

Purity By The Cross

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How much more shall the blood of Christ ... cleanse your conscience from dead works? — Hebrews 9:14

IN OUR PREVIOUS STUDY WE CONSIDERED THE FIRST BLESSING that comes to men by the way of the Cross—first, I mean in the line of human experience—the blessing of pardon. We attempted to listen reverently to this note of the great evangel the glad declaration that forgiveness for actual trespass is provided for men not merely on the basis of pity, but in righteousness, through the mystery of the Cross of Jesus. We all are conscious how great a blessing this is, yet I think I speak for every person here when I say that we do not feel that it goes to the root of our need.

That is not to undervalue the blessing of pardon, but it is to say that mere pardon leaves us lacking something that we do not earnestly desire, and something which we desire the more earnestly as the result of the pardon bestowed on us. I attempted very carefully to limit our previous study to the word which my text contained, “trespasses”: sins rather than sin, definite, personal, actual acts of disobedience. Sins as trespasses are pardoned by the way of the Cross, but all such sins are the outward manifestations of an inward disease—a moral disease, of course—the disease of sin.

I am not proposing to enter into any lengthy discussion even now as to how man, using the word in its generic sense, contracted the disease. I simply propose to recognize the fact that it is here, present in human life, that we are all conscious of it, that we feel that behind the deed is a force which impelled us to the deed, and which, strive as we will, struggle as we may, has proved too much for us.

That is not the experience of lonely individuals. It is the common experience of the race. Every man fails, goes wrong, breaks down; and the fact of his actual transgressions results from this deeper, subtler, profounder fact of a tendency toward actual transgression, of a bias in that direction, You may call that original sin or continuous abnormality—phrases matter nothing. The fact of which I am conscious and you are conscious and every man is conscious is that in man there is the double consciousness of a desire to do good and of a force which prevents his doing good.

Unless the evangel of the Cross can deal with that deeper thing in my life it does not meet my profoundest need. Great and gracious is the proclamation that my sins may be forgiven, and my hands are open to receive that gift and my heart sings a song of gladness as I receive it; but, oh, my soul, is that all? Must I still be left with this underlying somewhat that drives me to sin? Can nothing be done for me in the actual warp and woof of my spirit, in my moral fiber, to quench the fires of passion, to correct the poison that throbs? Or, again, to use the simpler language, is my prayer, "Create in me a clean heart, O God," to find no answer?

The evangel of the Cross is incomplete unless it meets that great need. My probation is not the probation of an unfallen man, of a man born without these forces and vices within him. The probation that I live is not exactly identical with that of the perfect One of Nazareth, or even of the first man according to the story of holy writ. The father of the race, according to that story, stood upright, erect, began without these forces throbbing through his consciousness. I did not so begin. I was born in sin and "shapen in iniquity." I was born with the need of a redemption that should deal not merely with the sins I have committed as the result of an inherited iniquity, or deviation from the straight, but with the inherited iniquity itself. And I am prepared to say this, even though for a moment it may sound a startling thing. Believe me, I say it most reverently, and yet I am talking out of the deepest and most passionate conviction of my life: Unless God has provided a redemption that touches sin in me as well as the sins that grow out of it, it is an imperfect redemption. All that, as it states the need according to the common experience of men, prepares the way for the consideration of our text, in which the perfect provision is revealed.

God has provided—to quote from the passage I read—"eternal redemption," and eternal redemption is infinitely more than long-lived redemption. Eternal does not finally or necessarily mean continuance without end. Eternal is as broad as it is long, as high as it is deep. Eternal redemption is redemption that meets every possible and conceivable necessity of the case. He has provided that redemption, and, while pardon for sins is its first benefit, everything else that I need is contained within that selfsame redemption. In this passage it is declared that Jesus Christ, who offered Himself through the Eternal Spirit, without spot to God, made a provision by which my conscience can be cleansed from dead works, that I may be able to do that thing that I have not been able to do—to serve the living and true God.

Now let us consider some of the outstanding terms of this text. I want to draw your special attention to the expressions, "conscience" and "dead works." "Conscience" is a word used at this point in one particular sense. "Dead works" is a figure of speech, and we must go back to the old economy with which the writer was dealing if we would understand what the phrase really means in this connection.

According to popular usage, conscience is a faculty enabling men to distinguish right from wrong. Conscience in the Bible has a far wider meaning.

The word is found only once in the Old Testament save once, and then it is in the margin. A careful examination of all the passages in which the word occurs in the New Testament shows

that it is used in the sense of consciousness rather than in our ordinary sense of “conscience.” The Apostle speaks of “a good conscience,” of “a conscience void of offence,” of “an evil conscience,” of “a conscience branded as with a hot iron.” Now, in neither case was he referring to the faculty that discerns between good and evil, but rather to the facts discerned. When he speaks of a good conscience he does not mean an excellent capacity for the discernment of good and evil. When he speaks of an evil conscience he does not mean a conscience unequal to the discernment of good and evil. Conscience is consciousness. To make this clearer let me requote those isolated passages, inserting the word “consciousness” instead of conscience. “A good consciousness,” “a consciousness void of offence,” “an evil consciousness.” In each case the word indicates the fact of discernment rather than the faculty of discernment. “A conscience void of offence,” then, is man’s inner consciousness, having nothing in it that causes him to offend. “A good conscience” is man’s whole consciousness, the whole sweep of his mind good. “An evil conscience” is man’s whole consciousness, the whole content of the mind evil. And here the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that by the mystery of the Cross man’s consciousness is cleansed. Consciousness lies at the back of conduct, is influenced by conduct subsequently, but is first the inspiration of conduct. There is perpetually a reflex action between a man’s consciousness and his conduct. My consciousness of anything creates my conduct toward it, and my conduct toward it reflects on my consciousness, and changes it, in that it either defiles it, or lifts it into higher reaches of purity.

Take the simplest thing you know for purpose of illustration. Let us take such a simple thing as the Master would have taken. Bring me a little child, and put this little child in the midst. My consciousness of a little child will create my conduct toward that little child. Let that be my first proposition. What is a little child? What do you think of a little child? Tell me, and I will tell you what your conduct toward that child will be. Is your consciousness of a little child a low consciousness, a mean consciousness? Your conduct to the little child will be low and mean. Suppose you have the same consciousness of a little child that Jesus had, suppose you say, In heaven its angel always beholds the face of the Father, then what? Then your conduct toward that little child will make you say what He said. If you offend that child it is better that a millstone were hanged about your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. My consciousness of a flower will affect my conduct toward it. Young man, your consciousness of a woman will affect your conduct toward her. Now, as God is my witness, there is nothing I crave more than a clean consciousness of things—a consciousness that takes hold upon a flower, a child, a woman, a city, everything, cleanly, purely, and without defilement; if I have that, then have I solved my riddle, then have I found plenteous redemption. And that is exactly what the Cross provides for every man, no matter how depraved he may be, or how utterly his consciousness has become evil. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, “If the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling them that have been defiled sanctify unto the cleanness of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish unto God, cleanse your consciousness from dead works to serve the living God.”

Now let us look at that phrase, “dead works.” As we indicated before, it is absolutely important that we should notice that the writer is dealing with the old economy, and we remember how

strict and stringent were the laws of that economy concerning ceremonial defilement. Both in Leviticus and in Numbers we find clear revelation of how particular God is about small things. To touch the dead was to be defiled, and cleansing was needed. To enter the house where the dead were, and, though they were wandering through the wilderness, and the tabernacle was not erected, and they could not come to sacrifice, they must be sprinkled in water in which were the ashes of a red heifer. If you will ponder well these old Mosaic requirements they are suggestions and pictures of infinite truth, telling us what God thinks of defilement and how easily a man is defiled. So that when I read here, on the page of a letter written to Hebrews, the term, "dead works," I must not pass it over as a mere poetical description. It is a description of corruption, of an evil thing that contaminates and spoils the life. These are the very forces spoiling me; these are the things from which I want a cleansing. My consciousness-how, I do not know; why, I may not be able to tell-is defiled, is contaminated; it suggests things to me which are not pure. Of course, I am speaking of a man by nature, and apart from the grace of God. I am speaking also of many a man who has been born again, but who has never appropriated God's gift of purity. The consciousness is tainted, defiled, spoiled by dead works. It is from that possibility of being contaminated that man wants cleansing.

Let us take some illustrations of things resulting from a consciousness defiled by dead things, corrupt things. First, in personal life-in the realm of the physical, a perpetual inclination to self-indulgence, to laziness, even to sensuality; in the realm of the mental, a tendency toward sloth, toward covetousness, toward dishonesty in dealing with truth, and even, alas! sometimes toward actual impurity of thinking; or, in the spiritual, proneness to lethargy, to neglect, to compromise between right and wrong. It was such impure consciousness issuing in carnal conduct which made the Apostle urge the Corinthians to purify themselves and cleanse themselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit. It is the defilement of the spirit which lies at the back of these manifestations in the realm of the flesh that we supremely need to have dealt with.

Then, because of this defiled consciousness, this defiled spirit, sin abiding still in the life manifests itself in lack of love, so that envy, malice, and even hatred are present. These are actively expressed by unwillingness to forgive where wrong has been suffered and unwillingness to apologize where it has been done. Or, again, in violation of truth, so that men are given to exaggeration or to prevarication, which is an evasion of truth; or deceit, which is to give another a wrong view of a matter; or fraud, which is to give another a wrong view in order to gain something for oneself; or slander, which is to issue a false report to the injury of another person. Or, again, in the violation of justice, the spiteful disposition, the incivility, the rudeness, the thoughtlessness, and, alas! sometimes the robbery. Now, all these things are to be found, not all in any one person perchance, but in the common consciousness of men and women who have received the blessing of pardon and sing in their joy over that blessing. My brethren, I am talking with you, not merely to you. We know what this conscience or consciousness is which is not devoid of offense, out of which offense comes, so that we do not look on men or things or affairs as we ought to, and the distorted vision of men and things and affairs produces a wrong attitude toward men and things and affairs. We know this is wrong, and we cry out at last, in the agony of our hearts, and say the good we see we cannot do. The vision of the ideal is in front of us, but power to realize it we lack. Or, in the words of the Apostle, when we would do good, evil

is present with us.

Now, what we need supremely—what I need, what you need—is that our very inward nature should be taken hold of and cleansed. We need not merely the forgiveness of sins, but a consciousness that is clean. It is a terrible need. It is as deep as our nature, and the cleansing must penetrate as far as our pollution. It must be a cleansing that deals not merely with the surface of sin, but goes down into the warp and woof, into the fiber of the being. Water will not do; fire is needed. Water is not sufficient; the infinite mystery of blood is demanded.

If I have partially voiced your sense of need, as I have spoken experimentally to you of my sense of need, as I have come to know what God is, and what I am, then I bring you the second note of the evangel. It is in the presence of that need that the writer asks, “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish unto God, cleanse your consciousness?” Christ offered Himself through the eternal Spirit. And by that offering He is able to cleanse the nature of the soul that trusts Him by the mystery of that blood poured forth. He can cleanse the consciousness and make it pure and good. And again I say I am not going to tell you how it is done, I am not going to try to explain to you by speculation of my finite mind or any philosophy of man how through the mystery of that shed blood a man’s consciousness can be cleansed as he trusts in Jesus. The writer does not explain it, he affirms it, and all the burden of the teaching of the New Testament is this, that not merely by the mystery of this shed blood a man’s sins are forgiven, but he is cleansed from his sin, changed, remade, a new creation, so that the consciousness defiled becomes a consciousness that is pure.

Now, I am perfectly well aware that a great many people who certainly have received the blessing of the forgiveness of sins have never appropriated this blessing of the cleansed consciousness and purity. I am perfectly well aware that hundreds and thousands of us are sighing after it, but not possessing it; and consequently I am driven to ask this question, if that indeed is declared to be a possibility, on what ground can I have that cleansing of my nature which shall change my view of everything, and give me a new outlook on everything, and so remake my attitude toward everything? How, in brief, can I have, instead of an evil conscience, a good conscience, instead of a conscience seared as with a hot iron, a consciousness which is void of offense? How? And the answer takes us back again to the statement of first principles.

The first thing we have to learn to do is to cease attempting to change our own consciousness. We must quit the conflict which is purely personal. A man says, I will come to look upon a little child as I ought to look upon a little child. You cannot do it in the strength of your own willing. That is the very mystery we have been dealing with. How many a man has said, I hate my outlook, this conception which is false and which issues in sinful conduct. I will alter it, I will change it, I will look upon the old things from a new standard, with cleanness of perception. A clean consciousness of the things round about me shall be mine. He was sincere in the vow, but long before the sun went westering, and the night had come upon him, he had looked again with evil thoughts, and impure desire, and debauched conceptions. The first thing, then, to do, strange as it may sound, is that we cease attempting to change our own consciousness. What

then? Then we must be ready and willing to abandon once and forever all permitted acts of sin. We are to put ourselves, so far as it is possible to us, outside the place of sinning. That is very concrete if only you will make it so. It means this. If you are going to quit impure thoughts you must begin by burning your impure pictures. If, after long struggle, you are going to enter into the possibility that lies declared in this text and overcome your tendency toward drunkenness—for let us name things by their right name—you must begin by turning out the last hidden cupboard in your house of the thing that has made you sin. “Having, therefore, these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” “Having, therefore, these promises,” what promises? “I will be their God.” “I will dwell in them and walk in them.” “I will be to you a Father, and ye shall be to Me sons and daughters.” These are the promises. Having them, what am I to do? Cleanse myself! But that is what I cannot do. If I try self-cleansing apart from these promises, and apart from the claim that faith makes upon them, I shall fail; but if I claim the promises and neglect the personal cleansing, I shall fail. There must not only be first a cessation of attempt to master the underlying evil in my strength, there must also be what appears to be a contradiction to that first statement, a resolute parting company with all the circumstances and friends and habits and methods which I know have led me into sin.

What beyond? There must be a handing over of the life just as it is, with its defilement, to Jesus Christ. Oh, but you say you are telling us to do what you tell people to do when they come to Him at first. Exactly! When the Church at Ephesus lost her first love, the great and glorious One, walking amid the seven golden lamp-stands, said, “I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love.” What shall she do? This is what she shall do: “Repent, and do the first works.” Begin where you began, fall in line with the principles you have neglected and wandered from. Remember, when we come for purity we are to come exactly as we came for pardon. First, “Nothing in my hands I bring,” the cessation of my attempts to deal with the underlying impurity; second, “Here I give my all to Thee,” the utter and absolute abandonment of the life to Jesus Christ—not as a theory to be sung, but as fact. And then what next? Then, dear heart, trust Him for that very thing after which you have been sighing. Accept it as from Him, trusting in Him. The cleansing of the conscience comes whenever a soul ventures everything on Christ and trusts Him absolutely. If you will come now, just where you are and as you are, with your false consciousness, but in strong determination that you will cut every cord that binds you to the old life, burn every bridge behind you, stand out in separation to Him, and then trust Him, He will break the power of canceled sin. He will set the prisoner free. And so, by the way of this Cross, infinite and ever-increasing mystery of God’s love, there comes to men not merely pardon, but purity—that for which the heart, quickened by the Spirit, most profoundly seeks.

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