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THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE GOSPEL.

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“ Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature : old things are passed away ; behold, all things are become new.”—
2 COR. V. 17.

A NOTED scoffer was once arrested in his noisy invective against Christianity by two simple questions, to which a direct and candid answer was challenged : What would be the effect upon the world if all men were sincere Christians ? and, on the other hand, what would be the effect upon the world if all men were consistent infidels ? In the silence which followed these questions was manifested the skeptic's defeat. For you observe that he could not return a truthful answer to one or the other without abandoning his own case. The argument is a valid one, founded upon the moral effect of the two systems as compared one with the other. If Christianity is found to be a system whose principles, heartily adopted, will relieve the world of most of the evils by which it is oppressed and convert this earth into a paradise, then, surely, it is the last of all systems that men ought to decry. If, on the other hand, infidelity, overturning Christianity, destroys the foundations on which all virtue and morality are based, then it is the last of all systems that ought to be upheld. The text sets forth this transforming power of the gospel over the characters and lives of men.

I need scarcely pause to expound the beautiful, though simple, expression, "if any man be in Christ Jesus"; for you remember there are two correlative expressions—to be in Christ, is one; for Christ to be in us, is the other; and these two expressions are employed in the New Testament to cover, upon the right hand and upon the left hand, the whole gospel. To be in Christ is to be united to him by a living faith; so that we are clothed with his righteousness and, as is beautifully expressed in another Scripture, "We are accepted in the beloved." Christ is in us when the Holy Spirit forms the image of Christ in our hearts. We are made new creatures in him; and then the Spirit carries forward the work of sanctification, until at length we are translated to the world of glory.

If any man be in Christ, then, he is entirely transformed; "old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new." But let us precisely understand the nature of the claim; it is by no means affirmed that all who profess Christianity experience, in like degree, this transforming change. Alas, my hearers, many who profess to be the children of God are in "the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity." The number is larger still of those converted by the Spirit of God, who are, nevertheless, imperfectly developed Christians. And in none of those who are the purest and best is this development completed till death. Not till then is the likeness to Christ made perfect by the last touches of the divine artist, and we are delivered forever from the presence and being of sin, as before we were, in a measure, delivered from its power and dominion. But, in all stages of the work, the nature and the reality of this transforming change may distinctly be traced.

What is it, then, which gives to the gospel its trans-

forming power? How comes it to pass that whenever it takes hold upon the sinner it makes him a new creature—old things passing away and all things becoming new? I have three special answers to return to this question, all which are so important that I must break each into distinct specifications.

I. The gospel has this transforming power over the characters and lives of men BECAUSE IT UNDERTAKES TO DEAL WITH SIN IN ITS ESSENCE AND ROOT, AND NOT WITH SIN IN ITS EXTERNAL FORMS OR OUTWARD MANIFESTATIONS. In this particular you perceive that the gospel is separated, by a long interval, from all the systems of moral reform which are devised by men. We have associations for the suppression of intemperance and of gambling. We have voluntary organizations, by precept and example to build up specific virtues in the world. All these associations, however praiseworthy, are, from the very statement of the case, merely palliative, whilst the gospel claims to be distinctly remedial. These schemes of reform strike at particular evils; they lop off the diseased branches of the tree. The gospel undertakes to go behind all these down to the sin, which lies at the root of every vice. It undertakes to effect a radical cure—not to remove the diseased limb of the tree, but to engraft upon the trunk, and to send down into its roots the virtue of a new life. The gospel transforms the character of man and makes him a new creature in Christ for the simple reason that it deals with sin in its interior nature rather than in its external form. This will be made plain if we view the gospel under four different aspects.

1. *It is the only system which undertakes to provide a perfect pardon and to readjust man's relations to the violated law.* In every government, human or divine, the first

thing to be considered is our relation to the law. Immediately upon transgression, the law seizes the offender's person, brings him before the tribunal of justice, convicts him under the evidence, fixes upon him the sentence of condemnation, and holds him in prison, awaiting the execution of the penalty. Of necessity, therefore, in seeking relief, his first concern will be to settle with the law and to cancel its indictment. It does not make a particle of difference, at the first, how the man feels as to his transgression; whether he glories in it, or is sorry for it; whether, if released from punishment, he will lead a life of obedience or repeat his trespass to the end. The first and absorbing question is how to escape the infliction of the penalty which he has incurred. How shall he come forth from the shadow of his prison and walk in the free air of heaven with an erect form, and look without a blush in the faces of other men.

Now, this is just what the gospel undertakes to do for the sinner. It provides a perfect pardon, and secures it upon principles of strict justice and law. The imperfection of human government is in nothing more manifest than in the fact that it never can exercise mercy except at the expense of justice. The criminal can never escape the penalty without inflicting a certain amount of injury upon the country and the law. If he escape by any defect in the evidence he is turned loose again to prey upon society as before. If executive clemency sets aside the deliberate judgment of the court, a shock is given to the stability of government by the collision between its two departments, which ought to be mutually supporting. But in the gospel, the justice and integrity of God are as completely vindicated as in the punishment of the transgressor. Whilst the sinner escapes the penalty, the law of God is more firmly established than before.

Such a pardon, in which every claim of law is satisfied, goes to the root of the sinner's case, so far as his guilt is concerned, for the reason that it is a pardon which can be sealed upon the conscience and give it perfect peace.

2. The gospel provides that *the sinner shall, by repentance, put away the sin from himself*. Not only does God cast his iniquities into the sea and remember them against him no more, but his grace enables the sinner to concur in a solemn act of repudiation on his part also, whereby he is doubly separated from the sins which he bewails. It is thus expressed by the Apostle Paul: "That I may win Christ and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." The first element in repentance is, of course, a true knowledge of sin—its very nature being opened to the spiritual eye so as to be seen in its hidden deformity. The second element is a thorough hatred of that sin, the vileness of which is so clearly perceived, and then bitter grief for its commission. After this comes the honest endeavor to turn away from it. Thus repentance, like a sharp sword, cleaves between a man and his sins—causes them to be cast behind his back with a most thorough repudiation—and leads him to strive with a vigorous purpose after new obedience. What a wonderful system! which not only blots out the sin from the divine record, but gives power to the transgressor himself to put the offence away, as disowned and rejected forever! In striking thus directly at the dominion of sin, no less than its guilt, the remedial character of the gospel is disclosed.

3. *In the new birth is communicated a superior and divine life to the soul* "dead in trespasses and sins." The spirit-

ual life, which man possessed before the fall, consisted in the holiness of nature in which he was created. In the loss of his original rectitude, man became spiritually dead. Hence, in the definition of original sin, as given in our standards, this "want of original righteousness" is placed between "the guilt of Adam's first sin" and "the corruption of our whole nature," as being the nexus by which the two are bound together. The legal process may be briefly stated thus: Adam being constituted in the covenant the representative and head of his posterity, his act, whether of obedience or of sin, would, by virtue of this headship, become putatively their act. The legal effect of this imputation of Adam's sin would be to separate man from God, with the consequent loss of that holiness in which he was created—and upon the loss of this original righteousness the entire corruption of nature must ensue. When, therefore, Christ, the second Adam, takes the sinner's place under the law, and satisfies its claim, the righteousness of the substitute is reckoned to the sinner as his own—precisely as before in the imputation of the first Adam's transgression. The guilt being now removed, and the sinner being legally restored to the divine favor, the spiritual life, which had been forfeited under the curse, must be restored. This is done by the Holy Spirit in the new birth, whereby the sinner is quickened into spiritual life through the principle of holiness once more implanted in the soul.

In the power of this new and divine life the sinner puts forth the act of faith which appropriates Christ's righteousness, and takes into actual possession what had previously been legally reckoned as the ground of reconciliation with God. By the same power he exercises also the repentance above described, by which he be-

comes, on his part, separated practically, as before legally, from the sins he deplors. In the impartation of this new life is begun the process by which the sin is eventually destroyed, whose guilt has already been pardoned, and its dominion already broken. But this introduces to the topic of the section that follows.

4. As stated above, the salvation of the sinner is not completed without *the entire elimination of sin from the nature itself*, in the sanctification and glorification of the believer. Language and thought alike fail in depicting this blessed consummation. It almost staggers belief that man shall not only be delivered from the dominion of sin, but eventually from its very presence and being. We accept it only upon the divine testimony, and because it is the logical outcome of the scheme of grace itself. If, in regeneration, a divine life is communicated to the sinner, its characteristic energy must, by its own expulsive force, drive out the sin which obstructs its growth. The power of sin is daily weakened, and there comes a moment, it may be in the instant of death, when the last stain is washed away in the Saviour's atoning blood, and the being of sin is forever destroyed in the soul. Transformed into the image of his divine Redeemer and Head, the believer ascends to heaven with a nature as holy as that in which he first came from his Creator's hand. The peer now of spotless angels who never sinned, he teaches them the song of redeeming grace, to which they can only respond in the mighty chorus, "Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever."

Is not the gospel, then, a glorious remedy for sin, going down to its root to destroy it there in the very seat of its life? It seals upon the conscience a perfect pardon,

which takes away all guilt; it cuts out the cancer from the man himself through the surgery of an honest repentance; it breathes a divine life into the soul that was separated from God, and completes its beneficence by the extirpation of sin itself and the transfiguration of the saint in glory. Here is no palliation of an inveterate disease, but its radical cure in a fourfold deliverance from the *punishment*, the *dominion*, the *pollution*, and the *being* of sin. Well may the apostle say, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

II. The gospel is thus transforming in its influence BECAUSE THE POWER IS DIVINE BY WHICH IT WORKS. It is a law of nature that, wherever there is motion there is power behind it as the cause. Now, when you ask for the power by which this transformation is wrought in the character of the sinner, the answer ascribes the change to the power of God alone. There are one or two specifications under this head also:

1. *It is the concurrent power of each person of the Godhead in their official distinction.* God, in the Scriptures, is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. These are plainly distinguished from each other, so that the Father is never confounded with the Son, nor the Son with the Spirit. Offices are assigned to each, which are so distinctive that they can neither be transposed nor consolidated. Affections are attributed to them which belong only to persons, such as anger and grief. The distinction, therefore, is not of attributes belonging to, nor of relations and offices discharged by, one and the same individual, but it is a distinction of persons in the adorable Trinity, who are yet revealed, however incomprehensible the mystery, as the one only living and true God.

It follows, from this unity of being, that the trinity of persons must concur in every action of the Deity, whether it be in creation, providence, or grace. We accordingly find in the Scriptures all the divine works referred now to one and now to another of these three persons respectively. The distinct agency of each is, however, not clearly drawn until we come to the scheme of redemption. As to the works of creation and providence, the distinction is sufficiently intimated as the exercise of power *from* the Father, *by* the Son, and *through* the Spirit; *from* the Father, in the way of original and supreme authority; *by* the Son, in the way of immediate efficiency; *through* the Spirit, in the way of a completing and applying agency.

If this distinction should appear to you vague and uncertain, it becomes amazingly clear and full in the scheme of grace. In this the Father, as the first in the order of thought, is the immediate representative of the Godhead (holds in his hands the reins of universal empire), administers the law and fastens its penalty upon the transgressor. It is the office of the Father, in the covenant of redemption, to accept the Son as the sinner's substitute under the law; to give the commission under which this Son shall act as the Mediator; to accept the sacrifice by which man's sin is expiated; to justify all those to whom this perfect righteousness is imputed; and to crown this Redeemer and all his seed with everlasting glory. The Son, in the distinction of his personality as the Son, undertakes the sinner's cause; endures the penalty of sin in his stead; renders the obedience in which he had failed; ascends to heaven to plead the merit of his sacrifice; sues out the sinner's right to pardon and life, and sends forth the Holy Spirit under his royal commission to work this complete salvation

into the experience of men. Whilst the Holy Ghost, the third of this trinity in unity, reserves to himself the final office in this scheme of grace, in applying the redemption purchased by Christ and making the believer meet for glory and immortality beyond the grave.

Here, then, is not only divine power, but that power concurrently wielded by each person of the Godhead in each of the three parts of the scheme of grace. How can it fail to produce the effect which is stated in the text? If the power of the Father decreeing this salvation, and the power of the Son executing it, and the power of the Holy Spirit applying it—if it all bears directly upon the sinner's case, he must be changed into the image of his Creator, from glory unto glory. The immediateness of this applied power from each of the persons of the Godhead gives additional security to the result, leaving no opportunity for the intrusion of any disturbing agency which shall arrest the completion of that which grace has begun.

2. *It is power springing out of spontaneous love; not intermittent, but constant.* There are those of scientific taste who amuse themselves with the effort to discover perpetual motion, just as the alchemists of old sought for the water of life, or labored to transmute the baser metals into gold. Assuming that for all movement there must be a force, and endeavoring by a combination of natural forces to compensate for the loss of energy experienced in producing motion, they hope to arrive at movement which shall never cease. But the secret of all force is found at last in the divine will; and God's will is always effective, because God always lives. Interpose as many secondary causes as you please, you are compelled, by the law of thought which seeks for the efficiency of every cause, to ascend to the eternal purpose

and thought of the infinite Jehovah. Multiply the links as you may, you must have at last the ring-bolt which suspends the chain from the arm of him who is himself uncaused.

But we would be overwhelmed by this conception of infinite power if it were not the free movement of infinite love as well. "Herein is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." It is power, indeed; but power springing from a nature of love, always under the direction of infinite wisdom and benevolence. It will, therefore, be a constant force, carrying the provisions of the gospel to their last result. When power and love combine the believer may well utter the triumphant challenge, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Nay, in all things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."

3. *It is the power pledged in the stipulations and promises of the divine covenant.* The pledge, you perceive, is two-fold, in the stipulations between the parties to the covenant, and in the promises made to those who receive its benefits. But who are the parties? Only the persons of the adorable Godhead. Far back in the silence of past eternity, before sun, moon, or stars shone in the firmament, or any creature had been fashioned—in the far-off ages when only God was, the Eternal Three devised the scheme by which man should be released from the thralldom and guilt of sin. The distribution of offices, which must be severally discharged, involved certain stipulations between those who assumed the various parts. The Father gave to the Son those whom he should redeem; the Son came under obligation to rescue these from eternal death: the Holy Ghost gave his pledge to apply this redemption to all those for whom it

was wrought. Can this solemn compact fail without a rupture in the Godhead?

The salvation thus secured under these mutual stipulations is made over to the sinner under "exceeding great and precious promises" which are "yea and amen in Christ Jesus." With what tender emphasis our faith is here assured. Wherever the sinner is found on the face of the earth, the gospel comes with its repeated "Verily, verily, I say unto you." Yes, sinner, yes, it constantly proclaims, Whosoever believeth shall be saved. Then comes the blessed "Amen"; the benediction which follows the affirmation and seals the promise under its own exultation. "So be it," sounds the triple voice in the pavilion of the Godhead! "So be it," says the law in the person of the Father; "So be it," cries divine mercy in the person of the Son; "So be it," cries infinite grace in the person of the Holy Ghost. The grand "Amen" rings through the upper temple in the song of angels, while the glad echo goes up from a redeemed earth to give a new tone to the music of heaven.

Surely, he who trusts in the Lord Jesus plants his feet upon a rock—upon the Rock of Ages, the eternal rock; the rock of God's own rectitude, his infinite justice and unchangeable truth. With such guarantees, the gospel can never fail to accomplish its last result in the transfiguration of the believer.

III. The gospel is thus transforming in its power BECAUSE IT BRINGS THE WHOLE AGENCY OF MAN INTO CO-OPERATION WITH THAT OF GOD. God is unchangeable in his works as well as in his being. Having made man holy and put him under law, he will never contravene the principles of this economy, but will hold him to his responsibility in the scheme of salvation as distinctly as in the fall. No man ever trusted in the Saviour

without a consciousness of his concurrence in the acceptance of the "great salvation." The pardon is never sealed upon us until we embrace him who offers it. Not only in the first exercise of faith and repentance is this human concurrence brought into view, but through the long conflict with indwelling sin, and in the assured hope with which the Christian mounts from the bed of death to sit at the right hand of the King in his glory. It is in the free play of all his faculties, as they are emancipated from the bondage of sin, the transforming energy of divine grace finds its manifestation.

Arresting all discussion at this point, I press upon your attention one or two practical inferences. The first is, *the grave responsibility which is herein laid upon God's children.* So far as the Scriptures inform us, redeemed sinners are the only representatives of God's most majestic work, and of the most important and holy principles which he has undertaken to reveal to the creature. What a responsibility! We undertake to say to the universe that there is pardon, consistent with holiness, justice and truth, for the sinner that will accept it. Is our testimony challenged, and do we say the Bible affirms it? Let the Bible speak for itself. God is his own witness when he puts these immortal truths on record in this book. But when we are asked about this pardon we must draw the answer from our own experience, because the pardon purchased with blood has been sealed upon our conscience, and has given us peace and "joy in the Holy Ghost." Upon this personal knowledge our testimony must be based. We say the power of this gospel is seen in making the Christian purer and holier, until at last he is made perfect in Christ's image. How do we know it? The Scriptures affirm it. But

where is our testimony corroborating the truth of God's holy word unless we experience this deliverance from the power and dominion of sin?

What an august testimony to bear before the world! Angels bend from their high places in order to hear it; and the world in which we live holds us under their jeers and taunts if we do not act consistently with these high professions. For this reason, God converts men in all conditions of life. The King upon his throne is made a witness and the beggar on the street, that in all these walks of life men may testify to the riches and efficacy of divine grace.

My brethren, this should be with us the main business and purpose of life. The first question which should come to every professing Christian is, whether this or that consists with his character as a child of God. We have no right to put our testimony under suspicion by being anywhere where a Christian ought not to be—by doing anything which a Christian ought not to do. Is the responsibility fearful? Let us remember that it is also a blessed responsibility. The joy of life is found in its weighty trusts. It is worth little if we cannot testify to some truth, and throw out some principle which shall help our fellow-men on their ascending path from earth to heaven. Just because these responsibilities are so immense, they ought to be taken by us as a crown of glory. And we shall be upon the edge of the millenium when the church herself shall fully recognize the binding nature of her own vow of consecration; when she shall consent to draw the line exactly as the world draws it, sharp and clear betwixt themselves and us.

The second inference is, that *the only hope of a perishing world is in the gospel of the grace of God*. The reformation from external vices may bring relief to society

from many ills which oppress it, but they work no radical cure, even of these. The waters can be healed only in the fountain from which they flow. And let the unconverted man see how all practical difficulties are removed out of the way of his salvation. He says, with a strange orthodoxy availing himself of a truth which he detests, that he has no power to believe or repent and turn away from sin. Grant it; but here is the power, in God if not in man; and all that power is offered without reserve to those who will simply yield to its exercise. The sinner is conscious of power to resist God's truth. We ask that he shall cease this resistance, and not grieve the Holy Spirit by smothering his convictions of sin. It is true, there is no power in the unrenewed man to turn from sin to holiness; but there is power in God, and the only hope for a world of sinners is, that they will become "willing in the day of his power," and appear before his throne at last as the drops of the morning dew.