

THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

We do not find, as we might expect, that this habit of meeting every Sunday morning to break bread in remembrance of Christ, loses its interest from repetition. On the contrary, the meetings grow more powerful to help us in the direction in which they are intended to draw and develop the mind. This is due to the nature of the matters to which they stand related. Any other subject than the subject of Christ, would become threadbare and insipid from continual treatment. The subject of Christ becomes larger, deeper to the view, and stronger in its power to interest and control the mind; that is, where the mind is unreservedly surrendered.

Paul says, "*They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh, and they that are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.*"

This distinction of bias existed in Paul's days, and must exist in ours, for human nature is the same. It does exist, as a matter of fact. Its existence is painfully obtruded upon our attention. The only difference is that in our day it is almost all one way. They form a much smaller minority in the 19th than in the first century, who "*mind the things of the Spirit.*"

The things of the flesh are almost the universal subject of solicitude and affection. The things of the Spirit are regarded with varying degrees of aversion. In every grade of society they are cast out. The wealthy and refined rank them with the story of Aladdin's lamp. The educated and scientific compassionate them as the probable dreams of mankind's moral infancy. Theatre-goers and pleasure-hunters vote them unmitigated rubbish. The man of business says they are visionary, and out of his line. The vulgar herd have little more capacity than the beasts that graze on the hillside to form an opinion of them one way or other.

It is a distressing situation. It is the one described by our brother John, the apostle of Christ: he said,

"The whole world lieth in wickedness."

It is a situation calling for much circumspection. We are liable to be influenced against our own better judgement by the universal infatuation. The sheer weight of numbers is apt to incline the mental scale in the direction opposite of true enlightenment. The right way to deal with the matter is not to look at men in the gross; but take any one of them individually. In that way you will measure them easily and decisively. You see at a glance that the flood of human life is a flood of folly, and that the way of wisdom lies in the way of Christ, and in the way of Christ alone. Creatures of sense, as we are, however, the spectacle of universal life, as it now is, is liable, every now and then, to override the perceptions of wisdom, and make us doubt if the narrow way is the right way. We do wisely, therefore, to turn our eyes often to the historical picture symbolized by the bread and wine on the table. Christ and his friends were a very small and despised company, even in the days of Jewish sacerdotal splendour, not to speak of Rome's imperial grandeur, and the world is not more divine now than it was then. If we find ourselves with very few, and those the poor, the illiterate and the despised, let us remember that this was the situation of the friends of God ages before we were born. If we are compelled by the inherent antagonism of the truth to the present evil world in all its developments, to appear as the most unsociable and censorious of men, let us fortify ourselves by the remembrance that the Son of God, the most truly lovely of human kind, was hated by the most enlightened nation of his time, because of his testimony against their evil works. If we find our position in the present life a position of self-denial, endurance, monotony and want of entertainment, let us call to our recollection that even David, surrounded by royal splendours, declared that he dwelt in a dry and thirsty land, wherein there was no water, and moped like an owl in the desert for lack of the love of God among men.

Once upon a time we were all in the condition described by the phrase "*after the flesh.*" We knew life and action in the light only of the thoughts and affections belonging to the unenlightened natural man. In those, the days of our flesh, the leading desire of the mind was to have pleasure. Some of us sought it in one way, some in another; but all of us were alike in being governed by this craving for enjoyment, which is the universal characteristic of those who know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, whether they be intellectual or sensual, refined or brutal, educated or ignorant, rich or poor, old or young. Being after the flesh, we "*mined the things of the flesh.*" We had a controlling interest in and regard for the things that tend to the gratification of "*the desires of*

the flesh.” These are legion, and in high esteem everywhere. They begin with the common wants of life, which, while legitimate enough in the subordinate place in which Christ placed them, are evil pursued as an end. We are deeply interested in making a living. Next, it was a supreme object to have a fine house, and to make opulent provision for our families. From that we went on to desire respectability, and the good opinion of the world. After that we were interested in pleasure in all its endless ramifications, from hunting with aristocrats down to song-singing in the pot-house. Intermediately and more respectably, we were taken up perhaps with some hobby of science or art. But whatever form our taste or affection might take, it was comprisable in Paul’s saying that we minded the things of the flesh. We were deeply interested in them; we spent much money on them, those of us who had it to spend. Our lives were moved and formed by them.

But a new chapter has been opened in our lives by our contact with the Spirit’s work in the earth. We have been brought into that other state described in Paul’s words,

“They that are after the Spirit do mind the things of the Spirit.”

I will not stay to dwell on the mode of the operation by which this change has been effected, beyond remarking that you are all aware that the gospel is the power employed by God in the bringing of men to Himself. We have abandoned the idea that the change is due to any inspiration or metamorphosis of the sort understood and inculcated by the systems around us. We have come to recognize that our faith comes from hearing the word spoken by the Spirit, through its appointed instrumentality in days gone by, and recorded in the Scriptures of truth for our learning and comfort. Leaving that point, let us ponder a moment the full import of the change from that condition of mind described as *“after the flesh”* to the state described as *“after the Spirit.”* The change, where it has fully taken place, is a very radical one in Paul’s estimation, and Paul’s estimation must be the rule of our estimation, if our estimation is to be of any value to us. He says,

“If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, and all things are become new.”

The use of the word *“if”* in this statement implies that there were some in Paul’s day professedly in Christ, but still in the flesh. The existence of such a class is placed beyond doubt by the words of Christ to Sardis:

“Thou hast a name to live, and art dead.”

What was possible in the apostolic age, in this respect, is more than possible in ours. It is profitable to recognize this, so that we may escape the confusion and distress resulting from what we may find in persons technically, but not really, in Christ. The habit of taking our own cue from the word, and measuring all men by it, will greatly simplify and ease our journey in probation, and protect us from being influenced to our hurt by the unapostolic ways and maxims of men who may consort with us in the name of the apostles. If any man be truly a son of God, he is after the Spirit, and minds the things of the Spirit. His tastes and affections and enterprises are all in that direction. Christ and his apostles are our examples in the case, and it is nothing short of treachery in the camp for anyone professing allegiance to them to teach that they are not our models, or that we are not to be expected to walk in their steps.

The new man in Christ is not negligent of the affairs of this life, but he attends to them in a different way, and with a different spirit and different objects from the old man he was before he became enlightened in the truth. To begin with, he has a God which he had not before, and from this results a faith unknown before, which prevents him from being fearful and anxious about this life’s affairs, and from bestowing his exertions upon large schemes of self-provision. He provides for his own, and is diligent in business because the new Master he has received requires it of him; but what he does, in this respect, he does to the Lord, and not to men, nor to himself, for he serves the Lord Christ; and while performing this part of his duty, he does not do it to the neglect of those other parts which require him to care for his neighbour, and to serve God in the exhibition of the gospel of His glory in the midst of a dark world in which he is called upon to shine as alight. If, in the exercise of his personal duties in business, plenty comes to his hand, he recognizes that he is a “steward of the manifold grace of God,” and that having received much, much will be required at his hand in distributing to the necessity of the saints, and abounding unto every good work; he does not act the part of the hoarding fool of Christ’s parable, who laid up treasure for himself, but was not rich toward God. He obeys the commandment of Christ, which forbids us to lay up treasure upon earth; and makes to himself friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness, which might otherwise turn to his destruction,

for it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. If he be poor, he remembers the widow's mite, and rejoices that, though little is in his hand, by the faithful use of what opportunity God has put in his power, he may lay up in store for himself in heaven a larger measure of divine approbation and blessing than those who *"out of their abundance cast in much."*

Rich or poor, his undying characteristic is that *"he minds the things of the Spirit."* His tastes and affections do not run in the same channel with those of the children of the present world; his affections are set upon things above, not upon things of the earth. The Spirit's point of view is his point of view. He looks at men and their affairs as Christ did, and takes the course he would have taken. For this reason he cannot be friends with the world. He will not be found partaking in the world's pleasures, or taking part in the world's enterprises. He stands not in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth he meditate day and night. In his eyes, vile men, however refined and ornamental, are despised; but he honoureth them that fear the Lord, however uncultivated or ungainly.

The things of the flesh are pleasant, and the things of the Spirit are in many points burdensome at present; but what wise man would falter in choosing the one before the other? Moses esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, and chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. In this respect he is the prototype of all men of true wisdom. The wisdom of the practical men of the present age is a very shallow affair. Its results are bounded by present things which pass away—the inherent valuelessness of which even the fool perceives on the day of death. The things of the spirit and the things of the flesh are, to one another, as the incorruptible gem to the perishing toys of childhood, or the shining of the midday sun to the flicker of an expiring lamp in a vault. The difference between them is manifest on a moment's consideration. Suppose the case of a dead man who, in his life, lived after the flesh. He comes to life 500 years afterwards. Where are the things he lived for and took care of while he lived? His friends are all dead and forgotten. He himself is a stranger to every living soul upon earth. His house is not to be found; it has crumbled to dust, or been removed as a useless dilapidation. His property, if it exists, is all in the hands of others. His bank account, if by a miracle it has survived such a lapse of time, is in another name. His schemes and enterprises have all disappeared in the restless ocean of human change. Not a shred remains of the things he chose for his portion in life.

But let it be the case of a man of God, who revives after a slumber of centuries. The things he had in his life he used as crutches of the moment merely. They were not the end of his being. God was the strength of his heart and his portion for ever. Christ was the aim, the affection of his life. The sleeping fathers and the prophets and the friends of God in bygone times were his friends and companions, for whom he was waiting. The purpose of God, as declared in the promises, was his hope and his confidence, and he awakes, after 500 years, to find them all unchanged and imperishable. The God whom he trusted and worshipped still reigns eternal in the heavens, the possessor of heaven and earth, which He upholdeth by His power. Christ, the ideal of his enthusiastic admiration, still lives, the same yesterday, today and for ever. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets and saints of every age and nation, stand by him or are still the coming vision of supernal friendship and delight. The purpose of God to banish away ill and to wipe the tear from every eye, and fill the earth with the effulgence of His love and glory, are still before him unaltered, as the glorious vision which filled his heart and cheered his sorrows in the brief day of his mortal probation.

Who but a fool, with the benighted intellect of a savage, would suffer himself with such a prospect to be imposed upon by the witcheries and lying appearances of the present evil world? The conflict may be severe; but it is short-lived, and the prize at the end of it is out of all proportion to the effort we are called to put forth. Even with all the rigours of persecution—with goods confiscated, friends banished, liberty taken away, and body tortured even to death, the sons of God in past ages have been able to say,

"the suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

And what craven and unworthy aspirants to association with them shall we be, if with all the comforts of home life, and all the liberty and security which we enjoy under the shadow of modern freedom, we shall begrudge the trifling voluntary sacrifices which the service of Christ demands at our hands, or be ashamed of the reproach which identification with it entails.

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