

THE CHRISTIAN RACE AND OTHER SERMONS

BY

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A BAD HEART

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”—JEREMIAH xvii. 9, 10.

THE first of these two verses contains a very strong saying, and one which the world in general is not at all disposed to believe. “The heart is deceitful above all things,” says our text. “I deny it,” says the unconverted man. “To be sure, my heart is very careless and very thoughtless, but it is an honest heart after all.” “The heart is desperately wicked,” says the text. “Nothing of the sort,” replies the sinner. “I know that I neglect the means of grace very much, and perhaps I do not live as I ought to do, but I am sure I have a good heart at the bottom.” “Who can know it?” asks the text. “Know it!” we are told: “why, we do not pretend to be such saints as you want men to be, but at any rate we do know our own hearts, we do know what our faults are.”

And so, beloved, it appears there are two statements, and one of them must be false. The everlasting Bible is on one side, and flesh and blood on the other; God says one thing, and man says another. Now, I shall endeavour to persuade you this morning that the Scripture account of the heart is strictly and literally true and correct; it is a faithful likeness, a lively picture, and it must not be softened down and called figurative and extravagant because it sounds rough and plain, and leaves you no room for boasting. O that the Holy Ghost may bring many of you to a right understanding of your own hearts! It is almost impossible to say how immensely important it is to have a clear view of their natural state: “with the heart man believeth unto righteousness,” “out of the heart are the issues of life”; “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart”; in short, unless you really know the character of your own heart, you will never value the Gospel as you ought, you will never love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, you will never see how absolutely necessary it was that He should suffer death upon the cross, in order to deliver our souls from hell and bring us unto God. I wish therefore, firstly, to prove to you the truth of the words “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked”; secondly, I shall say a few words to remind you that God knows what is within you,—“I the Lord search the heart”; and, thirdly, I shall point out shortly the only remedy that can do you any good, if you would be saved. It is my earnest desire and prayer that you may all come unto Christ and be delivered from the wrath to come; but this will never be until you are convinced of sin, and you will never be thoroughly convinced until you know that the root and source and fountain of it all is within you, even in your own hearts.

I. Now, as to the natural deceit and wickedness of every man, woman, and child that is born into the world, first and foremost what says the Scripture? How is it written? What do we read? Hear the book of Genesis: “God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”; “The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” The first book of Kings: “There is no man

that sinneth not.” The book of Psalms: “The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. Corrupt are they, they have done abominable iniquity, there is none that doeth good.” The book of Job: “How can he be clean that is born of a woman?” “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one.” The book of Proverbs: “Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?” The book of Ecclesiastes: “There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.” “The heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.” “The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live.

The book of Isaiah: “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way “We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” The words of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of St. Matthew: “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man.” The same words more fully in St. Mark: “From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile a man.” O this pure heart, this good heart which people speak of!—these are not texts which describe the character of the wicked only; they are written generally of all mankind, of you and me and the whole world, and they ought to be sufficient proof of that which Solomon declares, “He that trusteth his own heart is a fool.”

But perhaps you would like to know what Bible history teaches us upon this point: it is possible you may flatter yourselves these are all single texts, and probably do not mean something quite so strong as I have made them appear. Be not deceived; you will find nothing to encourage you to think well of yourself; man’s natural character is everywhere described in the same colours,—it is all black, very black. Perhaps you sometimes try to think that the Bible is a book which contains the history of many good men, and an account of God’s loving-kindness to us, and a great store of good advice. No doubt it does contain all this, but it contains something more too: it contains the true description of man’s heart, it strips off the flimsy coverings which pride and self-conceit throw over our natural dispositions, and it shows us man as he really is; it furnishes continual proof from first to last of the inbred wickedness of our hearts, it supplies us with countless examples of our inclination towards sin, unless we are restrained and bent back by the grace of God.

O beloved, that you would only search the Scripture for yourselves on this matter! I am not preaching my own doctrine; I am telling you that plain, humbling truth which the Holy Ghost endeavours in every possible way to drive into our hearts, in that blessed volume which was written for our warning.

You can hardly turn to a single part of Bible history in which this doctrine does not come uppermost. Look at the men before the flood! who would have thought, with Paradise as a witness before their eyes (for until the flood Paradise was on earth), who would have thought they could have turned their backs on God, and given themselves up to all manner of lusts and sin? And yet they did so, in spite of every warning, and God was obliged to drown the

whole world, excepting eight persons. Look at men after the flood! Doubtless you would expect that every one would flee from sin as if it were a serpent, remembering God's wrath against iniquity; and yet, behold, the first thing that we meet with is the calling of Abraham and his family to preserve the remembrance of God upon the earth; the whole world had become so sinful and idolatrous, that the Lord Jehovah was obliged to interfere, as it were, in a special manner, and choose out one man's home, that he might not be entirely forgotten. And lest you should imagine things were not so very bad, and this calling of Abraham not so very necessary, the next event we meet with is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, because of their abominable wickedness. Look at the history of Israel, the chosen family itself. They went down into Egypt and dwelt there, and two hundred years after, they had gone back so far in spiritual things that they had forgotten the name of the God of their fathers. They were brought out by miracles with a mighty hand, and yet they had hardly got into the wilderness when they murmured and desired to return to Egypt. They were taken into the land of Canaan, and had the purest and the best of laws given to them, and yet Joshua was scarcely buried when they fell away after idols. Time after time you read of their being in hard captivity for their sins, time after time you read of God delivering them; and yet a few short years and it seems to have been all forgotten. The Lord gave them judges and kings, and priests and prophets and ministers, and preachings and warnings; and yet their history, with a few exceptions, is a history of unbelief; and backsliding and transgression and crime down to the very day when they crucified the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. What can you say to these things? If ever there was a nation free from outward temptation and inducement to sin, it was the Jews; they were hedged in and fenced in on every side by the strictest rules, which prevented them mixing with other nations, and nevertheless you see what they were. You can only account for it by taking the Bible reason: they had the root of all the evil within them, they were men like ourselves, and as such they had hearts deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; and like too many among ourselves they would not believe it, and so they fell.

But I shall not leave the Bible here. I say further that you can hardly turn to a single family, even of the best of God's servants, in which the natural corruption of our hearts does not appear more or less in some one of the branches. The firstborn in Adam's house was Cain, a murderer. The family of Noah, that just man, contained Ham, the wicked father of Canaan, the accursed race. Abraham was the father of Midian, an idolatrous people who deceived Israel in the wilderness, as well as of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Esau, that "profane person," as well as of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Reuben, who defiled his father's bed, as well as of Joseph. Eli, the priest of the Lord, was the father of Hophni and Phinehas, who made people abhor the offering of God. David was the father of Absalom and Amnon as well as of Solomon. Hezekiah, that good man, was the father of Manasseh, the most wicked of the kings of Judah. Why am I telling you these things? I tell you them to show you that good education and good example cannot alone make the children of the saints good, without the grace of God to show you how deeply rooted is the corruption of our natural dispositions.

But I shall go even further. I say that you can hardly turn to a single character, among the holy men described in the Bible, who did not, to his own horror and dismay, fall at one time or another. Noah planted a vineyard, and was one

day found drunken. David committed adultery with the wife of Uriah. Peter denied his Lord thrice. What does this prove? It proves beyond a question that the most excellent of the earth have found that the root of all their sinfulness is within them; they never boasted of the purity or goodness of their hearts, they have all placed upon record the truth that, although Satan does much and the world does much, still after all the great enemy is always within us; it is a heart deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Pause, beloved, for an instant, and think of that: the men who were the friends of God, who lived most closely to Him, were those whom we find grieving and mourning over their sinful hearts most bitterly. Surely the heart must be more treacherous than you supposed.

Well, perhaps you will say, all this may be very true; the men we read of in the Bible certainly sinned very much; but things are altered now we live under the light of the Gospel. Things may be altered certainly in some respects; but the heart is just the same. I cannot see the smallest proof of any change there. So long as every newspaper contains accounts of crime in one shape or another of all descriptions; so long as gaols and prisons are full and new ones are continually building; so long as hundreds and thousands are every year tried and punished, and yet next year there are as many more committed; so long as men make a god and an idol of money, and swear and pray God to damn their souls, and break the Sabbath day in every possible manner, and show an utter want of affection and kindness to their own relations, and are angry and passionate on the slightest occasion, and think very lightly about fornication, and think it clever and fair to deceive their neighbours, and do not hesitate to say what is not true if it serves their interest, and covet each other's money and house and land and property from morning till night, and get drunk, as if they gloried in ruining soul and body at once,—so long, I say, as such things go on in England, which professes to be a Christian country,—and you know they do go on,—so long as such things go on in the face of God who sees it all, and the Bible which condemns it all, and the Church which witnesses against it all; so long shall I declare that the only possible reason which can be given for it is the plain account of my text: “The natural heart of every man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” There must be some hidden cause and fountain within us, or men would never be guilty of such enormous folly.

But I will not detain you with proofs of this nature, which you must all know. I would rather lay before you a few questions which perhaps many of you have not considered.

What, then, is the reason that men are so active and industrious in their business and so careless about their souls? They give up their whole heart and soul and mind to their labouring and planting and building and gardening; they rise early and go to bed late; they bestir themselves; they are in earnest; they think it wrong not to be diligent and hardworking; but as for serving God, they seem to think it their duty to sit still and do nothing.

What is the reason that men have always so many excuses to make in the service of God?—the most ridiculous, the most trifling seem to satisfy them, and yet they know that if they gave such excuses to an earthly master, they would be dismissed at once from his employment.

What is the reason that men pay such respect to those above them upon earth?—their landlord, their master, the rich and the noble, are always treated with a proper reverence and deference; and yet the Lord God Almighty, the

Maker and the Judge of all things, is honoured when it is convenient, as if it was rather a favour to attend His house and hear His ministers.

What is the reason that men can give smooth names and soften down practices which God detests, and talk of an adulterer as a gay man, and a drunkard as a merry, cheerful man, and a riotous reveller as a wild man; while one who is striving to lay hold on Christ is called mad, and one who has a tender conscience is called narrow-minded, and one who thirsts after holiness righteous overmuch?

What is the reason that many can talk much and show much knowledge about this world's matters, but are grave and silent and ignorant about their souls—can remember everything bad which they meet with, but forget the good—can hear of others dying, and never look at their own state—can see death coming near their own doors, and yet neglect to make preparations to receive him?

Beloved, these things are wonderful, but are they not true? Man, so wise, so prudent, so thoughtful as he is about the life that now is, seems a fool in the matter of the world to come. And why? "He has within him a heart deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

And what is the reason that men who profess and call themselves Christians do often find fault with the doctrines they hear preached, and say they must be wrong, they cannot be the truth of God, they are too humbling, too strict: and yet they will not take the trouble of looking at their Bibles, to see whether these things be really so.

What is the reason that so many go on saying they know all these things, and yet they never do them? They are almost ready to take offence if we doubt their acquaintance with the Gospel; but there they stop, their knowledge does not seem to make the slightest difference in their lives.

What is the reason that so many use the outward forms of religion but never pray in secret,—I know that certain of you did not pray last night nor yet this morning,—that so many hear the Gospel preached week after week and never apply it to themselves, and go away from church as cold and unmoved as if they had gone to be witnesses of instruction given to their neighbours, but not meant for themselves?

What is the reason that so many encourage themselves with the idea it will be all right at the last, and yet they cannot say why; and so many make a great profession, and try to deceive ministers, as if God did not see it all; and so many desire to have the name of spiritual Christians on earth, who clearly are not bearing the Cross nor showing the mind that was in Christ Jesus?

Verily, beloved, there is but one reason to be given, and that is the Bible reason. Conduct such as I have described,—and you know I have mentioned matters of everyday occurrence,—such conduct is so utterly unlike the way in which men act about the care of their bodies and the things of this world, that there must be some hidden reason, some secret fountain of evil within us. I say it is impossible to observe how differently men generally live from the plain precepts of the Bible; it is impossible to consider the number and the variety of the ways in which God's law is continually broken, and not to see the most decided proof that man's natural heart is indeed deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Truly indeed were the words added, "Who can know it?" Who can ever understand how men can shut their eyes against such light, and live after such a fashion as too many do? Job thought he knew his heart, but

affliction came and he found he did not. David thought he knew his heart, but he learned by bitter experience how woefully he was mistaken. Peter thought he knew his heart, and in a short time he was repenting in tears. Oh, pray, beloved, if you love your souls, for some insight into your own corruption; the veriest saints of God do never quite discover the exceeding sinfulness of that old man which is in them.

II. I promised to say a few words about the second part of my text, but I shall not detain you long over it. We read, "I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings." There are two things written here: one is that, although you do not know your own hearts, the Lord God Almighty does, and keeps a close watch over them; the other is that He will one day call you to account, and judge you accordingly. And do you not observe here what the mind of the Spirit points to? Some men might say, God will not be extreme to mark what is amiss, I shall have peace though I walk in the imagination of mine heart; but the prophet sweeps away these refuges of lies by warning us of searching and of judgment immediately after he has declared to us the deceitfulness of man's heart. Remember, now, O unconverted man, that God has set your secret sins in the light of His countenance; the vilest imaginations of your wicked heart, the deeds you have so carefully concealed from the sight of men, the abominable thoughts which you would not have your dearest friends suspect,—all have been seen through and through by that Pure and Holy One who will one day be your Judge. Remember that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; that the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people, too, who forget God, and neglect so great salvation; that hell is everlasting woe: ten thousand times ten thousand years shall pass away, and the worm and the fire shall be just the same, and this is the place to which you are going. You do not like to believe the account we have given of your natural heart; but look back over your life and tell us of one single day in which you have done all that God required and left nothing undone: you cannot find it; and what will you do when each of the three hundred and sixty-five days in each of the twenty, forty, sixty years you may have lived shall come to light, when thousands of little things you now forget shall all appear, and God shall ask you, "What hast thou got to say, why these things should not condemn thee?" Oh, be not deceived, but bear in mind that St. James has said one single offence will make you guilty, that Jesus teaches that in God's account a thought or a feeling is as bad as an outward act, that one wanton look is adultery, and that hatred is murder. Better be humble now and confess you did not know your own vileness, than flatter your vanity and self-conceit, and perish everlastingly.

III. Beloved, you are feeling disposed to say, "At this rate, who can be saved?" and I shall endeavour to give you very shortly the Bible answer; I shall try to point out the way. Truly on any earthly plan salvation would be impossible, but with God all things are possible, and God has laid before us a path by which the vilest may get to heaven. You are thinking that I have gone too far, that I have spoken too strongly; but you cannot say that I have gone beyond the Bible, nor yet beyond the Prayer-book, which you have used today and called yourselves miserable sinners.

I say, then, O ye miserable sinners, although your hearts are deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, although there is no health in you, I say that God loves you exceedingly. He has given His only-begotten Son to suffer for your sins; and now whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, shall not be condemned, shall have everlasting life. “Who can be saved?” All, I answer, who give up their iniquities, and grieve over them, and put their whole trust in Jesus Christ. But these deceitful hearts? Repent and believe, and God shall wash them in the blood of the cross, shall make them as it were new, shall create them again in righteousness and true holiness; shall fill them with the Holy Ghost, shall put love where there was hatred or indifference, shall put peace where there was doubt and anxiety, shall put strength where there was wickedness. Verily your sin does indeed abound, but you shall find, if you will only try it, that grace does abound far more. O ye miserable sinners, who are just now thinking well of your own state, and not alarmed about your souls, and rather offended at the picture I have drawn of your hearts—I ought to say our hearts, for my heart is naturally just as abominable as your own—O ye miserable sinners, I do beseech you to pray God that you may see clearly the corruption of your nature! I tell the young among you, your hearts are desperately wicked, and so long as you put off repentance and calling upon God you are like an infant trifling with a razor—you are like a fool playing with a tiger. I tell those among you who are getting on in life, your hearts are desperately wicked, and so long as you hold back and talk of a more convenient season for coming unto Christ, you are adding stone to stone and brick to brick to that great wall which you have built up between yourselves and the Kingdom of Heaven.

Your hearts are deceitful above all things, and except they be changed, the Bible says you will most surely perish. But in the name of my most loving Master I offer to you a complete remedy; I proclaim to you the freest salvation. I entreat you not to reject it. Come unto Jesus: He came not to save the wise in their own eyes, but to seek that which was lost. Come unto the Lamb of God: He taketh away the sins of the world; and though your hearts be full of iniquity they shall be changed, “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall become as wool.” But mark my words: God hath witnessed that except ye choose this way, the way of repentance and of faith, ye shall have no salvation, and the more free and gracious are the offers which ye reject, so much the more heavily shall ye be judged in the last day. “O seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”