

The Marks of the New Birth by George Whitefield

~Other Speakers M-R: Old Paths Magazine - Issue 13:

MATTHEW 18:3 - VERILY I SAY unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

I suppose I may take it for granted, that all of you, among whom I am now about to preach the kingdom of God, are fully convinced, that it is appointed for all men once to die, and that ye all really believe that after death comes the judgment, and that the consequences of that judgment will be, that ye must be doomed to dwell in the blackness of darkness, or ascend to dwell with the blessed God, for ever and ever. I may take it for granted also, that whatever your practice in common life may be, there is not one, though ever so profligate and abandoned, but hopes to go to that place, which the scriptures call Heaven, when he dies. And, I think, if I know any thing of mine own heart, my heart's desire, as well as my prayer to God, for you all, is, that I may see you sitting down in the kingdom of our heavenly Father. But then, though we all hope to go to heaven when we die, yet, if we may judge by people's lives, and our Lord says, "that by their fruits we may know them," I am afraid it will be found, that thousands, and ten thousands, who hope to go to this blessed place after death, are not now in the way to it while they live.

Bear The Name of Christ

Though we call ourselves Christians, and would consider it as an affront put upon us, for any one to doubt whether we were Christians or not; yet there are a great many, who bear the name of Christ, that yet do not so much as know what real Christianity is. Hence it is, that if you ask a great many, upon what their hopes of heaven are founded, they will tell you, that they belong to this, or that, or the other denomination, and part of Christians, into which Christendom is now unhappily divided. If you ask others, upon what foundation they have built their hope of heaven, they will tell you, that they have been baptized, that their fathers and mothers, presented them to the Lord Jesus Christ in their infancy; and though, instead of fighting under Christ's banner, they have been fighting against him, almost ever since they were baptized, yet because they have been admitted to church, and their names are in the Register book of the parish, therefore they will make us believe, that their names are also written in the book of life. But a great many, who will not build their hopes of salvation upon such a sorry rotten foundation as this, yet if they are, what we generally call, negatively good people; if they live so as their neighbors cannot say that they do anybody harm, they do not doubt but they shall be happy when they die; nay, I have found many such die, as the scripture speaks, "without any hands in their death."

What The World Calls a Christian

And if a person is what the world calls an honest moral man, if he does justly, and, what the world calls, love a little mercy, is not and then good-natured, reacheth out his hand to the poor, receives the sacrament once or twice a year, and is outwardly sober and honest; the world looks upon such an one as a Christian indeed, and doubtless we are to judge charitably of every such person. There are many likewise, who go on in a round of duties, a model of performances, that think they shall go to heaven; but if you examine them, though they have a Christ in their heads, they have no Christ in their hearts.

Wicked and Deceitful Men's Hearts

The Lord Jesus Christ knew this full well; he knew how desperately wicked and deceitful men's hearts were; he knew very well how many would go to hell even by the very gates of heaven, how many would climb up even to the door, and go so near as to knock at it, and yet after all be dismissed with a "verily I know you not." The Lord, therefore, plainly tells us, what great change must be wrought in us, and what must be done for us, before we can have any well grounded hopes of entering into the kingdom of heaven. And of all the solemn declarations of our Lord, I mean with respect to this, perhaps the words of the text are one of the most solemn, "except, (says Christ) ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." The words, if you look back to the context, are plainly directed to the disciples; for we are told, "that at the same time came the disciples unto Jesus." And I think it is plain from many parts of Scripture, that these disciples, to whom our Lord addressed himself at this time, were in some degree converted before. If we take the words strictly, they are applicable only to those, that have already gotten some, though but weak, faith in Christ. Our Lord means, that though they had already tasted the grace of God, yet there was so much of the old man, so much indwelling sin, and corruption, yet remaining in their hearts, that unless they were more converted than they were, unless a greater change past upon their souls, and sanctification was still carried on, they could give but very little evidence of their belonging to his kingdom, which was not to be set up in outward

grandeur, as they supposed, but was to be a spiritual kingdom, begun here, but completed in the kingdom of God hereafter. I believe the words may be justly applied to saints and sinners; and as I suppose there are two sorts of people here, some who know Christ, and some of you that do not know him, some that are converted, and some that are strangers to conversion, I shall endeavor so to speak, that if God shall be pleased to assist me, and to give you an hearing ear and an obedient heart, both saints and sinners may have their portion.

A Temporal Prince

The Evangelist tell us, "that the disciples at this time came unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" These disciples had imbibed the common prevailing notion, that the Lord Jesus Christ was to be a temporal prince; they dreamed of nothing but being ministers of state, of sitting on Christ's right hand in his kingdom, and lording it over God's people; they thought themselves qualified for state offices, as generally ignorant people are apt to conceive of themselves. Well, say they, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Which of us shall have the chief management of public affairs? A pretty question for a few poor fishermen, who scarcely knew how to drag their nets to shore, much less how to govern a kingdom. Our Lord, therefore, in the 2nd verse, to mortify them, calls a little child, and sets him in the midst of them. This action was as much as if our Lord had said, "Poor creatures! Your imaginations are very towering; you dispute who shall be greatest in the kingdom of heaven; I will make this little child preach to you, or I will preach to you by him. Verily I say unto you except ye be converted, and become as this little child, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven, (unless ye are, comparatively speaking, as loose to the world, as loose to crowns, scepters, and kingdoms, and earthly things, as this poor little child I have in my hand) ye shall not enter into my kingdom." So that what our Lord is speaking of, is not the innocency of little children, if you consider the relation they stand in to God, and as they are in themselves, when brought into the world; but what our Lord means is, that as to ambition and lust after the world, we must in this sense become as little children.

Loose From The World

Do not mistake me, I am not going to persuade you to shut up your shops, or leave your business; I am not going to persuade you, that if ye will be Christians, ye must turn hermits, and retire out of the world; ye cannot leave your wicked hearts behind you, when you leave the world; for I find when I am alone, my wicked heart has followed me, go where I will. No, the religion of Jesus is a social religion. But though Jesus Christ does not call us to go out of the world, shut up our shops, and leave our children to be provided for by miracles; yet this must be said to the honor Christianity, if we are really converted, we shall be loose from the world. Though we are engaged in it, and are obliged to work for our children; though we are obliged to follow trades and merchandise, and to be serviceable to the commonwealth, yet if we are real Christians, we shall be loose to the world; though I will not pretend to say that all real Christians have attained to the same degree of spiritual-mindedness.

When our Lord says, we must be converted and become as little children, I suppose he means also, that we must be sensible of our weakness, comparatively speaking, as a little child. Every one looks upon a little child, as a poor weak creature; as one that ought to go to school and learn some new lesson every day; and as simple and artless; one without guile, having not learned the abominable art, called dissimulation. Now in all these senses, I believe we are to understand the words of the text. Are little children sensible of their weakness? Must they be led by the hand? Must we take hold of them or they will fall? So, if we are converted, if the grace of God be really in our hearts, my dear friends, however we may have thought of ourselves once, whatever were our former high exalted imaginations; yet we shall now be sensible of our weakness; we shall no more say, "We are rich and increased with goods, and lack nothing;" we shall be inwardly poor; we shall feel "that we are poor, miserable, blind, and naked." And as a little child gives up its hand to be guided by a parent or a nurse, so those who are truly converted, and are real Christians, will give up the heart, their understandings, their wills, their affections, to be guided by the word, providence, and the Spirit of the Lord. Hence it is, that the Apostle, speaking of the sons of God, says, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are (and to be sure he means they only are) the sons of God."

Ignorant Creatures

And as little children look upon themselves to be ignorant creatures, so those that are converted, do look upon themselves as ignorant too. Hence it is, that John, speaking to Christians, calls them little children; "I have written unto you, little children." And Christ's flock is called a little flock, not only because little in number, but also because those who are members of his flock, are indeed little in their own eyes. Hence that great man, that great apostle of the Gentiles, that spiritual father of so many thousands of souls, that man, who in the opinion of Dr. Goodwin, "fits nearest the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, in glory," that chosen vessel, the Apostle

Paul, when he speaks of himself, says, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Perhaps some of you, when you read these words, will be apt to think that Paul did not speak true, that he did not really feel what he said; because you judge Paul's heart by your own proud hearts: but the more ye get of the grace of God, and the more ye are partakers of the divine life, the more will ye see your own meanness and vileness, and be less in your own eyes.

And as a little child is looked upon as an harmless creature, and generally speaks true; so, if we are converted, and become as little children, we shall be guileless as well as harmless. What said the dear Redeemer when he saw Nathaniel? As though it was a rare sight he gazed upon, and would have others gaze upon it; "Behold an Israelite indeed:" Why so? "In whom is no guile." Do not mistake me; I am not saying, that Christians ought not to be prudent; they ought exceedingly to pray to God for prudence, otherwise they may follow the delusions of the devil, and by their imprudence give wrong touches to the ark of God. It was the lamentation of a great man, "God has given me many gifts, but God has not given me prudence." Therefore, when I say, a Christian must be guileless, I do not mean, he should expose himself, and lie open to every one's assault: we should pray for the wisdom of the serpent, though we shall generally learn this wisdom by our blunders and imprudence: and we must make some advance in Christianity, before we know our imprudence. A person really converted, can say, as it is reported of a philosopher, "I wish there was a window in my breast, that every one may see the uprightness of my heart and intentions:" And though there is too much of the old man in us, yet, if we are really converted, there will be in us no allowed guile, we shall be harmless. And that is the reason why the poor Christian is too often imposed upon; he judgeth other people by himself; having an honest heart, he thinks every one as honest as himself, and therefore is a prey to every one. I might enlarge upon each of these points, it is a copious and important truth; but I do not intend to multiply many marks and heads.

Verily I Say Unto You

And therefore, as I have something to say by way of personal application, give me leave therefore, with the utmost tenderness, and at the same time with faithfulness, to call upon you, my dear friends. My text is introduced in an awful manner, "Verily I say unto you;" and what Jesus said then, he says now to you, to me, and to as many as sit under a preached gospel, and to as many as the Lord our God shall call. Let me exhort you to see whether ye are converted; whether such a great and almighty change has passed upon any of your souls. As I told you before, so I tell you again, ye all hope to go to heaven, and I pray God Almighty ye may be all there: when I see such a congregation as this, if my heart is in a proper frame, I feel myself ready to lay down my life, to be instrumental only to save one soul. It makes my heart bleed within me, it makes me sometimes most unwilling to preach, lest that word that I hope will do good, may increase the damnation of any, and perhaps of a great part of the auditory, through their own unbelief. Give me leave to deal faithfully with your souls. I have your dead warrant in my hand: Christ has said it, Jesus will stand to it, it is like the laws of the Medes and Persians, it altereth not. Hark, O man! Hark, O woman! He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Lord Jesus Christ says, "Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Though this is Saturday night, and ye are now preparing for the Sabbath, for what you know, you may yet never live to see the Sabbath. You have had awful proofs of this lately; a woman died but yesterday, a man died the day before, another was killed by something that fell from a house, and it may be in twenty-four hours more, many of you may be carried into an unalterable state. Now then, for God's sake, for your own souls sake, if ye have a mind to dwell with God, and cannot bear the thought of dwelling in everlasting burning, before I go any further, silently put up one prayer, or say Amen to the prayer I would put in your mouths; "Lord, search me and try me, Lord, examine my heart, and let my conscience speak; O let me know whether I am converted or not!" What say ye, my dear hearers? What say ye, my fellow-sinners? What say ye, my guilty brethren? Has God by his blessed Spirit wrought such a change in your hearts? I do not ask you, whether God has made you angels? That I know will never be; I only ask you, Whether ye have any well-grounded hope to think that God has made you new creatures in Christ Jesus?

Renewed And Changed

So renewed and changed your natures, that you can say, I humbly hope, that as to the habitual temper and tendency of my mind, that my heart is free from wickedness; I have a husband, I have a wife, I have also children, I keep a shop, I mind my business; but I love these creatures for God' sake, and do every thing for Christ: and if God was now to call me away, according to the habitual temper of my mind, I can say, Lord, I am ready; and however I love the creatures, I hope I can say, Whom have I in heaven but thee? Whom have I in heaven, O my God and my dear Redeemer, that I desire in comparison of thee? Can you thank God for the creatures, and say at the same time, these are not my Christ? I speak in plain language, you know my way of preaching: I do not want to play the orator, I do not want to be counted a scholar; I want to speak so as I may reach poor people's hearts. What say ye, my dear hearers? Are ye sensible of your weakness? Do ye feel that

ye are poor, miserable, blind, and naked by nature? Do ye give up your hearts, your affections, your wills, your understanding to be guided by the Spirit of God, as a little child gives up its hand to be guided by its parent? Are ye little in your own eyes? Do ye think meanly of yourselves? And do you want to learn something new every day? I mention these marks, because I am apt to believe they are more adapted to a great many of your capacities. A great many of you have not that showing of affection ye sometimes had, therefore ye are for giving up all your evidences, and making way for the devil's coming into your heart. You are not brought up to the mount as ye used to be, therefore ye conclude ye have no grace at all. But if the Lord Jesus Christ has emptied thee, and humbled thee, if he is giving thee to see and know that thou art nothing; though thou are not growing upward, thou art growing downward; and though thou hast not so much joy, yet thy heart is emptying to be more abundantly replenished by and by. Can any of you follow me? Then, give God thanks, and take the comfort of it

A Great Welcome

If thou art thus converted, and become a little child, I welcome thee, in the name of the Lord Jesus, into God's dear family; I welcome thee, in the name of the dear Redeemer, into the company of God's children. O ye dear souls, though the world sees nothing in you, though there be no outward difference between you and others, yet I look upon you in another light, even as so many kings sons and daughters: all hail! In the name of God, I wish every one of you joy from my soul, ye sons and daughters of the King of kings. Will not you henceforth exercise a child-like temper? Will not such a thought melt down your hearts, when I tell you, that the great God, who might have frowned you to hell for your secret sins, that nobody knew of but God and your own souls, and who might have damned you times without number, hath cast the mantle of his love over you; his voice hath been, Let that man, that woman live, for I have found a ransom. O will ye not cry out, Why me, Lord? Are ye converted? Are ye become like little children? Then what must ye do? My dear hearers, be obedient to God, remember God is your father; and as every one of you must know what a dreadful cross it is to have a wicked, disobedient child; if ye do not want your children to be disobedient to you, for Christ's sake be not disobedient to your heavenly parent. If God be your father, obey him: if God be your father, serve him; love him with all your heart, love him with all your might, with all your soul, and with all your strength. If God be your father, fly from everything that may displease him; and walk worthy of that God, who has called you to his kingdom and glory. If ye are converted and become like little children, then behave as little children: they long for the breast, and with it will be contented. Are ye new-born babes? Then desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby. Are ye children? Then grow in grace, and in the knowledge of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Have any of you children that do not grow? Do not ye lament these children, and cry over them; do not ye say, my child will never be fit for anything in the world? Well, doth it grieve you to see a child that will not grow; how much must it grieve the heart of Christ to see you grow so little? Will ye be always children? Will ye be always learning the first principles of Christianity, and never press forward toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus? God forbid. Let the language of your heart be, "Lord Jesus help me to grow, help me to learn more, learn me to live so as my progress may be known to all!"

Are Ye Converted?

Are ye God's children? Are ye converted, and become like little children? Then deal with God as your little children do with you; as soon as ever they want any thing, or if any body hurt them, I appeal to yourselves if they do not directly run to their parent. Well, are ye God's children? Doth the devil trouble you? Doth the world trouble you? Go tell your father of it, go directly and complain to God. Perhaps you may say, I cannot utter fine words: but do any of you expect fine words from your children? If they come crying, and can speak but half words, do not your hearts yearn over them? And has not God unspeakably more pity to you? If ye can only make signs to him; "As a father pitieth his children, so will the Lord pity them that fear him." I pray you therefore be gold with your Father, saying, "Abba, Father," Satan troubles me, the world troubles me, my own mother's children are angry with me; heavenly Father, plead my cause! The Lord will then speak for you some way or other.

Are ye converted, and become as little children, have ye entered into God's family? Then assure yourselves, that your heavenly father will chasten you now and then: "for what son is there whom the father chasteneth not: if ye are without chastisement, of which all are partakers, then are ye bastards and not sons." If therefore ye are God's children; if ye are converted and become as little children; do not expect that God will be like a foolish parent; no, he is a jealous God, he loves his child too well to spare his rod. How did he correct Miriam? How did he correct Moses? How hath God in all ages corrected his dearest children? Therefore if ye are converted, and become as little children, if God hath taken away a child, or your substance, if God suffers friends to forsake you, and if you are forsaken as it were both by God and man, say, Lord I thank thee! I am a perverse child, or God would not strike me so often and so hard. Do not blame your heavenly Father, but blame yourselves; he is

a loving God, and a tender Father, "he is afflicted in all our afflictions:" therefore when God spake to Moses, he spake out of the bush, as much as to say, "Moses, this bush represents my people; as this bush is burning with fire, so are my children to burn with affliction; but I am in the bush; if the bush burns, I will burn with it, I will be with them in the furnace, I will be with them in the water, and though the water come over them, it shall not overflow them."

Are ye God's children? Are ye converted and become as little children? Then will ye not long to go home and see your Father? O happy they that have gotten home before you; happy they that are up yonder, happy they who have ascended above this field of conflict. I know not what you may think of it, but since I heard that some, whose hearts God was pleased to work upon, are gone to glory, I am sometimes filled with grief, that God is not pleased to let me go home too. How can you see so much coldness among God's people? How can ye see God's people like the moon, waxing and waning? Who can but desire to be forever with the Lord? Thanks be to God, the time is soon coming; thanks be to God, he will come and will not tarry. Do not be impatient, God in his own time will fetch you home. And though ye may be brought to short allowance now, though some of you may be narrow in your circumstances, yet do not repine; a God, and the gospel of Christ, with brown bread, are great riches. In thy Father's house there is bread enough and to spare; though thou are now tormented, yet by and by thou shalt be comforted; the angels will look upon it as an honor to convey thee to Abraham's bosom, though thou are but a Lazarus here. By the frame of my heart, I am much inclined to speak comfortably to God's people.

Love One Another

But I only mention one thing more, and that is, if ye are converted, and become as little children, then for God's sake take care of doing what children often do; they are too apt to quarrel one with another. O love one another; "he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him." Joseph knew that his brethren were in danger of falling out, therefore when he left them, says he, "fall not out by the way." Ye are all children of the same Father, ye are all going to the same place; why should ye differ? The world has enough against us, the devil has enough against us, without our quarreling with each other; O walk in love. If I could preach no more, if I was not able to hold out to the end of my sermon, I would say as John did, when he was grown old and could not preach, "Little children, love one another:" if ye are God's children, then love one another. There is nothing grieves me more, than the differences amongst God's people. O hasten that time, when we shall either go to heaven, or never quarrel any more!

Not Give That Which is Holy to Dogs

Would to God I could speak to all of you in this comfortable language; but my master tells me, I must "not give that which is holy to dogs, I must not cast pearls before swine;" therefore, though I have been speaking comfortably, yet what I have been saying, especially in this latter part of the discourse, belongs to children; it is children's bread, it belongs to God's people. If any of you are graceless, Christless, unconverted creatures, I charge you not to touch it, I fence it in the name of God; here is a flaming sword turning every way to keep you from this bread of life, till ye are turned to Jesus Christ. And therefore, as I suppose many of you are unconverted, and graceless, go home! And away to your closets, and down with your stubborn hearts before God; if ye have not done lit before, let this be the night. Or, do not stay till ye go home; begin now, while standing here; pray to God, and let the language of thy heart be, Lord convert me! Lord make me a little child, Lord Jesus let me not be banished from thy kingdom! My dear friends, there is a great deal more implied in the words, than is expressed: when Christ says, "Ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven," it is as much to say, "ye shall certainly go to hell, ye shall certainly be damned, and dwell in the blackness of darkness for ever, ye shall go where the worm dies not, and where the fire is not quenched." The Lord God impress it upon your souls! May an arrow (as one lately wrote me in a letter) dipped in the blood of Christ, reach every unconverted sinner's heart! May God fulfill the text to every one of your souls! It is he alone that can do it. If ye confess your sins, and leave them, and lay hold on the Lord Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God shall be given you; if you will go and say, turn me, O my God! Thou knowest not, O man, what the return of God may be to thee. Did I think that preaching would be to the purpose, did I think that arguments would induce you to come, I would continue my discourse till midnight. And however some of you may hate me without a cause, would to God every one in this congregation was as much concerned for himself, as at present (blessed be God) I feel myself concerned for him. O that my head were waters, O that mine eyes were a fountain of tears, that I might weep over an unconverted, graceless, wicked, and adulterous generation. Precious souls, for God's sake think what will become of you when ye die, if you die without being converted; if ye go hence without the wedding garment, God will strike you speechless, and ye shall be banished from his presence for ever and ever. I know ye cannot dwell with everlasting burnings; behold then I show you a way of escape; Jesus is the way, Jesus is the truth, the Lord Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. It is his Spirit must convert you, come to Christ, and ye

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shall have it; and may God for Christ's sake give it to you all, and convert you, that we may all meet, never to part again, in his heavenly kingdom; even so Lord Jesus, Amen and Amen.

George Whitefield (1714 - 1770) - Used of God to preach to crowds of up to 50,000 in the Great Awakening in America. One of the most known yet God glorifying ministers in the Church age.