

FOLLOWING AFTER RIGHTEOUSNESS

Portion read: Psalm 32—*“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom Yahweh imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.”*

We have met to remember Christ; but there is something underneath that. We cannot remember Christ scripturally or acceptably without remembering God, for it is written,

“God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.”

It was that God might be manifest that he appeared. It was that the world might be reconciled to God that he came and died, and rose again. There is a great tendency in our age, where Christ is remembered at all, to remember Christ without remembering God. What praise there is of Christ is mostly fixed upon him alone. God is not seen. This is not according to Christ. Christ directs our attention to God. He came that we might be reconciled to God. So also Paul: he says,

“We pray you, in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”

All the Scriptures exhibit God. God is their subject altogether. If they give us history, it is that God’s part in it may be seen, and His ways illustrated as in the disobedience and afflictions of the house of Israel. It was not that a story might be written. There are no “stories” in the Bible in the proper sense of that term. There is narrative of incident, and some the most thrilling ever put on record, but it always has to do with God in some way. If the Bible gives us poetry, it is all about God, as in the Psalms—never about the mere beauties of nature or the charms of human feeling, as in human poetry. I need not say that if it gives us prophecy, it is about God, because we know that the ultimate exhibition of prophecy is the exaltation of God in all the earth.

What are we ourselves? If we are not deceiving ourselves, if we are not wasting our time, if we are not coming to this Table in a mistaken character, we are children of God. If we are not the children of God it would be better that we should not come here. To come here in any other character is to come here unworthily; and Paul says that anyone eating and drinking unworthily incurs condemnation.

Now, here is one important matter to consider: What makes us children of God? What entitles us to that description? There will be less difficulty in answering that question than in coming up to the answer. We must answer the question; and we must try and come up to it. That is the business we have in hand, as brethren and sisters of Christ, to grow up into the *“fulness of the stature of Christ.”* Well, let us have the answer first. Children of God are those who know Him, and who love Him, and who obey Him, and who, therefore, have been adopted by Him, in the operation of His institutions provided for that purpose.

If a man know God, God is before his eyes all the time; because God exists all the time, and therefore such a man is not a mere theologian. A theologian, in the ordinary sense, is a man who has a theory about God; a son of God is a man whose theory of God has become the root of warm and ever-present conviction. To such a man, God, though unseen, is a real being—as real as his everyday friend. God is not only a real being to him, but, in a sense, the only real being, for he realises that God is the only inherently real being. All other beings are but incorporate reflections of His being. Man seems real, but he is not permanently so.

“There is none abiding.”

“All the glory of man,” says the Scripture, *“is as the flower of the field” (1 Peter 1:24).*

It withers and vanishes. All flesh is grass. The Scriptures say this, and we know it to be true by experience. We all perish. A son of God does not lean on grass. He leans on the only rock, the power and life that in God are, from everlasting to everlasting—God. The world leans on man. The world is full of abominations just now, as the Apocalypse reveals. The world either openly blasphemes God or cants about Him. It is hard to say which is the worse. They are both odious. Of the two, perhaps the cant is the better; for in it there is at least a recognition of God, in however corrupt a form. In open blasphemy there is the denial of Him, out of which no good can come. But 10,000 times better than cant is sincere knowledge. The man who knows God does not ‘cant;’ he speaks about God as he speaks about his friend. You can tell by the very tone where the matter stands in a man’s feelings. If

he is a very honest man and knows not God, he can scarcely pronounce His name. If he is not an honest man, he speaks of Him in a tone and manner that tell you infallibly that God is a nonentity with him, and that he is merely anxious to be credited by man with a fear of God that he does not possess. The man to whom God is a reality does not tone about it; he speaks about God with reverence, truly, but with the sincerity with which most men speak of a matter of common reality.

Consider some of the consequences. If a man know God, that man is purified and sanctified. “Gravity and sincerity”, become habit of speech with him. The truth has brought us out of a world not only of cant and ignorance, but of levity and corruption. Light talk and foul is the order of the day. From this the truth calls upon us to purify ourselves. Even “*jesting and foolish talking*” are among the things Paul says are not to be “*named among the brethren as becometh saints.*” We are in little danger of missing this point from a special cause. Getting away from the cant about God, we are liable to drift into the barrenness of talk that has no odour of Him at all. This is as bad as cant. The love of God will be sure to make His presence manifest in our speech. Coming out of the fanatical sects, we are liable to go to just the other extreme, and to forget God. It is just as bad to know God and not to love Him as not to know Him at all. Nothing in the universe is more powerful than love, though we are not allowed to know much of it just now. A man will do anything for love, abstain from anything for love. The man who loves God will show it by what he does and what he does not do. For God has made known His will to us, and those who love God delight to do His will. It is written of Christ,

“*I delight to do Thy will, O my God*” (Psa. 40:8; Heb. 10:9); and we are remembering Christ acceptably if we do the same, for so Christ hath said,

“*He that doeth the will of my Father which is in Heaven, the same is my brother and sister and mother.*”

These quiet words will remain the stern and everlasting measure of our final attainments, whether we forget them or not. A man who loves God will do His will, whether anybody know of it or not. Nay, he will prefer that others should not know. He remembers Christ’s commandment,

“*When thou doest thine alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, that thine alms may be in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret, Himself shall reward thee openly.*”

The man who loves God will be found doing the right thing for God’s sake—not man’s. Such men are noble men. There will yet be a multitude of them in the earth, a noble multitude. We shall see them by-and-by. God has not forgotten the earth, though it may seem so to a superficial view. The finish will show that He has remembered all the time, and had His eye all the time upon those who fear Him, and hope in His mercy. He will at last make up His jewels. They must be produced first. I suppose there are some kinds of precious stones that require darkness for their production, and the bowels of the earth for the workshop, and extreme pressure of heavy weight, and the fire of intense heat to develop them. After a long time, men dig down and find them and bring them to the light, and show their sparkling colours. Tried and chosen men are compared to precious stones. They require days of evil and darkness for their preparation. The darkness does not prove forgetfulness but the reverse. It is part of the work. When the days of darkness have fulfilled their mission, the multitude of God’s chosen will stand revealed, and they will prove to be those who have done the will of God for God’s sake.

Such a character may seem to some to savour of cold independence certainly, but not a cold one. A man of God is a warm man, but he certainly is an independent one. Surely this is necessary. We must not be influenced by man, but look straight to God. This is the independence. You may be influenced by human praise or censure to go off the right path. If you look to God, you will consider His will only.

The man who knows God is as unlike a merely natural man as this psalm is unlike a human poem. What is the theme of human poems? Merely human impression. It may be a fair maid—a lovely form of life no doubt, but a perishing, fleeting thing. Or perhaps it is some smiling landscape; or some passing aspect of nature, such as a beautiful sunset. Bible poems, the Psalms for example, deal with nothing so limited as this. They are all about God; they recognise God as the Root, the Rock, the Upholder, the Guide of all things.

This is deep, eternal, and true. This is satisfying; it is enlarging; it is purifying. Holiness, says the Scripture, becometh thine house; all the Psalms are holy; all the Scriptures are holy. The Bible is

well called “the Holy Bible;” it is a holy book. Everybody is made holy by reading it; that is, everybody who does so with diligence, earnestness, and effect. This is its mission as regards individuals; to make men holy “*to purify for Christ a peculiar people, zealous of good works*” to whom Christ has left his command, “*Be ye holy*” and of whom Paul says, “*without holiness, no man shall see the Lord.*” Now, are we holy men? We are trying to be, and perhaps we are to some extent; let us not be satisfied with half measures here. Jesus said to his disciples,

“*Now are ye clean through the word I have spoken to you*” (John 15:3).

We can all feel the truth of that to a certain extent. I was made aware of it to a large extent when on board the “Etruria” lately. I felt that the weakest brother I knew was almost an angel compared with the odious creatures of the flesh with whom I was tabled on the return voyage. They were truly the swine, wallowing in the mire. Well we are only washed hogs as yet. There is always a danger of that creature returning. Let us not be like the Laodiceans, and rest content with our attainments. You remember Christ’s message to them. They had a high opinion of themselves. The Laodicean ecclesia said “*I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing;*” but Jesus says “*thou art wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.*” Let us never indulge in self-glorification. We are likely to deceive ourselves; let us always resist the tendency to think well and brag well. Let our estimate be not as to how we look in mortal eyes, but how we look when compared with the “*holy angels.*” We will be safe in comparing ourselves with them. We are not safe in comparing ourselves with human swine. Don’t let us look at the unwise mob and say “Well, we are much better than they are.” The people that surround the Prince of Wales might say that; are they good enough for God? Goodness as God reckons is goodness towards Him. Goodness towards man is second. We know that the world is not good towards God. It knows Him not: believes Him not; obeys Him not. Are they fit to be promoted to equality with the angels? Those only are who are now “*an holy priesthood, a peculiar people.*”

We can form an opinion of our standing if we imagine ourselves about to enter the presence of Christ, or dying. This is doing what Paul commands, when he says, “*Let us judge our own selves.*” The man who is good enough for God is the man who is covered with God’s righteousness in Christ, and who walks after the commandments which require holiness. It is written, “*Be ye holy in all manner of conversation,*” that is, in everything—in behaviour, in practice, in habit of life. God himself says, “*Be ye holy for I am holy.*” Do we not instinctively know the meaning? Let us fix our minds on it and ask what does it mean? Is not holiness that which is pure, that which is clean, that which is undefiled? Is it not so? And if we are to be holy “*in all manner of*” ways, we are not to be so, as some. Are we to be undefiled in some things and not in others? Why is it necessary to be so explicit? Because the world is reeking with unholiness of every kind, and being in the world, we are liable to be infected with its ways. The world is to be judged with terrible judgment when Christ comes. That judgment we are invited to administer, if meanwhile we become what the world is not: what the truth is designed to make us—a purified people, an holy people, “*a peculiar people,*” not a cold people but a zealous people, “*zealous of good works.*” There is perhaps a cold holiness. This is not the sort. A zealous holiness is godly holiness—zealous of good works. Good works consist of doing that which is good according to God’s rule. Man is no judge here. Some works are good by divine rule which are bad by the human rule. Preaching the “narrow” way, “*contending earnestly for the faith,*” is bad according to modern man, but good according to the commandments of God. Things are good according to man, which are bad according to God—sparing Agag, to wit, by Saul; holding your tongue about religion in our day, according to etiquette. There are many other examples. We must have God’s rule for the estimate of good works, of which we are to be zealous. When people are zealous, their hands don’t hang lazily and helplessly down. They are prompt and active and earnest. And as it is an earnestness about which the natural mind has no affinity for, they are considered mad by merely natural men of every kind and variety. Well, this is not nice, especially as there is such a thing as religious madness. Are we going to be scared out of zeal for good works, because there is such a thing as religious madness? No. There is such a thing as that which is holy, and just, and good and true, and the truly sane and enlightened mind will hold on to this with all the heart and mind, and soul and strength—whatever odium it may bring. Remember what Christ says: “What have they said about me? He hath a demon, and is mad, why hear ye him? What have they called me? Beelezebub. If they so speak of me, what are you to expect?” If we are going to be called mad because we strive after holiness, let us count it an honour, as he said,

“The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more them of the household. Fear them not therefore” (Mat. 10:24, 26).

Let us give this a special application this morning. A brother has asked me to say something about smoking. Surely these principles touch the question. I don't care to go into it particularly, but one or two simple questions seem to me to settle it. Putting it in the mildest way—is it not possible that Christ will consider this practice (only about two or three hundred years old) an unholy thing? Is it not certain that he will have no fault to find with those who do not smoke, so far as that goes? The abstaining from it cannot be wrong; the indulgence in it may be, and by the general rules of apostolic holiness doubtless is. Nature itself teaches us something in the matter, and Paul appeals to nature itself in some matters. Smoking is against nature, for who can smoke for the first time without being sick, and what healthy person can come near a person reeking with narcotism without physical loathing? Let us put it extremely by a way of test; imagine a whole ecclesia sitting in clouds of tobacco smoke! Why not if it is right? An ecclesia can meet for tea or dinner; why not for smoking, if it be a holy thing? There are other arguments against it, but time does not allow. All the world smokes. This is an argument against it: for the world knows not God and is odious to Him and ripening for judgment. It is our part, having come out from among them to be holy in all manner of conversation.

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