

## A PHASE OF RELIGIOUS SELFISHNESS.

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“Justifying faith . . . respects Christ in his priestly office alone.”—OWEN ON “JUSTIFICATION.”

“He” (the materialist philosopher) “may be tempted to show his contempt, when he is told that actions instigated by an unselfish sympathy, or by a pure love of rectitude, are intrinsically sinful; and that conduct is truly good only when it is due to a faith whose openly-professed motive is *other worldliness*.”—HERBERT SPENCER, FIRST PRIN.

ONE of these sentences, from a great divine, seems to avouch a defect, not in the gospel, but in our mode of presenting the gospel, which the other sentence, from a would-be-great infidel, bitterly charges upon it. Christ's priestly work is that in which he makes sacrifice, satisfaction and intercession for believers, to deliver them from the penalty due their guilt. The human want which this mediatorial work meets, is man's sense of guilt and danger. This feeling awakened by the convincing light of the word and Spirit, regards self directly; and it is entirely compatible with a dominant selfishness. It is but self-love awakened by foreseen danger. There is, then, nothing characteristic of the new and holy nature in it. Men dead in trespasses and sins often feel a degree of it. Lost spirits feel it. The biting phrase of Herbert Spencer, “*other worldliness*,” suggests a charge against this species of Christianity which is just. We Christians use the word “worldliness” very patly to describe a selfish devotion to the pleasures of this world. We charge that it is idolatry. We point to it as the very signature of a dead soul, and justly. Now, on what principle do we proceed in this judgment? On the obvious distinction between natural good, or the advantages which confer selfish, natural gratification on our desires; and moral good, or the principles and acts which satisfy conscience and meet our accountability. We see clearly enough that, in this earthly sphere, to crave and act for personal enjoyment simply is not moral good, being merely selfish, and that it may be, and most often is, wicked. When we

see a responsible creature living supremely for wealth and what wealth purchases, gratified sensual appetites, gratified vanity and ambition, immunity from personal toil and pain, we regard him as a selfish and sinful creature. But is the principle of the case changed in the least by placing the gratification craved in another sphere of existence, and beyond the grave rather than this side of it? Obviously not. This "other worldliness" is but worldliness exaggerated and intruding its unhallowed grasp into the holy realm of redemption. It is not forgotten that there is a legitimate and righteous regard for one's own welfare, that Christianity does not extinguish this appetency, but appeals to and stimulates it. But the gospel consigns it to a subordinate place, and requires the absolute "denial of self" as the very condition of discipleship.

Every act of the soul receives its moral complexion from that of its real motive. If the sole want of the soul, which impels it to Christ in faith, is this sense of future danger from its guilt, then the faith exercised is nothing but the temporary faith of the "stony ground" hearer. Redemption is presented to this soul, not as a moral good, but simply as an advantage. The cross is to be prized and sought, not for any purpose or desire of holiness, but for its utility to an endangered selfishness. The Saviour is degraded to subserve a function precisely similar to a life preserver or life boat, or a fire extinguisher, or a dentist's forceps, or an anodyne, or a dose of other medicine. The joy of the supposed release has nothing in it distinctively spiritual, any more than the frisking of the thievish pig which has released its neck from the fence. There is no real faith, no real coming to Christ, except that which embraces him in his three offices of prophet, priest, and king. Hence there is no real coming to Christ until the soul is so enlightened and renewed as truly to view not only its danger, but its ignorance and pollution, as intolerable evils. The true believer goes to Christ in faith, for personal impunity indeed, but far more for sanctification. He is fleeing from sin as truly as from punishment. The object to which his soul moves is he "who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." This is God's representation of the matter, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst *after righteousness.*" How much wiser and safer is the statement of the "Confession of Faith" than

Owen's! "By this faith a Christian acteth differently upon that which each particular passage of the word containeth, yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God. . . . But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone *for justification, sanctification, and eternal life*, by virtue of the covenant of grace." It is true that Owen cautiously qualifies his questionable statement, and abundantly exhibits, in other places, a fortunate inconsistency. But the selfish leanings of human nature are too strong to permit this presentation of the gospel without a mischievous result.

Is not Protestant preaching very defective in this respect? Do we not hear Christ currently held forth too exclusively for the personal advantages of embracing him, while his sanctifying work as a Saviour from sin to holiness is left out? Sinners are exhorted to flee to the Saviour, simply that they may not be punished in hell. The penal wrath of God is described as though it were the only evil. Even the reprehension of the preacher proceeds as though the sin of neglecting one's enlightened future self-interest were the whole of the crime of unbelief. It is very true that personal recklessness is criminal; but such preaching leaves in the background the far more enormous crimes of the impenitent against God's rights. And too often, when the sinner's idolatrous and sinful selfishness is alarmed, the preacher lauds and praises him for this, as though there were something good in it. The advantages to self-love are dwelt on as the sole attractions of the church and of heaven. Oftentimes the pictures, designed to allure the sinner, appeal as directly to his self-love as those of the playbill or the tavern; and, while more decent in coloring, they are sometimes little less sensuous. Is not this a deplorable oversight? Let even the Reformed or Presbyterian pastor call himself to account here, and he will be shocked to perceive how seldom he has pleaded to sinners to come to Christ *because it is right*; how prevalently he has limited his plea to the promise that it *will be advantageous*. Let the question be urged: Is selfishness any the less idolatrous and wicked simply because it has become shrewd enough to project itself into the future?

One evil which has resulted from this defective presentation of the gospel is the filling of the churches with "stony-ground

hearers." Their selfish fears of punishment have been aroused. Their remorse has been quickened. But there is in their *pseudo* faith and repentance no "hungering and thirsting after righteousness." Hence they have no root in themselves. Not having embraced Christ in his kingly and prophetic offices, they have no spiritual life, and so soon as the alarmed self-love is quieted, immediately they wither away. Another consequence, we are persuaded, is that the gospel is shorn of much of its strength. The reasonable and valid appeal to *the conscience* is left in the background. But our Maker designed this faculty to be the mistress of the human heart. Sin has usurped its authority? True. And the monster will not be effectually dethroned without the intervention of God's grace? True. But that grace acts on human nature *in accordance with* the healthy laws of nature. Hence the instrument who neglects and omits the appeal to what ought to be the dominant faculty has no right to expect the aid of the great agent. We are mistrustful of the power of this imperial faculty over the soul; perhaps also we are mistrustful of God's promise to enlighten and enable the conscience. We aim at the baser principle of self-interest; and we fail as we deserve. We forget that in a soul dead in sin self-interest is even more impotent than conscience to prompt any godly action. If we made the argument to self-love less prominent, and said more about righteous and reasonable obligation; if we urged sinners to believe and repent, less because thus they escape hell, and more *because it is right*; if we made less of the claims of self, and more of the righteous claims of God, we should find him honoring our ministry more by making it effectual. A fashionable mother, who knew no way of controlling her children, except wheedling or force, once heard a wise Christian woman base her authority over her young child on a simple appeal to conscience—"You must do this, my dear, because it is right,"—and secure a prompt and sincere obedience. The godless woman expressed her astonishment at the method, and declared, that with her children such language would be breath thrown away. The Christian replied, that her Bible taught her the Creator had imprinted conscience in the human soul as the ruling faculty, that she had always concluded, hence, that her first duty as a parent was to appeal to it, and that the appeal was usually successful.

"But if you act," said she, "towards your children as though the faculty were not there, of course you leave it dormant." Too often the pulpit commits the same mistake. If we struck more habitually at the sinner's slumbering conscience, we should find the Spirit of God sending home the blow.