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SERMON II.

THE NATURE OF SAVING FAITH.

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“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.”—Gal. v. 6.

“Purifying their hearts by faith.”—Acts xv. 9.

Two methods of salvation have, at different times, been proposed to mankind. One of these is by the law, and the other is by the gospel. The ultimate principles on which these two plans proceed, are essentially the same; the gospel, no less than the law, being founded in truth and righteousness. But the terms which they propound to mankind, are essentially different. The law demands obedience as the condition on which it will administer its rewards, and threatens disobedience with its penalties. Its language is, “The man that doeth these things, shall live by them.” Its further language is, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” This, then, is, in four words, the idea of the law—obedience rewarded, disobedience punished.

Now the gospel comes to those who have sinned, and have, for sin, been condemned; and proposes to save them in another method, and on peculiar terms. It introduces a new idea, the principle of faith. Its language is, “Whosoever believeth shall be saved.” Its further

language is, "Whosoever believeth not shall be damned." This, then, is, in a few words, the proposition of the gospel—the believer saved, the unbeliever destroyed. Belief, therefore, or faith, occupies, under the gospel, the place which obedience holds under the law. If you would be saved by the law, you must obey it: if you would be saved by the gospel, you must believe it.

Now, **WHAT IS FAITH?** I enter into no argument to show the importance of this question. Our salvation depends upon the possession of this grace, and a mistake in respect to it may be fatal. I propose, in this discourse, to institute an inquiry into the nature of the faith which saves the soul. I shall conduct the investigation by stating its most important elements, as they are disclosed in the Word of God.

First. I will speak of its *foundation*. It rests on the testimony of God.

Our whole knowledge is derived from three sources. One of these is our personal experience. We gain an acquaintance with the external world by the use of the senses. We see the forms of things, we hear the voices they utter, we feel their pressure, we taste the delicious fruit, we smell the fragrant flower. Consciousness reveals to us the world within—the intellect, the passions, the conscience, and the free and noble will. We repose the fullest confidence on the testimony of our senses respecting outer life, and on the testimony of consciousness respecting the inner life. This confidence is faith in our personal experience.

The circle of our information is greatly widened by what we learn from other men. We see through their eyes, and hear through their ears, and reach conclusions through the processes of their understandings. We have not seen Calcutta, or Jerusalem; we have not stood on

the banks of the Euphrates, or the Jordan; no living man has seen the temple of Solomon; yet, none doubt that these cities and rivers are, and that this temple once was. We have not searched into the grounds and principles of the sciences, yet we admit their facts and conclusions on the authority of the learned. This is faith in human testimony. On it rests our knowledge of whatever lies beyond the narrow limits of our own personal observation, and within the sphere of human sense and reason. The man is insane, or idiotic, who refuses to credit human testimony. He can know nothing of history, and comparatively nothing of passing events. He who loves any truth well enough to die for it, would as readily stake his life on facts ascertained by the testimony of others, as on those of which he is himself the witness.

But the domains of human knowledge enlarge immeasurably, when we receive as true the testimony of God. Now, we hear of past events, which were otherwise unknown. We learn that the world was made by the word of God's power, not from the testimony of our own experience, nor from the testimony of other men, but from that of the Creator himself. "By faith, we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God." The creation of angels, their original brightness, their apostacy, and their ruin—being thrust down to hell; the creation of man, his uprightness, paradise, the tree of life, the fruit of the forbidden tree, the mortal taste, his expulsion from Eden, his first experience of an earth cursed, of a body dying, and a soul debased and lost; all these things are known to us by the testimony of God only.

That testimony reveals to us, also, coming events. "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." This we believe by faith alone, for the human reason can detect no germ of life in the dissolving dust; nor can it discover a

ray of light in the dark precincts of the grave; nor are we endowed with the prophetic vision which, outrunning the deductions of reason, foresees the resurrection of the dead. We know, also, that God hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world; that the heavens and earth will flee away before the terrors of that scene; that the righteous and the wicked will stand before the bar of Christ, he sitting as God, because he is God; that the wicked shall depart from him into hell, and the righteous ascend with him into heaven. We know that these things will come, and will not tarry. We look, we hasten unto their approach, believing in the testimony of God.

In like manner we realize the existence of an unseen world. It is not the object of sense, nor is it discoverable by reason, but it is made known by the word of God. The Almighty now reigns in light inapproachable, yet we see no shining token of his glory. Christ, also, sits at the right hand of God, but we cannot gaze in upon his royal robe, nor upon his brow, on which are many crowns. "Whom, *not having seen*, we love." Heaven, while I speak these words, opens its gates of pearl upon streets of gold and waters of life, but we cannot catch a glimpse of its unfading splendor. Hell, also, rears its gloomy walls, and shoots up its lurid flames, yet we see not even the smoke of its torment. No vision of either world shines upon the mortal eye; no echo from either, the world of song or the world of wailing, breaks upon the ear. These are objects not of sense, nor reason, but of faith in the testimony of God.

Having thus discovered the foundation on which saving faith rests, we now mention,

Secondly, *its object*. The characteristic, controlling object which is apprehended by saving faith, is the Lord Jesus Christ. You believe that God made the worlds.

You do well: this is an historical faith. You believe that God will raise the dead, and judge them by that man whom he hath ordained. This is well: it is a faith in the vision of prophecy. You believe in the reality of an eternal state. This, too, is well: it is a faith in the Unseen. But there is a faith, higher, holier, more influential still—a faith in Christ. It is a grace, by which you “receive and rest upon him alone for salvation.” If you have this grace you are convinced, first, that you are sinners, justly condemned and lost; next, that you cannot recover yourselves, nor can all other creatures recover you out of your lost condition, nor will even God himself, out of Christ, save you: then you are persuaded that Christ is able and willing to save; further, you do rest upon him, and cleave to him for salvation, rejoicing to be saved by his grace, and to be governed by his commands; and further still, you embrace the promises and tremble at the threatenings of God, for this life and for that which is to come; “accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone, for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.” Such is the faith which saves. By that you recognize your sin, and your Saviour; you confess your guilt, and cleave to him who died to atone for it; you apprehend Christ, and apprehending, trust him, and trusting, love him, and loving, rejoice in him. That is the principle which, implanted and sustained in the heart, by the Spirit of God, renders your salvation, I do not say possible, but certain; nay, inevitable; nay, more, it renders the contrary eternally impossible, just as it is impossible for God to lie.

Thirdly. *This faith is an active principle.* Our text uses a strong term to express this sentiment:—“Faith that *worketh.*” Now men believe many truths, and believe them firmly, which exert over them no controlling power.

The sublime truths, for example, taught by the astronomer, are believed by every man who has investigated the science, and by multitudes who take them on trust. It is unquestionably true, that the planets are at given distances from the sun; that they revolve in their orbits, and around their centres in certain fixed periods; that the earth is one of these planets, and turns daily on its axis, and moves, yearly, through its pathway in the sky; that the fixed stars are suns, and are at immeasurable distances from us, and from each other. These truths are generally received, yet they do not "work" in your bosoms. You do not love or hate either God or man, nor do you choose or refuse the good or the evil in consequence of believing them. They make you no better and no worse, indeed, in no respect, morally, different from him who rejects these facts and theories, and holds by the old system of astronomy. In the same spirit many men receive the truths of religion. They believe that God made the worlds; that God will even judge the world; that there is a heaven and a hell; that Christ lived; that he died; yea, rather, that he is risen again; that he is even at the right hand of God, and maketh intercession for the saints. Yet their belief in these things is a dormant, or even a dead faith; it works not.

Here, then, we discover one of the essential elements of saving faith. It is a living, active principle. It is like leaven, hidden in the meal, but working therein, until it leavens the whole lump. Although faith be lodged in the heart, it does not sleep there. It is full of energy and outbursting strength. It is, in this respect, like the principle of the natural life, a secret, subtle substance, we know not what, hidden we know not where, coming and going we know not how, yet working in every joint and member of the human body. It glistens in the eye, it glows in the cheek, it whispers or thunders in the voice, it

swells in the bosom, it leaps in the pulse, it gives to the hand its cunning, and to the foot its swiftness; it rages in the tumult of human passion, and smiles on the peaceful scene when the storm is over. Now, you must not think it strange, that a religious faith is also a life, a vital principle. You should not deem this one of the incomprehensibles of Christianity. Patriotism works in the bosom where its sacred fire is kindled. Parental love is something more than a fond idea; it works where it abides. Your love of the world is no inert, dormant abstraction, slumbering in your bosoms. It is alert, and enterprising, and energetic, working ever, we fear, to your undecaying. If you hate your enemies, that is a wild and furious passion, and not a mere conception resting on the heart, like the shadow on a rock. It is full of vitality. It plagues your enemies and torments yourself.

We do not speak mysteries, therefore, when we say that faith, like other principles in the soul, good and bad, is clothed with activity and power, and that it discovers its earnest nature by appropriate manifestations. From the fact of its activity, we turn to consider,

Fourthly, *the method by which it works*. "It worketh by love." There are several emotions through which the human will is swayed. The most influential are these three: Hope, Fear, and Love. Hope has vast power over man. In the ordinary affairs of life, it enables him to overcome difficulties, which were otherwise insurmountable. In the religious experience, a good hope is declared in Scripture to be "the anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast." And, "we are saved by hope." A being without hope, is a being without God in the world. Yet this is said of the Christian hope only, as it is associated with other graces. We need other bonds to hold us to our allegiance, besides the single bond of hope. This

principle contemplates objects that are afar off—in a distant world and in a future state. We are, by reason of sin, at so great a distance from God, that we feel but feebly the drawings of the heavenly world; like stars, shooting so far away from their spheres, as to lose, almost, the attractions of the central body. We need, therefore, a faith which, associated with hope, works by another and more controlling principle of grace.

Fear has wonderful power over the soul. The law addresses our fears, and God has given us fears to be addressed. It is but an empty boast of the wicked man, that he is not afraid of hell. Let him but realize the truth; let hell be uncovered before him, and it is not in human nature, it is not in any created nature, though of higher and firmer structure than that of man, to feel no fear. Sinners are not afraid, because they do not believe. The devils believe, and they tremble. These have the faith of an appalling experience, by which they know that there is a hell; and the faith of appalling guilt, by which they know that they cannot escape from its torments; a faith that works by fear, a terrible and excruciating faith. This is just the faith of the wicked. So far as they believe, they are miserable. They see nothing in religion but gloom, nothing in Christ but a final judge, nothing in God but a consuming fire. They choose not to believe; or if the truth force itself on their consciences, they try to drown its voice in care, or pleasure, or wickedness.

Far different in its nature and effects is the principle of love. It is not like fear, filling the mind with terror; nor is it like hope, fastening itself on some far-away good, which it must wait for, long and patiently. It realizes vividly the excellencies of its object. It discovers things invisible, and brings distant objects near. The Apostle expressly states, that love is better than hope, and better

than faith, in itself considered. "Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love."

Faith, working by hope, is often enfeebled by the remoteness and dimness of the things hoped for. Faith, working by fear, brings eternity near to the soul; it summons forth, from the dark bosom of the future, all frightful forms and visions, all dreadful wailings and cries. Faith, working by love, does what hope cannot do; it makes the world to come a present and vivid reality;

"Far into distant worlds she pries
And brings eternal glories near."

And further, unlike fear, which terrifies the soul, love wins its affections; it teaches the heart to shoot forth its tendrils and to bind up itself with holy objects. God is love. He that loveth is born of God. A faith that works by love, assimilates the heart to God. This remark, however, introduces another topic.

Fifthly. *The effect of saving faith on its subject.* The Scripture which we have adopted into our text from the Acts of the Apostles, teaches us that, by this grace, God "purifies the heart." This is a capital point in the case. It tests both the genuineness of faith and the power with which it worketh.

Let us analyse the process. First, faith brings near to the believer spiritual objects. It brings Christ near with his atoning blood. It brings heaven near with its purity and its joy. Next, it enables the mind to discern these. The natural man cannot comprehend them, they being spiritually discerned. Further, this faith makes the Saviour the object of devout contemplation. And further yet, working by love, it fastens the affections supremely upon the Saviour. Finally, this blessed object, thus loved and adored, reacts upon the heart with an elevating and purifying power. It is a law of human nature, that the character of man

conforms itself to that which gains his highest affections. He who loves money supremely, becomes sordid; he who loves pleasure, becomes sensual. He, whose heart is fixed on base objects, is gradually but inevitably debased; and his spirit gravitates towards their low mean level. But if his thoughts and affections be occupied with things pure and lovely, his whole being is lifted up into their clear sweet atmosphere. He is purified, too, by what attracts him. This principle has a thousand illustrations in the works of God. The insect takes its hue from the leaf on which it rests. The bird and the rose borrow their tints from the sunlight which bathes both plumage and flower. When God brings the winds out of his treasuries, they are all pure and fresh alike. But how are these changed by what they gather up in every land and every sea. They blow from the north, giving snow like wool, and scattering the hoar frost like ashes. They return from the weary journey of Sahara, breathing forth, like a furnace, their scorching and suffocating heat. Laden with infection from inhospitable shores, or with fragrance from spicy groves, the pestilential or the aromatic gale visits the voyager, when far out upon the sea. The great globe itself is lighted up and warmed by the orb around which it moves. If the light of the sun were quenched, the earth, chained to a dark and frozen centre, would wheel along its pathway in eternal night, and ice, and death.

No principles are better established than those which are involved in these illustrations. Now when you read in Scripture, the caution, "Love not the world, nor the things of the world," and when you read, again, that "The friendship of the world is enmity with God," do not think these to be arbitrary or unreasonable decrees. They are founded in the truest philosophy touching man, as well as

in the purest piety towards God. He that loves the world, becomes, by the very force of that affection, earthly and grovelling. He who bows his face into the dust, gathers defilement upon his brow. Nor does the command to love God rest upon other than the highest reason. Love to a being so holy and glorious, lays upon the soul the grasp of an upward attraction and of a transforming energy. He who communes with God, brings forth from the presence chamber a shining face.

These remarks unfold the principle contained in the text, that, through the faith which works by love, God purifies the heart. He who truly loves the Lord Jesus, opens his heart to influences which will discharge his corrupt affections, and assimilate him to Christ. This, indeed, is precisely the explanation which the Apostle gives of the matter. He speaks of Christ under the figure of a mirror, in which is reflected the whole glory of God. Then he adds these remarkable words: "We all beholding, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord." How impressive the statement! "*We beholding—are changed!*"

I have now mentioned five elements of saving faith. It rests on the testimony of God; its object is the Lord Jesus; its nature is vital and active; it works by love; it purifies the heart.

I will add two or three practical remarks, suggested by what has been now advanced, and close this discourse.

First. Our subject *indicates the difference between the religion of form, and the religion of a saving faith.* "Neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but faith that worketh by love." There is, here, a broad distinction taken between the rite of circumcision and true piety, and with this distinction is

associated the statement, that it is the faith, and not the form, that saves the soul. This principle has an instructive application to one of the most serious of modern errors in religion.

It is our persuasion, that baptism holds to Christianity the relation in which circumcision stood to Judaism. Now these two ordinances show their affinity to each other, in nothing more remarkable than in the circumstance, that the doctrine of baptism is now perverted precisely as was that of circumcision. In the age of Christ and the Apostles, it was the belief of many, that circumcision was, in some sense, a saving ordinance. It is now the conviction of many, that baptism is of saving efficacy. The baptismal regeneration of our time, may find its exact counterpart in the circumcisonal regeneration of the former time; and what we now have to meet is, identically, the same error, under another aspect, which Paul confuted. And we preserve absolutely, the sentiment of the Apostle when we tell you, that, as the ground of salvation, in Christ Jesus, neither baptism, nor the want of it, availeth any thing, but faith that worketh by love.

Your attention must have been arrested by the remark of Paul to the Corinthians, as bearing on this error. In his first Epistle to those brethren, he remonstrates with them in respect of the divisions which prevailed among them. These dissensions appear to have arisen, in some measure, from the partiality which the people severally entertained for those ministers and apostles who had baptized them. One was of Paul, another of Apollos, and another of Cephas. In the course of his remonstrance, the Apostle exclaims, "I thank God, that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; lest any should say, that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized, also, the household of Stephanas; besides, I know not whether

I baptized any other." Now if baptism be a saving ordinance, or even if it be, in some mystical way, essential to a true regeneration, is it not exceedingly strange, that Paul should deliberately thank God that he had baptized, in the whole city of Corinth, two persons only, and the household of another? He then adds: "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Upon the supposition, that baptism hath an inherent power to save the soul, how shall we understand the fact, that Christ sent him not to baptize? And how shall we explain the circumstance, that Jesus Christ baptized not at all, if so be that ordinance introduces sinners into the kingdom of God?

Nay, nay, brethren; baptism is not the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Water is the emblem of His cleansing power, but is not the hiding place of that power. Simon Magus was baptized by an Apostle, yet that Apostle afterwards perceived, that the sorcerer was still a sorcerer; "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity." Regeneration is something more than an outward washing. It is a baptism, not of water only, but of blood and of fire; nay, it is the work of the fire and the hammer; nay, more, it is the sword, piercing to the dividing asunder of the soul and the spirit; it is even a new creation, and a resurrection of the dead.

Secondly. *Our doctrine of justification by faith, supplies a powerful motive to holiness.* There are those, I know, who think otherwise. They pretend, indeed, that this doctrine leads to impiety and vice. If, say they, a man believe that he is to be saved by what he does, he will do his best; if works save, he will see well to it that his works are good, that his heart is pure, and his life holy. But if he believe that he is to be saved by his faith alone, he will conclude that good works are unnecessary; he will

rely on his faith, and be careless as to his life. This is the argument of the objector.

But the objection overlooks, wholly, the nature of the faith by which we are saved. It is a peculiar and powerful principle of goodness, implanted and sustained by the Holy Spirit. First, it worketh—it is a living, energetic principle. Secondly, it works by love; it is indissolubly associated with love to God and man. Thirdly, by it, God purifies the heart, discharging its corrupt propensities, and pervading it with the spirit of holiness. This is the nature of the faith by which we are justified. A living principle, working by love, bringing man's character into harmony with the Divine nature,—it vindicates itself against all the cavils of the disputer. The objection we have in hand was once well stated, thus: "If I believed that I am to be saved by my faith, and not by my works, I would take my fill of sin." The reply was admirable: "How much sin, think you, would it take to fill a Christian?" If the faith by which we are saved, be only another name for holiness, or, at the very least, if it involve, by absolute necessity, the possession of practical godliness where now is the force of the objection? It works by love to God, and, therefore, by hatred to sin; it works, also, by love to man, and, therefore, teaches the faithful to love their fellow men; it lifts up the soul into communion with God, and thereby, transforms the man after the image of God. Does such a grace lead to sin? Does justification, by such a faith, encourage disobedience to the law, and contempt for its author? Indeed, we may boldly say, that this faith is not more remarkable in saving the soul from hell, than in delivering it from sin. Nay, its transforming power is identical and co-extensive with its saving efficacy.

It were easy to show that this faith is the only true spring of all holy endeavors. It is the power of God unto

salvation. It is a spirit of gentleness, working by love, but it is a spirit of energy, overcoming the world. Christ declares that even a little faith—a portion like a grain of mustard seed—is sufficient to remove the mountains. The fulfilment of his words has far exceeded their promise. It has subdued kingdoms; it has stopped the mouths of lions; it has quenched the violence of the fire; it has restored to women their dead raised to life again; it has strengthened others, when tortured, to accept no deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. The evidences of its might in achieving, and its patience in suffering, have been borne aloft, on earth and in heaven, by a “great cloud of witnesses,” of whom the world was not worthy.

Thirdly. Our subject suggests a *serious thought to the impenitent*. Under the gospel, one thing is absolutely indispensable. That one thing is faith. “He that believeth shall be saved”—this is the truth as it is in Jesus, conveyed in the very words of Jesus. “He that believeth not shall be damned”—this is equally true in the sentiment, and exact in the words, of that same Jesus. And this is the whole truth. There is no hope for the man that will not believe—none whatever. For this faith there can be no possible substitute; for the want of it, there can be no possible excuse. Neither baptism, however administered, nor the Lord’s Supper, with whatever consecration dispensed, can take its place. Neither prayers, nor tears, nor self-tortures, nor even martyrdom itself, can help the sinner who will not believe. Nor man, nor angel, nor, with reverence be it spoken, can the Great God himself, deliver him from death who rejects the Eternal Son. For such an adversary “there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation.” Your eternal destiny will, at last, turn upon the one simple question, whether you have received Christ

by a living, loving, purifying faith. The determination of this question will determine, unchangeably, whether you shall come forth unto the resurrection of life, or unto the resurrection of damnation; whether you shall have boldness or terror in the day of judgment; whether you shall stand on the right hand of the Judge, or on his left; whether you shall hear from his lips the "Come, ye blessed," or the "Depart, ye cursed;" and whether you shall utter for ever the song or the wail.