

~Other Speakers M-R: Thomas Reade:

58. THE UNPROFITABLE NATURE OF EXTERNAL RELIGION, WHEN MADE A SUBSTITUTE FOR GODLINESS

"Having a form of godliness but denying its power." 2 Timothy 3:5

Gracious God! impress this truth upon every heart, that all who call themselves Christians may live under its saving influence— that externals of religion profit little. We may regularly attend the house of God; be stated communicants at the Lord's Table; observe with rigor the appointed fasts of the Church; use various austerities to mortify the flesh; be conscientiously strict in private devotion, and in family worship; be zealous for the Church in all its rites and ceremonies; be actively engaged in the management of religious and benevolent institutions; and yet, with all this External Religion, remain mere Formalists. Nothing is pleasing to God, nothing is vital in religion, but what springs from faith in Christ. Without love, all our doings are nothing worth.

O! then, what need we have to watch and pray, lest we should be deceiving ourselves, having only the form of godliness while denying its power. We may deceive ourselves and others, but the all-seeing God cannot be deceived. He looks at the heart. He weighs the spirits. Blessed Lord! show me my true state and character. Deliver me from a deceived heart, from formality and hypocrisy. Give me a single eye, make me upright and sincere before you.

Man is naturally legal and self-righteous. He is ever ready to substitute External Religion for godliness. The ancient Jews were continually reprov'd by their prophets on this very account. "I am sick of your sacrifices," says the Lord. "Don't bring me any more burnt offerings! I don't want the fat from your rams or other animals. I don't want to see the blood from your offerings of bulls and rams and goats. Why do you keep parading through my courts with your worthless sacrifices? The incense you bring me is a stench in my nostrils! Your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath day, and your special days for fasting— even your most pious meetings— are all sinful and false. I want nothing more to do with them. I hate all your festivals and sacrifices. I cannot stand the sight of them!"

True devotion cannot live in a sinful atmosphere, but formality can. This truth is verified in every age of the Church. Godliness has the promise of the life that now is. What a sweet assurance to the people of God. They shall have everything that can render this life truly happy; for, being the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, he will withhold nothing from those who is really for their good. Their sins are all forgiven through the blood of Christ. They are justified freely by his grace, and have peace with God. They are adopted into his family, and become heirs of his kingdom. They are made the temples of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in them, to enlighten, guide, sanctify, and comfort them on their way to Zion.

They may be hated and persecuted by the world; they may be often in heaviness through manifold temptations; they may often groan, being burdened; they may be frequently harassed by the enemy of souls, and by the rebellious lustings of indwelling sin; but they still have the promise of the life that now is. They shall have sweet seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord; they shall enjoy a pleasure to which the world is a stranger, a pleasure flowing from a close and abiding union to Christ their living Head, in whom dwells all the fullness of the godhead bodily, and out of whose fullness they shall receive continual supplies of grace and strength. They may be poor in temporal things, but Jesus will sweeten their little portion, while the rich have often gall and wormwood poured into their golden cup

O! my soul, are you looking unto Jesus? Are you longing to obtain an interest in his blood? Ah! what avail the gilded pomp and grandeur of the world? Do I want to be rich? Let me look at the end of the rich worldling who fared sumptuously every day, but when called into eternity, was cast into the lake of fire! Do I seek the praise of men and the honors of the world, Let me remember, that "whoever will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God;" that all who love the world, shall perish with the world when Christ shall come in flaming fire to take vengeance on all who will not have him to reign over them.

Do I pant after the pleasures of the world? Let me not forget, that all who now place their happiness in sinful gratifications shall feel the gnawing of the worm that never dies, and the torment of the fire which never shall be quenched. "Seek," then, O my soul, "those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." Labor to possess that godliness which has the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

Blessed truth; the promise of the life to come, is included in godliness. Oh! what a treasure, surpassing all the

riches of ten thousand worlds. Could I call the stars my own, this vast possession would dwindle to a pinpoint, when compared with the inconceivably glorious portion of the humblest believer. He is an heir of God, and a joint-heir with Christ. Death alone can reveal the fullness of this blessedness. Here we must live by faith. So did John— "Yes, dear friends, we are already God's children, and we can't even imagine what we will be like when Christ returns. But we do know that when he comes we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. And all who believe this will keep themselves pure, just as Christ is pure."

O! eternal Spirit of all grace, renew my soul in righteousness, and fill me with light and love. Preserve me from formality. Guard me against self-deception. Deliver me from false views of religion, and false marks of grace. Enable me to walk in the narrow way, and strengthen me to withstand the world, the flesh, and the devil; to confess you before men, to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints. O give me a new heart, that in simplicity and godly sincerity I may live a life of faith on earth, abound in the fruits of righteousness, and live a life of glory with you in heaven.

Though external religion, apart from godliness, profits little; yet, when connected with, and resulting from true piety, it profits much. Thus Paul declared to the Corinthians; "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved." His life, from the period of his conversion, was dedicated to the service of his Savior. He deemed no labor too great, no toil too severe, no privation too painful, if only he could extend the Redeemer's kingdom, and be made instrumental in bringing sinners to Christ. He exhorted the Roman Christians to active service "As you have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity, unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness, unto holiness." The Corinthians he also admonished; "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

His epistles abound with exhortations to activity in the cause of Christ, which may be summed up in the one addressed to the Hebrews; "For God is not unfair. He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other Christians, as you still do. Our great desire is that you will keep right on loving others as long as life lasts, in order to make certain that what you hope for will come true. Then you will not become spiritually dull and indifferent. Instead, you will follow the example of those who are going to inherit God's promises because of their faith and patience."

True believers are consecrated to the Lord. "Or don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body."

Surely this is one of the unsearchable riches of Christ. What an inconceivable honor for a poor worthless sinner to be made an habitation of God through the Spirit. For, "thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." Every true believer is therefore humble and contrite, because with such the high and lofty One condescends to dwell. "To this man," says the Lord, "will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at my word." Oh! how gracious is our God. He "is near unto those who are of a broken heart; and saves such as be of a contrite spirit." "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise," was the prayer of David, when he supplicated for mercy.

The true believer is clothed with humility. Being filled with self-abasing views, he cries out with Job; "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." And with Jacob; "I am not worthy of the least of all your mercies." Yes, with Paul he esteems himself to be "less than the least of all saints," the chief of sinners.

Oh! my soul, are these your feelings and views? Are you panting after Christ? Are you hungering and thirsting after righteousness? Is sin your burden? Is purity your delight?

The true believer in Jesus experiences more pleasure in crucifying a lust, than the sensualist does in gratifying it; which proves that the gospel, even in its most painful exercises, far exceeds the fleeting pleasures of sin. The pleasures of the wicked, if such they can be called, are like the transient meteor; while the enjoyments of the righteous resemble the shining light, which shines more and more unto the perfect day. The gratifications of the wicked, in the end, bite like a serpent and sting like an adder; but the felicities of the godly, flowing from faith in Christ, and communion with the Father through him, yield their sweetness in a dying hour. Truly, then, may we say with David; "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace." And with Solomon, "Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

Happy, indeed, is the man who can say, in humility and sincerity, I desire above all things to love Jesus, and to

repose my soul fully and entirely upon him. Where can I expect comfort, but from Him who is the fountain of felicity? Where can I find wisdom, but in Him in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge? Where can I obtain pardon and justification, but in and through Him who paid the price for my redemption, even his own most precious blood; and who obeyed that holy law, which demands a sinless obedience to all its requirements?

How beautiful, how glorious, is the plan of human redemption, which amply provides for the honor of God and the happiness of man. Well may angels desire to look into this mystery of grace. Surely nothing can more clearly prove the blinding, hardening, and rebellious nature of sin, than the manner in which this dispensation of mercy is received by a world of sinners. Jesus, the compassionate Jesus, daily knocks at the door of our hearts, and sweetly says, "If any man hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." A promise this, of delightful communion and enjoyment of his love. But what reception does he meet with? Do we hail his approach with gladness? Do we throw wide open the doors of a willing mind? Do we say, Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.

Alas! no. We ungratefully bar the doors against him, by unbelief, and pride, and the love of sin, as if he were coming to destroy our comfort, and to rob us of our peace. Oh! blind infatuation. Awful delusion! Jesus comes indeed to destroy our false comforts, and to remove our false peace. He comes to dislodge the strong man armed, and to save us from indwelling sin. He comes to dispel the darkness from our minds, to show us our true state and character, and to deliver us from that fatal security, by which we are bound. He comes to take away that self-love which conceals us from ourselves; which makes us fancy that all is safe and well, though there be but a step, and that a very short one too, between this destructive repose and everlasting torment.

Oh! how we should love this kind and heavenly Visitor, who comes to us on such an errand of love. Blessed Jesus! put forth your hand and touch my sin-sick soul. Speak the word only, and your servant shall be healed. Oh! all-gracious Redeemer, now that you are in heaven, your love and pity are the same; and my needs and weaknesses, my guilt and corruption, my helplessness and wretchedness, are so many pleaders with You to have mercy upon me! You have said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Lord, I am sick, heal me. You have said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Lord, I am a sinner; the chief of sinners. O save me! Grant unto me repentance unto life, that I may turn from every evil way to You, the only true and living God. Lord, the work is all your own, and the whole glory shall be yours. I will lay the crown at your feet, and ascribe salvation unto You, who redeemed me through your blood, when made a vessel of mercy; a pillar in your temple, to go out no more.