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John T. Pressly

Pastor of the First United Presbyterian Church, Allegheny City, Pa.
Moderator of the United Presbyterian Synod 1858

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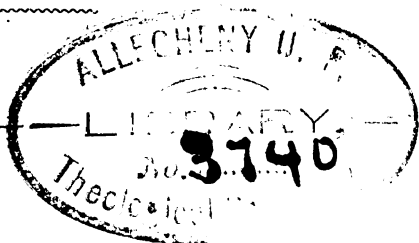
SERMONS BY THE MINISTERS

OF THE

FOUR SYNODS OF THAT DENOMINATION.

EDITED BY

REV. JAMES PRESTLEY.



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SERMON II.

THE GRACE OF CHRIST.

BY REV. J. T. PRESSLY, D. D.

*Pastor of the A. R. Church, and Professor of Theology in the A. R. Theological
Seminary, Alleghany, Pa.*

"Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for
your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich."

2 Cor. 8: 9.

It is a striking peculiarity of that system of religion which is revealed in the Bible, that it proposes to meliorate the moral condition of man, by first changing his heart, and then regulating his life. Viewing the moral condition of man in the light of truth; contemplating the human character as it really is; looking fairly at the fact, that the heart of man, is not right with God, and consequently that the very fountain of moral action is poisoned, the primary object of that religion of which Jesus Christ is the author, is to change the heart. From the heart, proceed evil thoughts, and these display themselves in murderous and unhallowed practices. And according to the philosophy of the Bible, the only effectual way to check the flow of these deadly streams, is to purify the fountain.

But overlooking the true character of man's condition as a sinner, the various systems of false religion which have prevailed in the world, have expended their feeble energies, in endeavoring to restrain and control the evil propensities of our depraved nature, while they have neglected to purify the fountain in which they originate. And hence it came to pass,

that under the influence of paganism, so far was the moral condition of the world from being improved, that every species of wickedness became prevalent, until the most impious and horrid abominations were incorporated with the very services of religion. And such was the moral condition of the world, when Jesus Christ appeared on earth, the light of the world. In that system of religion which he delivered to mankind, it is an elementary principle, that we must be born again, before we can see the kingdom of God. While the heaven to which christianity proposes to conduct us, is a habitation of holiness into which no unclean thing can enter, its primary object is to produce purity of heart, as an indispensable qualification for the enjoyment of future blessedness. "Blessed are the pure in heart," is its divine language, "for they shall see God."

In the cultivation of purity of heart, and in preparing himself for the enjoyment of the heavenly state, the disciple of Christ, may not confine his attention exclusively to his own individual interests; but, under the expansive influence of genuine benevolence, must act with respect to the glory of God and the good of his fellow-men. Hence that important precept of christianity, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

And here christianity as a practical system adapted to the improvement of man's moral condition, has decidedly the advantage over every other system of religion. While the precepts of the gospel are of the most pure and exalted character, and while the virtues which it inculcates have the most direct tendency to promote human happiness; obedience to these precepts and the practice of these virtues are recommended by a most noble example. Are we required to evince our submission to the will of God? We have proposed for our imitation, the attractive example of our Lord, who regarded it as his meat to do the will of Him that sent him; and whose language is, "Father, not my will, but thine be done." Are we called to the exercise of humility? We have in the life

of our divine Master a complete exemplification of this Christian grace, whose very name is unknown to the most perfect systems of paganism. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; and yet, he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. Are we exhorted to the exercise of meekness and patience under injuries? We have presented to our view the example of Him, who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not. And in the passage before us, in which the Apostle is exhorting his brethren of Corinth to manifest their Christian benevolence in ministering to the supply of the wants of those who were destitute, his grand argument is drawn from the example of our Lord. "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In these words there are three things which demand our attention,

I. The original dignity and glory of our Lord; He was rich.

II. The humiliation to which he submitted, and the grace therein displayed. Ye know the grace of Christ, that though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor.

III. The important blessings resulting to us from his humiliation. That ye through his poverty might be rich.

I. The first subject which demands our attention is the original dignity and glory of the Lord Jesus. He was rich. If we contemplate the character of Jesus Christ, simply as the son of Joseph and Mary; if we view him in the light of certain modern systems of theology, it would evidently be an abuse of language to speak of him as one who was rich. His parents were not of the opulent or dignified class of society. They were indeed pious, and consequently in the best sense of the word, honorable individuals; but still their allotment was in the humble walks of life. As a man, therefore, the son of Joseph, was not an heir, either to the honors, or to the wealth of the world. Descended from parents in compara-

tively obscure circumstances, the world, ignorant of his true character, rejected him, while it inquired in derision, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" But though, while he was in the world, the world knew him not, "We," says an Apostle, "beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Who then I ask, is this son of man, in relation to whom there have been from the beginning such discordant opinions? To this inquiry I reply,

(1). He is a divine person; and therefore with infinite propriety, the Apostle says, he was rich. And in confirmation of this position, my difficulty is not to find proof in the oracles of truth, but to make a selection from that abundance and variety of proof which appears on almost every page of the Bible. There is not a name peculiar to the living and true God; there is not a title or an attribute, which distinguishes the self-existent One from all created beings, which is not in the lively oracles appropriated to that Jesus, whose name, is to the Christian as ointment poured forth. Is Jehovah, that peculiar name which designates the self-existent and independent God; a name which distinguishes the true God from all those false deities, which are vanity and a lie? This name is by the spirit of inspiration again and again applied to the son of God. For example: the prophet Isaiah, when in vision he beheld the glory of the Lord, exclaims, "Wo is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the king, the Lord (Jehovah) of hosts."—Isaiah 6: 5. "These words were uttered by the prophet," says the Apostle John, "when he saw the glory of the Lord Jesus, and spake of him."—John 12: 41. Is creation the peculiar work of the Almighty? Jesus Christ was in the beginning with God, and was God. "All things were made by him, and without him, was not anything made that was made."—John 1: 3. Is religious worship to be offered only unto God; and do the sacred scriptures denounce the most fearful maledictions against those who serve other gods? It is the solemn command of heaven, that all men should

honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. "And when he bringeth the first begotten into the world, he saith, and let all the angels of God worship him."—Heb. 1: 6. Is eternity the peculiar attribute of the living God? "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."—Heb. 13: 8. If then plain language has any meaning; if the oracles of truth do not contain an empty parade of insignificant phrases; then, beyond controversy, that Jesus who is the beloved of our souls, and in whom is all our hope of salvation, is in very deed, "THE GREAT GOD OUR SAVIOUR."

(2). Jesus Christ is likewise the sovereign proprietor of all things in heaven and in earth; and is therefore with the utmost propriety said to be rich. To him the earth with all its fullness, and the heavens with all their glory belong of right, for his power called them into existence. Of old he laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of his hands. The vast blue vault of heaven; the dazzling splendor of the sun; and the sparkling brilliancy of the starry firmament, are only exhibitions of a portion of that infinitude of glory which is in himself. The beauty which adorns the landscape; the fragrance which perfumes the air; and the loveliness in which the flowers of the field are arrayed, are only emanations from that infinite fullness which is in him, who is altogether lovely. All the beauty, and the grandeur, and the glory of creation are from him, and to him they belong. On him the eyes of all things wait, and from his vast storehouse, he gives them their meat in due season. He opens his hand, and satisfies the desire of every living thing. The earth is his, with the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein. Every beast of the forest is his; and the cattle upon a thousand hills. He knows all the fowls of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are his. He clothes the pastures with flocks, and covers the valleys with corn for their supply; and the earth is full of his riches. And while he sustains in being the archangel who bows before his throne, and ministers to cherubim and seraphim supplies of bliss out of that inexhaustible fountain which is in himself,

his beneficence does not pass unheeded the young ravens which cry unto him. This Jesus, then, to whom belong the underived glories of the Godhead, and who is the possessor of heaven and of earth was *rich*.

II. But he who was rich became poor. Let us then in the next place contemplate the humiliation to which the Son of God submitted, and the grace and condescension therein displayed. The language of the Apostle, very plainly conveys the idea, that the Lord Jesus for the accomplishment of an important object, voluntarily submitted to be brought down from an exalted to a humble condition. Though he was rich yet he became poor. As we have already seen, he was essentially the everlasting God; the Alpha and Omega; the beginning and the ending; and yet he appeared in our world an infant of days. He was the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of his person; and yet, "forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same." Though he was in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet he humbled himself; made himself of no reputation; and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. His creative power called the earth with all its fullness into existence; his hand stretched out the expanse, and by his spirit he garnished the heavens with beauty; and yet he appeared among men the babe of Bethlehem; he was born in the stable of a public inn, and was cradled in a manger. Though he was the eternal lawgiver to whom angels and men owe allegiance, he was made under the law, and was made a curse for us. Though he was fairer than the children of men; the chiefest among ten thousand and altogether lovely, he became a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; his visage was marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men. He was the Lord of the universe and the proprietor of all things, and yet he submitted to such a state of poverty, that, as he himself declares, while "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, the son of man hath not where to lay his head."

He to whom all the treasures of earth belong, humbled himself to a condition so destitute, that his daily wants were supplied by the contributions of charity; and a fish of the sea, furnished the small sum which was requisite to enable him to testify his dutiful subjection to the laws of the land.

And for whom was such marvellous condescension displayed? On whose account did the son of God submit to such amazing humiliation? It was not for those exalted intelligent beings who excel in strength, in wisdom and in glory—those holy ministers who do his pleasure; but for “your sakes.” For verily he took not on him the nature of angels, but he took on him the seed of Abraham. And the object to be accomplished was not less grand and glorious, than his humiliation was amazing. It was to exalt from degradation and wretchedness our ruined and rebellious race; a race of sinful and ungrateful creatures whom he needed not; a race, whom he could by a word have remanded back to their original state of nonexistence, and whose place he could by a word have supplied with another race of intelligent beings, all obedient and holy and happy.

When the Apostle would awaken the sympathies of his Christian brethren in behalf of the suffering poor; when he would arouse the spirit of compassion toward the destitute, the grand motive is drawn from the grace and condescension of our Lord Jesus Christ. “Ye know the grace of Christ.” He points to that elevation of glory from which the Son of God descended; he contemplates him as high above all nations, and his glory as above the heavens; and he calls upon his brethren to fix their attention upon him, who from the height of his glory humbled himself, that he might raise the poor out of the dust, and exalt them to be kings and priests unto God. And with this bright example of the grace and compassion of Jesus before them, he calls upon them to manifest that the same mind is in them, which was also in their divine Master. Did he who is the Proprietor of heaven and earth, become poor for our sakes, and shall we who owe all that we possess to his bounty, refuse a small contribution

to alleviate the distresses of those for whom he laid down his life? No! I will not think so dishonorably of your Christian profession, replies the Apostle; "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

But that we may be assisted in forming something like adequate views of the grace of Christ, let us proceed,

III. In the last place to consider the important benefits resulting to us from this grace. "That ye through his poverty might be rich." At his original creation, man was constituted lord of this lower world. "And God said to our first parents, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." And while the earth with the various animals wherewith it was stored, was subjected to the dominion of man, its nourishing fruits were given to him for food. But when man rebelled against his God, the inferior animals manifested an unwillingness to own his authority; and at the same time the curse of God descended upon the earth, with its varied productions. And the Lord God said unto Adam, "cursed is the ground for thy sake." But in Christ Jesus, who was made a curse for us, we not only obtain deliverance from the curse of the law, but have a right to the enjoyment of temporal mercies. The basket and the store of them who are in Christ, are blessed.

1. I remark then, in the first place, that, as the result of the humiliation of our Lord Jesus Christ who became poor for our sakes, the believer is made rich in the enjoyment of the blessings of the present life. I admit, that according to the mode of computation which is common among men, he may not be rich. He may not be able to lay claim to thousands of gold and silver; nor to boast of his extensive possessions. But still, I contend that according to the estimate of truth and reason, the Christian is rich, in so far as what is conducive to human happiness in the present life is concerned. "He shall dwell on high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; bread shall be given him; his waters

shall be sure." These blessings include everything that is really necessary for man in this life; and the promise of the God of truth and faithfulness, is the Christian's security that they shall be enjoyed. And the man on whom God bestows bread and water, with his blessing to crown them all, possesses a treasure more valuable than any amount of mere gold and silver.

I should indeed render myself liable to the charge of offering an insult to the good sense of my hearers, were I to affect to despise the wealth of this world, or to represent as destitute of value, the bounties of a benignant Providence. The possessions of this world are the gifts of God; and like all the gifts of heaven, they are good in themselves, however they may be abused by the depravity of man. But it is not in the nature of these things to render an immortal being happy. Happiness is the gift of God; and it depends not upon the extent of man's possessions, but upon the state of his mind. And the wealth of this world and the bounties of divine providence are conducive to human happiness, only in so far as the blessing of God makes them subservient to that end. I repeat it then, that the man who enjoys a competency of the good things of this life, with the blessing of God superadded, is truly rich. For, this accompanying blessing of the Lord maketh rich; and therefore, a little that a righteous man hath, is better than the riches of many wicked.

Contrast with his lot, the condition of the man who is rich in the possession of earthly treasures, but who is a stranger to that peace of God which the world cannot give; and whose temporal enjoyments are not sweetened by the accompanying blessing of heaven. His garners may be filled; his coffers may be overflowing, and wealth may be wafted in upon him, by every passing breeze. His table may be covered with every luxury which the appetite can crave, or wealth can command. But in the midst of plenty, anxiety and care may destroy all relish for the comforts of life; and after all, it is but little of his abundance that he can enjoy. And while surrounded with a profusion of heaven's bounty, the man is

often rendered wretched, when he looks forward to the time when all these things on which his heart is set, must be left behind him; and nothing shall remain but the mortifying reflection that he once enjoyed but abused them.

Disciple of the Lord Jesus! be not envious when you behold the prosperity of such men. Their condition may well awaken in your breast the spirit of commiseration, but should not excite your envy. Jesus Jehovah, being your shepherd, however humble your allotment in life may be, you are authorized in the triumphant language of faith to say, "I shall not want." "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Behold the fowls of the air, for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feedeth them." Did he not spare his own son, but deliver him up for you? How then shall he not with him also freely give you all things? And why should you disquiet yourselves with anxious cares on the account of raiment? "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon, in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore if God so clothe the grass of the field which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" Is that Jesus, who, though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, your Saviour? Can you claim Him who is the Proprietor of all things in heaven and earth as your friend and portion? Then, verily you are rich; for in him "all things are yours." "Whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ's."

But more especially, I remark

2. In the second place, that through the poverty of Christ, the Christian is made rich in the enjoyment of spiritual blessings. And where shall I commence, if I undertake the enumeration of these blessings? They cannot be reckoned up in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more

than can be numbered. But brethren, let me refresh your souls, by recalling some of them to your remembrance.

Then though you were once dead in trespasses and in sins, you have been created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works. In your unrenewed state you served divers lusts and pleasures, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; the end of which things is death; but now in Christ Jesus, you are become the servants of righteousness; your fruit is unto holiness, and the end is everlasting life. You were once in a state of spiritual bondage under the dominion of the god of this world, the spirit that worketh in the children of disobedience; but you have been redeemed from this spiritual thralldom, not with corruptible things, as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Formerly you were under condemnation, justly exposed to the wrath and curse of God; but you have been justified freely, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. You are now the favored partakers of the blessedness of that man whose sin is forgiven, whose transgression is covered, and to whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity. Temptations may assail you, and iniquities may sometimes prevail against you; yet still it is your privilege to rejoice in the assurance, that there is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit. You were once children of wrath; aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise; but now you are adopted into the divine family, are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ Jesus. In your former condition, you were the subjects of moral pollution and sin reigned in your mortal body; but now in Christ Jesus, your body is made the temple of the Holy Ghost; and divine grace has begun in your souls a good work, which shall be performed until the day of Jesus Christ. And what shall I say more? I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Though I walk through

the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou my Saviour and my God, art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Lord it is enough! "As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness."

From this subject, we may learn

1. In the first place how deplorable must be the condition of the human family; since, to exalt man from the degradation and wretchedness and misery of his fallen state, it was necessary that the Son of God should become poor. Mistaken views with regard to the true character of our condition as sinners, lie at the foundation of the most hurtful errors which have disturbed the peace of the Christian world. He who adopts the principle, that the injury we have sustained by the fall, amounts to nothing more, than that thereby we are placed in a world where we are exposed to temptation, and rejects the humbling truth, that our nature is wholly depraved, finds it difficult to see any necessity for a divine Saviour. And hence the bright diadem of the Redeemer's divinity is impiously torn from his head, and the character of the great God, our Saviour, is reduced to the level of a fallible man. And when men have explained away the plain and obvious meaning of the Bible which describes the natural understanding as darkness, and the unrenewed heart as enmity against God, they see no necessity for a divine Spirit to regenerate the soul which is dead in trespasses and in sins. And from the rejection of our Lord's divinity, and unscriptural views with regard to the operations of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, result most of the pestilential errors which prevail. And these two radical corruptions of the truth may be regarded as having origin chiefly, in false views of our fallen condition. But is our condition by reason of the fall such, that to redeem our souls from destruction, God spared not his own Son, but delivered him up unto death? Then, judge of the arduous nature of the work to be accomplished,

from the exalted character of its Author. Were we in such a state of wrath and condemnation, that it became necessary that he who is God over all, blessed forever, should be made under the law, and be made a curse for us, that he might redeem us from the curse of the law? Then estimate the magnitude of the evil from which we are redeemed, by the infinite value of the price that was paid for our redemption.

2. In the next place, let us learn to estimate correctly the extent of our obligations to the grace of Him who though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that through his poverty we might be rich. Did he descend from the elevation of his glory, and appear in our world, in the likeness of sinful flesh? Did he become a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, that we who were by nature children of wrath, might become the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty? Then does it well become every redeemed soul to exclaim, "What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits toward me?" Did he lay down his life for us, and shall we be reluctant to yield any sacrifice, which he may require at our hands? Was it his meat to do the will of his Father in accomplishing the work of our redemption? And shall we be unwilling to submit to his yoke? Nay! verily; but under the constraining influence of his love, we shall be prepared to say, Thy yoke, O my God and Saviour is easy and thy burden is light. I am thine; thou hast bought me with thy blood; therefore through thy grace strengthening me, I will glorify thee in my body and in my spirit which are thine.

3. And finally; let us learn to imitate the bright example of our divine Lord, by ministering as we have opportunity, and as God has furnished us with the means, to the necessities of our fellow-men. Did that Saviour whom we profess to love and serve, come from heaven to earth to minister to poor sinners of our race? Let us then manifest, that we are partakers of his spirit. "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his

bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

To minister to the temporal wants of our fellow-men, however, is the least duty of Christian benevolence. The poor have immortal souls, which must as certainly perish for ever, if deprived of the bread of life, as will the corruptible body decay and perish if left destitute of the meat which perisheth. While therefore, in the good providence of God, the bread of life is dispensed liberally to us, through the medium of his word and the ordinances of his grace, shall we not sympathize with the millions of our race who are sitting in darkness and in the region and shadow of death? In the midst of our abundance, shall we not commiserate the condition of our fellow-men who are suffering under the destructive influence of a famine, not of bread, nor a thirst of water, but of hearing the word of the Lord? Brethren, ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. And with this divine example before you, show to the world that the same mind is in you which was also in Christ Jesus. And while you enjoy and value the privileges of the gospel, think of those who are groping in darkness, where there is no vision, and where the people perish; and let your sympathies be aroused in their behalf. To do good and to communicate, forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Amen.