

THE DESIRE OF A GOSPEL MINISTER AND THE CONCERN OF A LIVING SOUL.

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"That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God." I Cor. ii. 5.

Although I have neither the grace, nor the gracious gifts, nor the success enjoyed by the apostle Paul, I hope that without presumption I can claim to preach the same truths, rely upon the same blessed Spirit, with the same object in view, "That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God." The apostle was under the painful necessity of having to defend the manner and the matter of his ministry to the Corinthian church. Subtle enemies of truth had sought to undermine the apostleship of Paul, had spoken disparagingly of his person and of his ministry, and among other things, the apostle in this epistle defends the matter and the manner of his preaching. His argument in the first chapter may be reduced to this: he maintained that God had revealed that He would save sinners not by the instrumentality of human reason, but by the preaching of the gospel of the Son of God. Therefore, when the apostle came to them, he came not as an orator, with excellency of speech, nor yet as a philosopher, speaking the wisdom of this world; but he came as a minister of Jesus Christ, bearing testimony to the truth of the gospel, determining in his mind that he would have nothing to do with anything excepting the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The theme of his ministry very solemnly and definitely implies that man is a ruined sinner, and the only provision for his redemption is that which God has made in the gift of His Son, and by His substitution in the room and place of His church. These truths he reiterated again and again. He had no confidence in himself, he relied upon the grace and blessing of the Holy Spirit to make the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to be both the power of God and the wisdom of God in those that believed. He said, "I was with you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling." Not meaning, possibly, weakness of body, although that might have been true, but rather referring to an anxiety of mind, a solicitude of spirit, conscious of his insufficiency for the work of the ministry and

the infinite importance of preaching the gospel of the Son of God. How different was the mind of the apostle to that self-reliance and self-sufficiency discovered by some who would be preachers! This great and gifted man had such a sight of himself and the work in which he was engaged that he felt this fear and trembling in the work of the ministry. He says in the 4th verse, "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." He reveals that the mode of his ministry negatively was not with enticing or persuasive words of man's wisdom. This is important and significant, for if the apostle had been so minded, he had the power and could have argued, reasoned and appealed to the natural reasons and emotions of his hearers, and produced a natural conviction in the truth, but he disclaimed such a power. He knew that the salvation of the sinner did not depend on the skill or oratory, therefore he deprecated its use. He relied simply on an honest testimony to the glorious truth of revelation. He positively asserts of his ministry that he gave utterance to those truths which in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, God made manifest in their consciences. The truths of the gospel are the only truths which the Holy Spirit will demonstrate and which He will accompany with heavenly power in the heart. To demonstrate the truth of God with power in the soul is the work of the Spirit of truth; that is, He proves with certainty that the glorious doctrines of the gospel meet and centre in the Person of the Son of God. If the ministry of God's servants is made use of in our experience to demonstrate with certainty the reality of those truths upon which our hope of immortality depends, it is better than mere persuasion. Man's persuasion, however powerful, will sooner or later, fail, but the demonstration of the Spirit and of power will never fail. Our enjoyment of it may decline, but what God has demonstrated in the conscience, what He has written and revealed with power in the soul can never be undone. No turns of providence, no periods of adversity, no sore conflict of the enemy can ever gainsay what the Spirit of truth has demonstrated in the soul.

Now the object of the apostle, with every other gospel minister, is so to preach that the faith of their hearers may stand not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. Therefore the apostle not only preached the truths which exalt the Person

and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in the salvation of His people, but he refrained from any word or action, in public or in private, that would encourage a poor sinner to rest short of the realised power of God in his salvation. Indeed, he went further than this; he very definitely resisted every tendency of the people of God in their legal natures to rest in anything short of the power of God. When they were saying among themselves, "I am of Paul, or, I of Apollos, or, I of Cephas," he enquired who they were, were they crucified for them, were they baptised in their names? he showed that they were but instruments, and that to rest even in an apostle is to rest short of the power of God in the soul. We may have particular reasons for esteeming certain ministers; God may have made them useful to us, and to esteem them highly for the truth's sake is proper and has the sanction of Scripture. But to do more than this is not well, to make a minister infallible, to put our confidence in man, and not in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, is derogatory to His glory and subversive to the best interest of our souls. When they were discussing their gifts, and apparently the church of Corinth had been blest with many gracious gifts, he reminded them of something which was more excellent even than these; and he does it with very singular and discriminating language. "Though I speak with tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. Though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." If you and I are attempting to find rest in our gifts and attainments, we are wrong in spirit, nor shall we find the peace of God resting upon our consciences. It is the true wisdom of the child of God gratefully to acknowledge whatever God gives him, to seek that it may be devoted to His fear, but never to rest short of this gracious possession of the spirit and grace of love. How very positively the apostle asserts in his epistle to the Romans that, "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." Rom. viii. 9. Here the apostle means the indwelling of the Person of the Holy Spirit. Whatever a man has, if he has no indwelling by the Holy Ghost and has not His operations in the soul, demonstrating the truth of God, revealing

it with power, he is out of the secret. We need to be on our guard equally against a tendency to rest upon present frames and feelings. There are some who would encourage you so to rest, forgetful of the fact that mere pleasant frames and feelings may arise, not from vital experience of the truth, but from circumstances of a pleasing character, or from emotional causes which, when they pass away, the comforts pass away as well. Do not misunderstand me, I am not speaking against a gracious feeling. I have no notion of true religion which is destitute of feeling. Feeling of necessity must arise from a sense of our ruin because of sin, must arise from a gracious sight of the condescension of Christ and experience of His promises or of the encouragements of the Holy Ghost. All true religion, in whatever phase it may be known and experienced, is accompanied by a gracious feeling in the heart. But to rest simply upon a frame or feeling is to rest short of Christ. I would rather ask you, "Have you a feeling which arises from consciousness of your need of Christ to give you repentance and to produce living faith in His Person and work? Have you a feeling which arises from the operations and influences of the holy Spirit in your soul?" All gracious truth when applied and revealed by the Holy Ghost will give rise to a feeling of a gracious character; but the sinner will, as taught by the Spirit of truth, be ever looking to principle, particularly to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Further, the apostle resisted this tendency which discovers itself as frequently in us, to rest short of Christ, and he reiterated again and again and yet again that true religion is a supernatural work in the soul. It is not a work produced by emotion or sentiment; it is a something produced by the operations of God the Holy Ghost. In writing to the Church at Philippi, he calls it a good work, a work that is good in every respect. (Phil. I. 6.) Because religion is supernatural it is vain for us to try and rest in anything else but the power of God. He discovers that the exercises of true religion are in spiritual exercises, not in natural excitement or fleshly enthusiasm; in such gracious exercises as sorrow for sin, a going after the Lord Jesus Christ, a living and walking in His fear, an embracing of the truth as it is in Jesus. In many ways the apostle struck at that natural tendency which would rest in the wisdom of men and not in the power of God.

The apostle was concerned for the faith of those to whom he

wrote. What an unspeakable blessing it is, if, through the operation of God the Holy Spirit, there is implanted and maintained in living exercise a grain of real faith. If we have this living faith, we have it as a gift, and it is produced by the operations of the Holy Spirit. Many people, in thinking about faith, examine themselves to see whether they have it by enquiring in themselves whether they are without doubt. I would suggest to you that when you measure the reality of faith by whether you are without doubt or not, you are examining really whether you have the assurance of faith. A very different thing. In examining whether we have faith, it is better to enquire whether there is wrought in our hearts a willingness to renounce confidence in our self-righteousness or in anything of a legal character, and to confess at the footstool of mercy that we are undone sinners without the interposition of His precious blood. Better to enquire whether we are willing, as suppliants, to take our case like the publican, and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner"; a prayer which is often used but not very often felt. Is the hymn, "Rock of Ages", more than a hymn? Is it a prayer in which your soul finds all its concerns, with all its desires expressed?

The apostle further speaks about "your faith." Faith is a personal matter. Not one of us can believe for another. Your believing will be to your benefit, but not to mine. If the sacred blessings of grace, if the fountain of salvation are to be enjoyed and realised in my case and in your case, it can only be by the personal exercises of living faith. Faith is that grace, which, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, is enabled to appropriate the blessings God designs to give. Without faith we are destitute of the comforts and favours of God's salvation. In being concerned for their faith the apostle expressed in reality what every gospel minister feels, that if faith is real it has to do with everything which is saving, sanctifying, comforting and animating in true religion. The Scriptures, for instance, are meaningless and valueless to us unless they are implicitly received by faith. As the Scriptures are believed to be the voice of God speaking to us, so direction and other benefits are communicated by the Spirit to us. Only by faith do we receive the testimony of God's Spirit as to our ruined state and condition, and our destitution of everything that is spiritual and saving. We only realise our personal interest in the love of God, in the meritorious sacrifice,

in the prevalent intercession, and the benefits of Christ's salvation by and through the exercise of this faith. It is because God gives faith, and because He exercises that faith towards Himself that we are blessed with a personal interest therein. We only live and walk rightly when we live and walk by faith. The fear of death is only removed and the prospect of heaven is only revealed with comfort when the grace of faith is graciously exercised in and upon the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In a word, faith has to do with that which is vital and essential to the salvation of the soul; and it is the concern of a gospel minister that the faith of his hearers should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. It may be that some of you are in trouble about your case. You feel the guilt of sin heavily upon your conscience, you are dismayed by the filth of it and the way in which it discovers itself in every faculty of your mind and in every member of your bodies. You are in fear because of death, because of judgment, because of Satan and hell; or it may be that you are in trouble because God has hidden His face from you, your comforts have declined, your liberty in prayer is sadly reduced; the Scriptures meet your eyes, they sound in your ears, but do not meet your case effectually and experimentally. You feel in your experience that you are under discipline and correction, and you know that you need it. What would I do? I would not exhort you to exercise faith, or to produce it yourselves; I would not call upon you to believe as if the power to believe was at your control and that it was your duty to do so. I would rather preach to you the Person of the Son of God in His suitability to meet the cases that I have described, with every case peculiar to the people of God. I would speak of His work, I would speak of His offices, I would speak of His gracious invitations, because I know and am assured from the Scriptures of truth that the power to believe these sacred truths is of God, and by them salvation is known; that faith which "laughs at impossibilities And cries, It shall be done," that faith which removes mountains, that faith which unites a guilty sinner to a forgiving Saviour, is not of men; it stands in the power of God. You might exert yourselves by every power you possess, but never could you produce for one moment this living, this powerful faith. It stands in the power of God the Holy Ghost, Who, by His blessed ministrations, enablings, directions, does raise up in the soul, sometimes in a moment, the power to

venture all our case upon the Son of God. This faith stands in the power of a sovereign Name, and there *is* a power in that Name, that is, in the Person and work of Christ. It is like a box of ointment, full of fragrancy; and fragrancy by which the sinner is revived in His soul, is enabled to believe, and says, "I sat down under His shadow with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste." I do trust that your faith, child of God, may often be revived and sustained by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your soul, and by the power of God in which it stands and by which it lives. You have no power in yourself, but there is a power in the love of God, there is a power in the sacrifice of Christ, there is a power in the Scriptures, there is power in waiting upon Him. When the Lord is pleased to bring us there, to cause our faith to depend upon the power of God to move us, to give us exercises, to crown those exercises with His blessing, there is prosperity and profit in our souls. It would be a mercy for ministers so to speak, and people so to hear, that their faith did not depend in any man's wisdom, but alone in the power of God, both as it generates in the heart and as it is the ground upon which our faith depends.

May God condescend to make some use of these remarks, for His Name's sake. Amen.
