religion is exemplified in the conscientious discharge of all the social and relative duties. It fills the domestic circle with peace; and every community where it reigns, with unity and concord.

The Christian's life is a life of desire and enjoyment. His desires are ever on the wing towards Jesus, and at times he enjoys the smiles of his Savior, which gladden his heart, and quicken his desires after a perpetual increase of this blessedness.

He pants continually after true happiness in the exercise of true religion; and every taste of this sweet refreshing fountain, while it alleviates his thirst after earthly pleasures, only serves to increase his desires after more spiritual communion with his God and Savior. Thus he proceeds, until his most enlarged desire is satisfied in that blessed region where all the saints are led to living fountains of water, proceeding from the living God.

How little is the Christian's life known by the world in general! How little is it valued even by those who profess to esteem it! How true the apostolic declaration; "All men seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's." The warrior, pursuing fame even to the pinnacle of glory, braving all the horrors of the blood-stained field; the man of letters, deeply entrenched in ponderous folios, seeking by research to immortalize his name; the busy merchant, stretching out his arms, and holding in his wide embrace a world of traffic to enlarge his fortune and enrich his family; ten thousand times ten thousand human beings of every rank and station, all feel,

while unrenewed, a secret wish that Scripture truth may not be true. Else why dispute the plain, yet awful declarations of the word of God? Why argue, contradict, and gainsay, yes, deny the solemn revelation of his will, whose word is truth, whose nature is unchangeable, whose counsel shall stand, and who will do all his pleasure?

How inveterate is the natural enmity of the human heart to true religion! Hence every call from earth to heaven is neglected and despised. The heart, deeply rooted in the earth, derives its nourishment from thence; and finds no relish in enjoyments or pursuits, which stretch beyond the boundaries of time, or bid the worldly mind forsake the groveling pleasures of this passing scene.

The religion of Jesus is unalterable in its very nature. It is founded on the perfections of Jehovah, and on the necessities of man. Its promises and precepts, its prospects and privileges, are the same now, as they ever were. Then why is the face of the Christian world so changed? It is owing to the prevalence of that evil heart of unbelief against which Paul so feelingly cautions the Hebrew converts; and which occasions our present luke-warmness, slothfulness, and departure from God.

There are four evils which mark the decayed state of Christians in general; their love of the world—<sup>À</sup>their love of ease—<sup>À</sup>their fear of man—<sup>À</sup>their distrust of providence. The primitive believers were just the reverse of all this. They despised the world, and its flattering allurements; they took up the cross, and denied themselves; they boldly confessed Christ, and suffered for his sake; they trusted God for all things, and so took joyfully the spoiling of their goods. And what was the blessed fruit? They abounded in consolation; they grew in grace; they shone as lights in the world; they felt joy and peace in believing.

But now we see professing Christians, even many of whom we charitably hope well, languid in their graces, timid in their confession, fearful of consequences, and fearful of offending. Sad symptoms these, of spiritual decay! Hence the spirit of the Gospel is not exhibited. Its character is not exemplified, and Christ is not glorified.

No marvel that the work of evangelizing the world has proceeded so slowly, since the power of true religion is so little felt by the bulk of professing Christians. An awful charge of guilt thus rests upon the visible Church of Christ. But as the Church is composed of individual members, so each must take his share of criminal supineness and neglect. And you, Oh my soul, must stand condemned before that gracious Savior, whose love demands the exercise of all those powers which he himself bestowed upon you. Oh that the Lord may quicken his people, and revive his work in the midst of the days!

Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me." This cross is heavy to bear when earthly affections, or pride, or unbelief work in the heart. But when the heart is filled with love to the Savior, then the greatest cross is light, and even pleasant to endure. Thus the apostles "counted it all joy, when they fell into diverse temptations." They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus. Multitudes of loving believers gloried in tribulation, and sealed the truth with their blood. If Christianity can effect such wonders in the hearts of sinners, how powerful, and yet how beautiful, is true religion!

As God will be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty unto the remnant of his people; so his people shall be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of their God. But while we admire the work of grace, it is to be deeply deplored that the world has made such sad inroads into the territories of the visible church.

The love of ease, of splendor, of worldly distinction, of family comforts, has greatly destroyed that spirit of martyrdom which should practically operate in every believer in Jesus.

Every Christian should be a martyr in spirit. He should be ready to leave all, and sacrifice all for Christ. That excellent reformer Oecolampadius, writing to a friend, said, "The greatest happiness of this life is to venture for the sake of Christ." Many will venture their all in some profitable speculation, which promises a large increase of worldly property. But happy indeed is that man who can venture all for Christ in faith and love. He may lose all that the world calls great and good; but he shall receive, through the merits of the Redeemer, a crown of glory which fades not away.

It is easy to rejoice at the bestowment of temporal favors, and sometimes of spiritual mercies; but are we as ready to render thanks unto the Lord for pains and trials, for losses and crosses, endured for righteousness' sake, or in the wise dispensations of a good and unerring Providence?

Now the apostolic command is, "in every thing give thanks." But Oh! how little of this primitive spirit is there among us. Who can bear with joy the loss of all things for Christ's sake? Who can glory in tribulation?

"Blessed Lord! pour out your Holy Spirit upon your drooping church, that it may flourish like grain and blossom like grapevines." Oh that I may sit loosely to the world and its passing enjoyments, and be ready to arise and follow you wheresoever you call me, either to labor or endure. Make me sincerely thankful for hourly mercies; and with these mercies, be pleased to bestow a heart weaned from creature comforts, and supremely devoted unto you. Increase in me true religion; that so, amid the manifold and sundry changes of the world, my heart may surely there be fixed, where alone true joys are to be found. Give me that spiritual perception, and that spiritual relish for heavenly truths, which are the experience and portion of your children here, and which form the delightful foretaste of their eternal blessedness in the world to come."

**ON TRUE RELIGION**

**Oh! you in whom all comfort lies,  
The source of all my inward joys;  
To you I look, to you I call,  
My only hope, my life, my all.  
With you, Oh God, is holy peace;  
Your flowing mercies never cease;  
They fill the spacious courts above  
With odors sweet of grace and love.  
Blest Savior, with delight I dwell  
On themes no mortal tongue can tell;  
The glory of your cross exceeds  
All human, all angelic deeds.  
Oh! may the love which brought you down  
Continue still your work to crown;  
Until every nation shall confess  
Your grace, your blood, and righteousness.**