

The Spirit's Work in Conviction

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"And when He is come He will reprove the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment." (John 16:8)

The context follows thus: "Of sin because they believe not on Me; of righteousness because I go to My Father and ye see Me no more; of judgment because the prince of this world is judged." It is clear from the Scriptures that God has had ever since the fall of Adam much to do with sin. Men, religious men, prefer to sing cheerfully about love. It is a woeful thing to sing about love before there has been mourning for sin. They talk about liberty and a cheerful religion. Better far to be in bondage and crying to God for His liberty than walk at large ignorant of that thing which God hates.

Before entering upon the text, let me invite your attention to a consideration of the tremendous, awful, just, necessary hatred of God to sin. The holiness of His character makes this necessary. God is holy. Let me name two or three instances of the effect of the revelation of God's holiness on the men to whom it was revealed.

First, of all, Moses at the backside of the desert feeding the flock of his father-in-law. He sees a sight that astonishes him, that attracts him; a bush burning but not consuming, retaining itself, its fullness, yet burning. To have seen a bush burning and consuming might have been an ordinary sight, but here was a bush burning but not consuming, and he turned aside to see the sight so extraordinary, and as he drew near God spoke to him and said: "Moses, Moses, take off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." (Exo. 3:4,5) God was there, and Moses had to bow down, did bow down. Joshua, the successor of Moses as leader and commander of Israel, saw one day near Jericho a man standing with a drawn sword in his hand, and Joshua went up to Him ignorant of who He was and demanded whether this man was for them or against them; and the word came: "Loose thy shoe, take it off, the place where thou standest is holy;" (Joshua 5:15) and Joshua fell down, fell down on his face. Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died, saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. He saw above it the seraphims each one having six wings; with twain he covered his face and with twain he covered his feet and with twain he did fly; and all cried and sang, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts," (Isa. 6:1-3) and the effect upon Isaiah was precisely the same as the effect upon Moses and Joshua, and he expressed the effect: "Woe is me for I am undone;" and why? "I have seen the Lord of hosts." Comparing this wondrous experience with the flippant religion of our nature, what a great thing it is to believe in and know the holiness of God; so to believe and to know it as to tremble and fear and quake! One day men who are flippant, confident, joyful, without the knowledge of God and Christ will see that great God, that wondrous Christ coming, and will flee to the mountains and to caves and to dens and cry unto the mountains to fall on them and hide

them from the face of Him that cometh and from the wrath of the Lamb. I say these things because it is a very important matter in my own judgment and heart, to have a knowledge of sin, as I said at the beginning. The Scripture shows that God has much to do with sin. He speaks of it, He judges it, He describes it, and mercifully He teaches His people what it is.

In the text we have the work of the Spirit set forth. The context contains a promise of the coming of the Spirit in the event, the expedient event of Christ's going away: "If I go away; that is, if I die and through death go to My Father, if I die and put away sin, it is expedient that then I should take possession of the throne and of heaven in the name of My disciples; and when I go, I will not leave them orphans, comfortless, alone, I will send One to them who shall be with them and come by their side and help them and shall dwell in them. And when He comes He will do a great work; He will make men to whom He comes, in whom He dwells, know what sin is. And so this morning, if the Lord will help me, I shall speak to you about the gloomiest and blackest and the filthiest and the worst thing that exists in earth or in hell, that which depraves men, that which binds devils, that which kindles hellsin; that which is in our hearts whether we know it or notsin. Some may say, "Well but we all know this." I wish we did. And they may say therefore it is unnecessary that it should be dwelt upon. No, if we know it, it is still necessary, for the work of conviction does not end after the first work of grace. It goes on, and on, and on. The word "reproof" means to convince, to convict. By reasonings, by shining in, by proofs of wickedness, we are convinced, we are convicted, we are condemned. And this great work is done by a great God, the Holy Spirit, this blessed Spirit, holy, infinitely holy. He condescends to come and rake into the heart of a sinner and open to him his wickedness; show him the desperate condition of his nature and the condemned condition of himself as a person, a sinful man. He, the Spirit, shall convince of sin.

Sin is missing the mark; that is its first meaning, missing the mark. Missing the mark, that is to say, the end of His creation. Created for God, man soon sought to be for himself, and with his eyes opened Adam turned away from his God, his Creator, his Law-giver. He missed the mark when he became his own object, and sin was at once rooted in him and has ever since been rooted in him. It is in us rooted. But so subtle is it, and so has it blinded our understandings, and so has it warped our wills, and so has it captivated our affections, that we think it not to be what it really is. And this our evil condition is described in the word, "dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1,5) As a corpse, void of life, unconscious, incapable of feeling its condition, so is the soul of man, dead to God, unconscious of its condition, without feeling, "past feeling" as Paul has it: "Alienated from the life of God through ignorance and wicked works." (Eph. 4:18) The understanding is darkened and that is why we call evil good and good evil; bitter sweet and sweet bitter; for we have no understanding in things, that is in things that pertain to our best interests, in the things which lock us up in the embrace of death, in the things that fit us for perdition, because they are against God. Sin is the transgression of the law. (1 John 3:4) No law, no sin. "I had not known lust," says Paul, "except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." (Rom. 7:7) Law is a statute, a limitation. It tells a man what to do and what not to do, and that is a limitation, a statute, within which he is to live, if he breaks through he is a transgressor; if he breaks loose and through the hedges, there will be a serpent to bite him. This is sin, and here is the law that says: "Thou shalt not do this; thou shalt do that." It is bad to be a sinner; it is worse, if possible, to be ignorant of that condition.

Now let us look at this great work of the Spirit: "He shall reprove of sin." He shall open to a sinner his condition; He shall show him in some degree what the character of God is holy, holy, holy, and the sight shall have an immediate reflection upon his heart, and in the light thus conveyed the sinner shall see his sins and this shall be a terrible thing to him. It is a terrible thing to see sin in the light and convicting work of the eternal Spirit, the Spirit of God. All the men, all the Christian men in Jerusalem and in Damascus, if they could have been gathered together and had Saul of Tarsus in their midst and had preached Christ to him and produced evidences and proofs from the Scriptures that He who had been crucified recently was the promised Messiah all of them would but have provoked Saul to yet greater excesses of bitterness and desire to persecute. But O, when the light of Christ shined upon Saul and surrounded him with its brilliance and blinded him with its powerful shining, and Saul in reply to the question "Why persecutest thou Me?" heard the voice of the Lord saying to him, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," then was a work of conviction! It is nowhere recorded what Paul passed through in those three days during which he was blind and while he fasted, but men in this chapel who have had conviction of sin can understand a little of the anguish of his spirit, the fervent confession of his sin, the cries for mercy, the wonder if mercy would come; for it was a terrible thing that had opened to Saul, he was convinced of his sin.

There is a standard, dear friends, by which we must be judged and that standard is God's character as revealed in the law. That standard says, "Come to this or be lost," and when that standard is brought home to the heart and understanding, then is conviction. A sinner perceives that as a rational creature, God's creature, he ought not to be what he is and ought not to do what he does, and that being what he is against his creation and doing what he does against the law of God, he is a sinner, he is a sinner. He sees it in a light not to be disputed; he feels it in a life he does not understand; he realizes it in a power that presses the conviction in on his conscience and he is convinced. Now this conviction by the Holy Spirit enters into the root of the matter, for you find the law of God thus set forth: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment, and the second is like, namely this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Mark 12:30,31) You see in the words there is no open act referred to at all. It is love that is demanded. It is love that God requires. With all that you are and all the strength you have, you are to love God, and it is love to your neighbor that forbids a selfish act. It is love in your heart to your neighbor equal to the love you have for yourself.

Now the Spirit's light comes down into this, and though you may have been, may be, the most moral person on which no man could lay his hand in the law of this world, you would in the light of the Spirit showing you what the nature of unbelief is, confess yourself to be the most immoral person breathing God's air; for of all the immoralities that exist the root of all, the deepest and worst of all immoralities, you will find to be unbelief. And the light of God shines on it and a man sees it in his heart, and he unites then with the words in the confession of Hart. Speaking of unbelief he says, "Of all my sins the chief." It was the chief and the beginning of Adam's sin. He believed the representation of the devil rather than the commandment of God. He believed that which took hold of his mind. Hitherto pure, absolutely pure, it took hold of his mind, "Ye shall be as gods;" and that shining forbidden fruit took hold of him and he took it, and this was unbelief. Now that conviction of unbelief going right to the very root of the thing brings a person in guilty. This law was before God promulgated the law of the ten commandments. We Gentiles

have no excuse. The Apostle Paul in the Romans tells us this: "For we which have not the law" in the manner and form in which the Jews had it, says he, "have the law." We are without law in that peculiar form, but we have the law, and we see the work of the law and know it in our hearts. And the work of the law is this, that it touches the conscience and accusations are therefore the consequence: "Their consciences the meanwhile accusing or excusing one another among themselves." Accusation and excuses held, and that showed the work of the law in the consciences of these people. Ah, and when God does this it is as if His light fetches up from the corners and depths of our hearts our sins, our secret sinshatred of men, hatred of God, unbelief of God, wrong desires, pride of life, lust of the eyes, covetousness which is idolatry, bitterness, hatred which is murder in God's account. These things are opened and when they are opened to a man, then he groans, he sighs, he mourns; God is terrible to Him: "Say unto God, how terrible art Thou in Thy doings to the children of men." (Ps. 66:3) And this terrible business, that is to say, the terror that is occasioned by the work of the Spirit in conviction, every child of God knows in some measure. I am not saying how deep it shall be, how great and how lasting as to bondage felt, but I am saying what the work of the Spirit is, and may we not turn from it. I know there is an impatience of it in man. I know there is a wish to escape it in us, but it is a mercy to be not so. That bright shining that comes to an old man and makes him see things which in his earlier days he saw not; that shows him the extensiveness of sin, the depths of sin, the universality of sin in him; that all his members, his faculties, all his perception, all his understanding and all his affections and all the motions of his will are corrupted, and that he is incapable by nature of doing that which is good. "He shall convince," the Spirit shall do it.

The Spirit does it and it is a matter for thankfulness indeed wherever it is, because it brings the subject of so great, so wonderful a work to justify God, to condemn self. This conviction makes a man honest; it makes him confess to God whatever is discovered. It makes a child of God feel now he can see no word that could possibly be an exaggeration of the evil that is in him. It makes him honest; it makes him fearful; he wonders what God will do. It makes him understand the quaking of Moses on Mount Sinai; the falling flat on his face of Abraham when God came to him; it makes him enter into these things. He says, "Woe is me, woe is me!" Like Job, he said, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5) Job's ditch would be a blessing to some. Job's convictions would be a blessing to some who make a profession of religion. It is not a little mercy. Think who make the promise of the Spirit; think who told those disciples what the work of the Spirit should be, and then can you say it is not a mercy to be convinced? It is a mercy. Do men go to heaven ignorant of the hell they deserve? Do they come to know what it is to be made holy by being ignorant of their pollution? Is a guilty person justified while he is ignorant of his guilt? The Spirit's work is a most necessary work. It takes away self-justification; it makes, as I say, a man honest; it makes him fearful; it produces this sweet work of the Spirit, so bitter in our mouth; it produces strong cries, sincere confessions, and fleeing away from the wrath to come. When you see what sin is, it is dreadful; and when you see against whom you have committed it, it is more dreadful: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned and done this evil in Thy sight." (Ps. 51:4)

Now Christ said: "Of sin, because they believe not on Me." I have just said, and this word proves it to my own mind, that unbelief is the greatest immorality in the world. For what can be more immoral than to disbelieve the word and the Person of the Son of God? This is sin. This is the

chief of all sin: "They believe not on Me." (John 16:9) Now who can describe fully the exercise and trouble that this work of conviction will produce in a sinner. God is in His holy temple; He has reason to judge a sinner, and when God arises to judge a sinner how can that sinner stand? Think of it, you who have undergone this work and are undergoing it, for it is not done at once. You know what I say is true. It brings great concern. It has some peculiar effects which will distinguish all the subjects of it from heady, high-minded professors.

One is this, sooner or later, there is lodged and rooted in the heart and mind a true sense of helplessness. Paul had it: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not." (Rom. 7:18) When I would pray, then I do not. When I would love, enmity is present. When I would believe, unbelief troubles me and prevails. When I would do good, evil is present with me, and how to perform that which is good I find not; that is, do not know how to do it, have no power to do it. And this helplessness wrought in him this cry: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24) I am helpless, I am helpless, who shall deliver me? Is there a hand to help me? Is there a power to deliver me.

It produces hopelessness, not in God's mercy, but in self. "I thank God," said Paul "through Christ Jesus;" there was the victory. Hopelessness in self will be the sure effect. Perhaps it comes gradually, but it comes surely. It becomes rooted in the heart and conscience that in himself a sinner has no hope. He looks at his wrongs and is sorry, but he dare not after a time say, "I will not commit them again." No, the Spirit's convicting work cures a man in time of promising that he will do better in the future than he has done in the past. It brings him to utter hopelessness in himself. His powers are so corrupted, his understanding is so warped, his will is so perverse, that he now knows he can do nothing good, nothing. These are two effects which every child of God finds sooner or later in himself. He is helpless, he is hopeless; and now if there come not another to him, what can prevent the pit from shutting her mouth upon him? Here is the sinner. Talk of goodness in the creature, he says, "I have none." O but men will have it after all, that sincerity will please God! And the sinner says: "I wish I had even a little of that, but I have none of that." What! Yes, hypocrisy is in us. The best child of God would not dare to lift up his face to the Lord and say, "Lord, my sincerity is universal in me; it is prevalent in everything in me." He could say, "I am sincere in my desire to know God and to escape the wrath to come;" but who could dare to say that when he analyses he is constantly and universally sincere? O he is a poor ruined creature! When sin smote us to the earth, it did not half smite us down. When it touched our faculties, it did not half deaden them. When it polluted our nature, it did not leave some spots untouched. The work was complete, we are ruined.

He shall convince us of our enmity of God, that bitter feeling. Why perhaps some here would even now be disposed to say that whatever they are and whatever they possess naturally, they would gladly part with if they could feel one little feeling of love to the Almighty, but it is not there unless put there by the Spirit. "Jesus gives us pure affections." They do not exist in nature fallen. Conviction goes in several directions. First, backward. It went backward in David: "I was shapen in iniquity." (Ps. 51:5) He saw his beginning was wrong: "In sin did my mother conceive me." It comes on through life. Everything we have done was wrong; we see it to be. Something mars what you have done; some bad motive, some wrong aim, some infamous wish, you find to have marred everything you have done. What may shine amongst men is in your own eyes

hateful, because of the inward spring of that which was sinful. It goes forward: "What will become of me? Shall I die in my sins?" It goes upward by the moving of the Holy Spirit: "God be merciful to me a sinner." (Luke 18:13) It debases the creature exceedingly; the creature in his desire is lifted up by the Spirit to Jesus Christ to cry for mercy. He is lifted up in his prayers, and though hopeless in himself and though nearing the grave, perhaps after a long profession he says: "Now I have nothing I can look to in myself, nothing I can depend on that I have done, nothing I have done am I pleased with, seeing myself in the light of God's teaching, but and here is a ground but I hope in God's mercy in Jesus Christ."

And this blessed moving of his spirit and heart by the Holy Ghost brings him to a hope, a sweet hope, and also a believing venture; yes, "I venture all on One." "Naught have we to look unto, but the blood of Jesus." And here begins the dawn of day. I will say in every individual comes the dawn of a Christian's day, the dawn of Jesus Christ, the uprising of Him as the Son of Righteousness, so that the sinner feels, vile and lost though he is, there is in Christ reason for hope, ground for pleading, arguing, wrestling with God in prayer and supplication. Looking in his mind to hell he says, "There I deserve to be." Lifting his eyes in the power of the Spirit heavenward, he says: "There I long to be." Seeing Jesus the Saviour of the lost he says: "In Him I would be found, to Him would I run, on Him depend, to His blood would I go daily for cleaning and for mercy and for forgiveness."

The Spirit's work in conviction then is a saving work. Man may be cut to the heart by some natural feeling about sin and it will be healed and pass away, but when pricked and moved and touched and taught by the Holy Ghost the effect is an abiding effect. It does not pass away, it grows; so grows that the sinner more and more, the longer he lives, becomes convinced of sin. "Say unto God, how terrible art Thou in Thy doings." How terrible is this work, like the skilful surgeon, the Spirit comes and as it were says to the sinner, "This must be probed." The sinner winces, shrinks back, and would avoid the troublesome and painful operation if he could. But no, he is held to it, he must have these probes, and being honest he is brought to say: "Lord, help me to bear it; help me to look at the sight; help me to wait on Thee in it." It is great to be really held to convictions. "O but I am afraid!" You will be, and the more you are convinced, the more fearful of sin you will be, but the more precious will Christ be as He is made known by His good Spirit.

"He shall convince of sin," but "He shall glorify Me, for He shall receive of Mine and shall show it unto you." (John 16:14) Are you lost? He shows a Saviour. Are you naked? He convinces of a righteousness divine. Are you polluted? He opens a fountain and reveals it to a sinner as open. Are you fearful of coming? He says: "Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters." (Isa. 55:1) Are you really hopeless in yourself? He says, "From Me is thy help, in Me is all you need." So this work of the Spirit is very merciful, and it will bring you to value the blessed Rock of Ages and cleave to that and embrace it for want of a shelter. "He shall convince of sin." He shall do it. It is His work and there is mercy in it, unspeakable mercy in this work of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord grant we may not lack it. O think it not a dreadful thing, though in itself full of pain and shame, yet wrought by the Spirit, this conviction is sure to issue in the sweetest consolation, because Christ shall be known as the Friend of sinners.

Now my friends, I must leave this matter. It is solemn; but to escape it, to miss it, to miss the work of the Spirit, if I may so say, the initial step in the life of a Christian, the initial step toward heaven by a pilgrim, what is it? It is death. For how can you take the second step, faith in the Lord Jesus, if you never take this first step? How can you be a believer in redemption, if you are not first a believer in your bondage and your sin? And if you never mourn over sin in you, how can you ever come to rejoice in Christ Jesus? May the Lord then grant this merciful work to be in us, that in the end we may thank Him for His correction which has often perhaps been grievous to us and open the mercy of God through Jesus Christ. Amen.