

~Other Speakers M-R: Thomas Reade:

42. THE DANGER OF EXTREMES IN MEN'S ESTIMATE OF HUMAN NATURE

"To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no light in them." Isaiah 8:20

People, in general, are acquainted with almost everything but themselves. The common affairs of life are thoroughly understood; and the various characters of mankind are freely canvassed. They seem to be everywhere at home, but in their own hearts. There, they are strangers. They know all men, but themselves. From this self-ignorance arises a great deal of self-conceit. As "all men think all men mortal but themselves," so do they esteem themselves to be wiser than others. "We are they who ought to speak," is the language of their hearts, if not always of their lips.

Pride and vain-glory are the natural products of the human heart. They grow with luxuriance in nature's soil. Surely it is most important to observe the state of our own minds. The great things of God, like himself, are unchangeable. The realities of the invisible world are always the same. Death and Judgment, Heaven and Hell, are now as they were when Adam sinned. If we are, at one time, deeply impressed with the view of eternity, and with the relation which every thing in us and around us bears to eternity and if, at another time, these considerations make but slight impressions upon our minds, what inference must we draw? Not that ETERNITY has become less important in itself, or less real in its bearings on our future destiny, but that our hearts have become less sensible of its importance. Should this insensibility continue, its deadening effects would increase, until we would, at length, hear with indifference, those very truths which once awakened all our solicitude, and set in motion all our apprehensions.

I see, therefore, the need for watching against this natural declension of the heart from God; and for praying constantly for the influences of the Holy Spirit, to preserve my mind in a solemn, practical, yet lively, frame.

O God, my inmost soul convert!

And deeply on my thoughtful heart

Eternal things impress;

Give me to feel their solemn weight,

And tremble on the brink of fate,

And wake to righteousness.

Everything around me is calculated to deaden the heart, and everything within me naturally opposes the work of grace. Blessed Lord! all saving, abiding impressions, are from you. Melt my hard heart; and mold it to your will. Enlighten my dark mind; and fill it with your truth. Keep me from the path of error, from proud reasoning; from false and perverted views of my real condition, as a fallen, ruined creature, lying under your curse, and deserving of everlasting fire. Lead me to the Savior; unite my soul to him; and make me a monument of your everlasting love.

Men are apt to run into extremes, especially in matters of religion. The opinions held by different religionists are as widely separated as the Arctic is from the Antarctic Circle. The ever-varying sentiments of mankind resemble the inhabitants on our globe; they are of different hues, and different dialects; yes, they are often the very antitheses of each other. Hence arise controversies and contentions, strifes and heart-burnings, to the disgrace of religion, and the triumph of scoffing infidels. The Church of Rome, indeed, boasts of her unity, but it is the unity of error, perpetuated by the assumed infallibility of that apostate church. With her, Truth has fallen, and cannot enter within her portals. All who dare to hold the torch of truth, must be either tortured on the rack, or be consumed by the flaming faggots of her spiritual despotism. Such was her conduct in the plenitude of her power. How soon that power may regain its deadly influence is known only to Him who has said, "Repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of his place, except you repent." Oh! that Protestant Britain may listen to the Savior's voice, before the vial be poured out for our abuse of his unspeakable mercies.

There are two extremes into which men are apt to run, when speaking of the present condition of mankind. Some extol the native powers of the human soul to such a degree, that one would imagine they had never heard or read of the Fall; or that they had resided among a race of mortals allied in power and spirit to the angels above. They talk of good hearts, and good intentions, and good dispositions, and good actions, and good everything. They magnify the power of the will, as if it could accomplish all that is great and noble. They eulogize the powers of the mind, as if they were equal to fathom the deepest, or to reach the loftiest subjects, in

natural and revealed religion.

Others there are, who, in their zeal to debase human nature, make man no better than a mere machine, acted upon by a dire necessity; so that every sinful action, instead of being the product of his own rebellious will, and thus deserving of eternal punishment, is attributed to some secret impulse, over which the man has no control. He does, what he does, because, as they express it, "He is fated to do it." Such doctrine opens the flood-gate of iniquity. If men can believe that they are not responsible for their conduct, they are prepared for every work which Satan urges them to perform.

These two statements are equally opposed to the Scriptures of Truth. The path of truth lies between the two extremes. To those who unduly extol human nature, I would say- Man is a fallen creature, yet still possessing some relics of his original glory. He is endowed with an immortal spirit; with a mind which can soar among the stars, measure their distances, and span their mighty bulk. He is like 'a palace in ruins'. The powers of the human mind are indeed vast, when exercised upon natural things. How wonderfully has Newton discovered the laws which regulate and govern our solar system. With what discriminating judgment has Locke unfolded the various faculties of the understanding. All this proves that man, though fallen, is a being far superior to the rest of animated nature. He can look before and after. He can reason, reflect, and draw conclusions.

Yet, his natural understanding is dark respecting the things of God. His will is averse from the will of God. His affections recoil from the holy law of God. The pride of his reason rises against "the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh." He spurns at the sublimity of those evangelical doctrines which are calculated to humble him in the dust, and to exalt the Redeemer on the throne of his glory. Hence, it is evident, that "the world by wisdom knows not God;" that mere science, unaided by light from above, will never lead the philosopher to the foot of the Cross, or transform him into a little child, into an humble, docile learner in the school of Christ. Yet, blessed be God, his grace has accomplished even such a wonder as this!

Newton, the prince of philosophers, consecrated his master-mind to the service of religion, which has thrown a halo of glory around his name. He was of a very meek disposition, and a great lover of peace. To his other great qualities, he added a serious and devout reverence for religion. His favorite study was the Bible; the prophecies of which he illustrated by his researches. He conformed to the Church of England, but he lived in friendship with good men of all communions; and he was an enemy to every kind of persecution. It is beautiful to behold philosophy as the handmaid of religion, to see the loftiest scientific mind lowly bending at the foot of the Cross.

If it be asked, can unassisted reason find out God? Can it find out the Almighty to perfection? Paul has answered the question; "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Our spiritual ignorance, then, is so great through the Fall, and the enmity of our will to divine truth so bitter, that nothing can remove the one or destroy the other, but the Spirit of God himself. Whenever this operation takes place in the soul, it is altogether undeserved on the sinner's part, and consequently an act of sovereign grace on the part of the Almighty. Salvation is of the Lord. Destruction is from ourselves.

To those who represent man as a mere machine, acting from necessity, I would say, It is true man has no power to come to Christ for life and salvation, without the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit; but where arises this inability to come to Christ? Properly to understand this point, would prevent many fatal errors. Man does not labor under a natural incapacity, but under a moral inability in the performance of divine things. He who said, "No man can come to me, unless the Father, who has sent me, draws him," said also, "You will not come to me, that you might have life."

God made man perfect. He endowed him with an understanding capable of contemplating the Author of his existence; with a will ready to obey his commandments; with affections to love him and delight in him; with a memory to retain whatever things were pure and lovely; with speech to extol and praise him; and with a body in every way calculated to promote the end and design of his creation.

When Adam fell through willful transgression, these various powers and faculties of soul and body became perverted and corrupt. The blinding, hardening nature of sin, in conjunction with the power which Satan had over him, through yielding to his temptation, was the sole cause of his inability to love and serve his Creator. The image of God, in which he was originally created, departed from him, and the image of the evil one was impressed upon him.

His mind became darkened; his heart, hardened; his will, obstinate; his affections, carnal; his memory, the storehouse of evil things; his tongue, an instrument of mischief; his whole body, polluted and unclean.

Thus man is an object of the divine displeasure, a child of wrath, an heir of hell! His opposition to the will of heaven arises from the deeply-rooted enmity of his will to God and goodness; and herein principally lies the guilt and turpitude of sin, whereby man renders himself peculiarly obnoxious to eternal holiness and justice. Is it not, then, evident that man does not perish from the want of any natural power or capacity to serve God, but from the determined opposition of his depraved and rebellious will to the rich grace and mercy so freely offered to him in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Describing the state of the heathen world, Paul declares, "Their foolish heart was darkened....God gave them up unto vile affections....God gave them over to a reprobate mind."

Take the most inveterate sinner, and ask him, Have you not an equal power of body to walk into the church, as into the tavern or the theater? Or, does all natural strength fail, as soon as the temple of God is proposed to be visited by you? Have you not as much power to read the Bible, as to read a novel and a newspaper? Or, do your eyes grow naturally dim the moment you open the sacred pages? Have you not as much power to beg of God to help you in time of need, as to seek it from an earthly friend in seasons of distress? Or, does some strange fit seize you at the moment of commencing prayer, and render you incapable of imploring aid?

The answer to these questions is self-evident. No one can say, that any sinner has a natural incapacity to perform these outward duties. Why, then, does he not perform them? Because he WILL NOT. The impediment lies solely in the will. His inability is altogether of a moral nature, and consequently he is without the least shadow of excuse.

It may be said, and scripturally so, that should the sinner perform these duties with ever so much exactness, yet, without the grace of God, ordinances, would be to him as "clouds without water;" as food, without nourishment; that the Bible would be as a sealed book, and prayer no better than an empty sound. This is true, for, by "grace are we saved," and not by any works of our own. Without Christ we can do nothing that is good; nothing that is acceptable, or well-pleasing unto God. But, is not this, I would ask, an additional argument why we should seek this help, and implore this salvation? Ought not this conviction of our helplessness to drive us to him who is almighty to deliver? And is not this salvation freely offered in the gospel to every seeking soul?

Oh! that men would but act in spiritual, as they do in temporal things. If they were as careful of the soul, as they are of the body, we would not be troubled with so many subtle distinctions, and disputations, about the freedom and bondage of the will; such extremes in setting forth the dignity and the debasement of man, such darkening of the plainest and simplest truths of the gospel. How strong are the exhortations of Paul to sleeping sinners; "Awake you that sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." "Awake to righteousness, and sin not."

Men scruple not to use the ordinary means for preserving the health of the body, and to apply proper medicines to restore it, when disordered. An efficacious remedy is gratefully received and carefully administered. Why are they less solicitous about their immortal souls? God has provided means of grace, and healing medicines, for every spiritual disease. There is balm in Gilead. There is a Physician there. Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? It is, because the remedy is not sought for, nor applied. And why is it not diligently used? Because men dislike the means which infinite wisdom has ordained for their recovery. They have no relish for them; no faith in them. They would rather remain in their state of natural corruption, and risk its consequences, than come to Christ, through the appointed means, to be saved out of it. Their language is, We love strangers, and after them will we go. We love our darling lusts, and will not part from them.

Throughout the Bible no mention is made of any secret decree of reprobation, sealing a portion of mankind to eternal death, irrespective of their character. Let no one, then, complain of natural incapacity, or of any necessity laid upon man to sin. The cause of human misery lies in man, and so does his destruction. The inveteracy of the will is the grand barrier between the sinner and Christ; and so strong is the current of the sinner's will to evil, that he cannot come to Christ, the Fountain of Holiness, in true faith and love, except the Father draws him by his grace and Spirit.

But yet, notwithstanding this, every man has a natural power to use the outward means and ordinances of the gospel. He can hear the preached word. He can read the Scriptures. He can offer up his daily supplications at a throne of grace, if not in words of his own, yet in suitable forms of prayer provided for him. Let these be duly and constantly performed on the warrant of the following delightful promises and assurances of God's holy word, and in due time a divine power will be communicated from on high. "If you seek the Lord your God, you shall find him, if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul." "Your heart shall live that seeks God." "Seek the Lord, until he comes and rains righteousness upon you." "The Lord is good unto those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him."

Men's Estimate of Human Nature

Let sinners only persist in the use of the appointed means of grace, waiting with patient hope and perseverance for the promised blessing, and "he that shall come will come, and will not tarry," "for the Lord never said unto the seed of Jacob, Seek you me in vain." No! the experience of all ages testifies to this sacred truth, that no one ever trusted in the Lord and was confounded.

Almighty God! who know the vileness of my nature, the stubbornness of my will, the darkness of my understanding, the depravity of my heart, and my proneness to seek for excuses to cover my sins. Stretch forth your mighty arm of salvation; and for your tender mercy's sake in Jesus Christ my Lord, enlighten my mind, rectify my perverse inclinations, regulate my disordered passions, and make me a new creature to the praise and glory of your grace. Impart a seeking spirit, to me your unworthy servant, and to every perishing sinner of mankind. Carry on, O Lord, your work of grace with power, until every soul is filled with gladness, and every mouth with praise; until Christ, the hope of glory, is formed in every heart; until all the world is subject to yours way.