

A Confession and a Warning

by Alexander Maclaren

The sermon explores the disciples' joyful yet shallow confession of faith, Christ's forewarning of their denial, and the profound loneliness of Christ amidst His mission.

Scripture: Luke 10:41, John 3:3, 2 Corinthians 4:18, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 2:11

Topics: "Heavenly Mindset", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

The preacher emphasizes the significance of setting our minds on heavenly things, highlighting the transformation believers undergo with a new heart that desires heavenly pursuits. Believers are called to focus on eternal realities and filter their experiences through the lens of eternity, not being swayed by worldly influences but being heavenly-minded. This intentional act of directing our thoughts towards heavenly things is enabled by the Spirit and involves a continuous effort to elevate our affections and desires towards God.

Transcript

THE FIRST WORDS OF these wonderful discourses were, "Let not your heart be troubled." They struck the key-note of the whole. The aim of all was to bring peace and confidence unto the disciples' spirits. And this joyful burst of confession which wells up so spontaneously and irrepressibly from their hearts, shows that the aim has been reached. For a moment sorrow, bewilderment dullness of apprehension, had all passed away, and the foolish questioners and non-receptive listeners had been lifted into a higher region, and possess insight, courage, confidence. The last sublime utterance of our Lord had gathered all the scattered rays into a beam so bright that the blindest could not but see, and the coldest could not but be warmed.

But yet the calm, clear eye of Christ sees something not wholly satisfactory in this outpouring of the disciples' confidence. He does not reject their imperfect faith, but He warns them, seeing the impending hour of denial which was so terribly to contradict the rapture of that moment. And then, with most pathetic suddenness, He passes from them to Himself; and in a singularly blended utterance lets us get a glimpse into His deep solitude and the companions that shared it.

My words this morning make no attempt at any further connection than is involved in following the course of thought in the words before us.

Note the disciples' joyful confession.

Their words are permeated throughout with allusions to the previous promises and sayings of our Lord, and the very allusions show how shallow was their understanding of what they thought so plain. He had said to them that, in that coming day which was so near its dawn, He would speak to them no more in proverbs, but show them plainly of the Father; and they answer, with a kind of rapture of astonishment, that the promised day has come already, and that even now He is speaking to them plainly, and without mysterious sayings. Did they understand His words when they thought them so plain? "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again I leave the world and go unto the Father." That summary statement of the central mysteries of Christianity, which the generations have found to be inexhaustible, and which to so many minds has been absolutely incredible, seemed to the shallow apprehension of these disciples to be sun-clear. If they had understood what He meant, could they have spoken thus, or have left Him so soon?

They begin with what they believed to be a fact His clear utterance. Then follows a conviction which they infer from the fact, and rightly infer, and which has allusion to His previous words. "Now," say they, "we know that Thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask Thee." He had said to them, "In that day ye shall ask Me nothing;" and from the fact that He had interpreted their unspoken words, and had anticipated their desire to ask what they durst not ask, they draw, and rightly draw, the conclusion of His Divine Omniscience. They think that therein, in His answer to their question before it is asked, is the fulfilment of that great promise. Was that all that He meant? Certainly not. Did He merely mean to say, "You will ask Me nothing, because I shall know what you want to know, without your asking?" No! But He meant, "Ye shall ask Me nothing, because in that day you will have with you an illuminating Spirit who will solve all your difficulties." So, again, a shallow interpretation empties the words which they accept of their deepest and most precious meaning.

And then they take yet a further step. First, they begin with a fact; then from that they infer a conviction; and now, upon the basis of the inferred conviction, they rear a faith. "We believe that Thou camest forth from God." But what they meant by "coming forth from God" fell far short of the greatness what He meant by the declaration, and they stand, in this final, articulate confession of their faith, but a little in advance of Nicodemus the Rabbi, and behind Peter the Apostle when he said: "Thou art the Son of the living God."

So their confession is a strangely mingled warp and woof of insight and of ignorance. And they may stand for us both as examples to teach us what we ought to be, and as beacons teaching us what we should not be.

Let me note just one or two lessons drawn from the disciples' demeanour and confession.

The first remark that I would make is that here we learn what it is that gives life to a creed--Experience. These men had, over and over again, in our Lord's earlier utterances, heard the declaration that "He came forth from God"; and in a sort of fashion they believed it. But, as so many of our convictions do, it lay dormant and half dead in their souls. But now, rightly or wrongly, experience had brought them into contact, as they thought, with a manifest proof of His Divine Omniscience, and the torpid conviction flashes all up at once into vitality. The smouldering fire of a mere piece of abstract belief was kindled at once into a glow that shed warmth through their whole hearts; and although they had professed to believe long ago that He came from God, now, for the first time, they grasp it as a living reality. Why? Because experience had taught it to them. That is the only thing that teaches us the articles of our creed in a way worth learning them. Every one of us carries professed beliefs, which lie there inoperative, bedridden, in the hospital and dormitory of our souls, until some great necessity or sudden circumstance comes that

flings a beam of light upon them, and then they start and waken. We do not know the use of the sword until we are in battle. Until the shipwreck comes, no man puts on the lifebelt in his cabin. Every one of us has large tracts of Christian truth which we think we most surely believe, but which need experience to quicken them, and need us to grow up into the possession of them. Of all our teachers who turn beliefs assented to into beliefs really believed none is so mighty as sorrow; for that makes a man lay a firm hold on the deep things of God's Word.

Then another lesson that I draw from this glad confession is--the bold avowal that always accompanies certitude. These men's stammering tongues are loosed. They have a fact to base themselves upon. They have a piece of assured knowledge inferred from the fact. They have a faith built upon the certitude of what they know. Having this, out it all comes in a gush. No man that believes with all his heart can help speaking. You silent Christians are so, because you do not more than half grasp the truth that you say you hold. "Thy word, when shut up in my bones, was like a fire"; and it ate its way through all the dead matter that enclosed it, until at last it flamed out heaven high. Can you say, "We know and we believe," with unfaltering confidence? Not "we argue;" not "we humbly venture to think that on the whole;" not "we are inclined rather to believe;" but "we know that Thou knowest all things and that Thou hast come from God." Seek for that blessed certitude of knowledge, based upon the facts of individual experience, which makes the tongue of the dumb sing, and changes all the deadness of an outward profession of Christianity into a living, rejoicing power.

Then, further, I draw this lesson. Take care of indolently supposing that you understand the depths of God's truth.

These apostles fancied that they had grasped the whole meaning of the Master's words, and were glad in them. They fed on them, and got something out of them; but how far they were from the true perception of their meaning! This generation abhors mystery, and demands that the deepest truths of the highest subject, which is religion, shall be so broken down into mincemeat that the "man in the street" can understand them in the intervals of reading the newspaper. There are only too many of us who are disposed to grasp at the most superficial interpretation of Christian truth, and lazily to rest ourselves in that. A creed which has no depth in it is like a picture which has no distance. It is flat and unnatural, and self-condemned by the very fact. It is better that we should feel that the smallest word that comes from God is like some little leaf of a water plant on the surface of a pond; if you lift that you draw a whole trail after it, and nobody knows how far off and how deep down are the roots. It is better that we should feel how Infinity and Eternity press in upon us on all sides, and should take as ours the temper that recognizes that till the end we are but learners, seeing "in a glass, in a riddle," and therefore patiently waiting for light and strenuously striving to stretch our souls to the width of the infinite truth of God.

So, then, look, in the second place, at the sad questions and forebodings of the Master.

"Do you now believe?" That does not cast doubt on the reality of their faith so much as on its permanence and power. "Behold the hour cometh that you shall be scattered"--as He had told them a little while before in the upper room, like a flock when the shepherd is stricken down--"Every man to his own." He does not reject their imperfect homage, though He discerns so clearly its imperfection and its transience, but sadly warns them to beware of the fleeting nature of their present emotion; and would seek to prepare them, by the knowledge, for the terrible storm that is going to break upon them.

So let us learn two or three simple lessons. One is that the dear Lord accepts imperfect surrender, ignorant faith and love, of which He knows that it will soon turn to denial. Oh! if He did not, what would become of us all? We reject half hearts; we will not have a friendship on which we cannot rely. The sweetness of vows is all sucked out of them to our apprehension, if we have reason to believe that they will be falsified in an hour. But the patient Master was willing to put up with what you and I will not put up with; and to accept what we reject; and be pleased that they gave Him even that. His "charity suffereth long, and is kind." Let us not be afraid to bring even imperfect consecration to His merciful feet.

Then another lesson is the need for Christian men sedulously to search and make sure that their inward life corresponds with their words and professions. I wonder how many thousands of people will stand up this day and say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ His only Son," whose words would stick in their throats if that question of the Master's was put to them, "Do you now believe?" And I wonder how many of us are the fools of our own verbal acknowledgements of Christ. Self-examination is not altogether a wholesome exercise, and it may easily be carried too far, to the destruction of the spontaneity and the gladness of the Christian life. A man may set his pulse going irregularly by simply concentrating his attention upon it, and there may be self-examination of the wrong sort, which does harm rather than good. But, on the other hand, we all need to verify our position, lest our outward life should fatally slip away from correspondence with our inward. Our words and acts of Christian profession and service are like bank notes. What will be the end if there is a whole ream of such going up and down the world, and no balance of bullion in the cellars to meet them? Nothing but bankruptcy. Do you see to it that your reserve of gold, deep down in your hearts, always leaves a margin beyond the notes in circulation issued by you. And in the midst of your professions hear the Master saying, "Do you now believe?"

Another lesson that I draw is, trust no emotions, no religious experiences, but only Him to whom they turn.

These men were perfectly sincere, and there was a glow of gladness in their hearts, and a real though imperfect faith when they spoke. In an hour's time where were they?

We often deal far too hard measure to these poor disciples, in our estimate of their conduct at that critical moment. We talk about them as cowards. Well, they were better and they were worse than cowards; for their courage failed second, but their faith had failed first. The Cross made them cowards because it destroyed their confidence in Jesus Christ.

"We trusted." Ah! what a world of sorrow there is in those two final letters of that word. "We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel." But they do not trust it any more, and so why should they put themselves in peril for One on whom their faith can no longer build?

Would we have been any better if we had been there? Suppose you had stood afar off and seen Jesus die on the cross, would your faith have lived? Do we not know what it is to be a great deal more exuberant in our professions of faith--and real faith it is, no doubt--in some quiet hour when we are with Him by ourselves, than when swords are flashing and we are in the presence of His antagonists? Do we not know what it is to grasp conviction at one moment, and the next to find it gone like a handful of mist from our clutch? Is our Christian life always lived upon one high uniform level? Have we no experience of hours of exhaustion coming after deep religious emotion? "Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone." There will not be many stones flung if that law be applied. Let us all, recognizing our own weakness, trust to nothing, either in our convictions or our emotions, but only to Him, and cry, "Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe."

Lastly, note the lonely Christ and His companion.

"You shall leave me alone." There is sadness, though it be calm, in that clause. And then, I suppose, there was a moment's pause before the quiet voice began again. "And yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me." There are two currents there, both calm; but the one bright and the other dark.

Jesus was the loneliest man that ever lived. All other forms of human solitude were concentrated in His. He knew the pain of unappreciated aims, unaccepted love, unbelieving teachings, a heart thrown back upon itself. No man understood Him, no man knew Him, no man deeply and thoroughly loved Him or sympathized with Him, and He dwelt apart. He felt the pain of solitude more sharply than sinful men do. Perfect purity is keenly susceptible; a heart fully charged with love is wounded sore when the love is thrown back, and all the more sorely the more unselfish it is.

Solitude was no small part of the pain of Christ's passion. Remember the pitiful appeal in Gethsemane, "Wait here and watch with Me." Remember the threefold vain returns to the sleepers in the hope of finding some sympathy from them. Remember the emphasis with which, more than once in His life, He foretold the loneliness of His death. And then let us understand how the bitterness of the cup that He drank had for not the least bitter of its ingredients the sense that He drank it all alone.

Now, dear friends, some of us, no doubt, have to live outwardly solitary lives. We all of us live alone after all fellowship and communion. Physicists tell us that in the most solid bodies the atoms do not touch. Hearts come closer than atoms, but yet, after all, we die alone, and in the depths of our souls we all live alone. So let us be thankful that the Master knows the bitterness of solitude, and has Himself trod that path.

Then we have the calm consciousness of unbroken communion. Jesus Christ's sense of union with the Father was deep, close, constant, in manner and measure altogether transcending any experience of ours. But still He sets before us a pattern of what we should aim at in these great words. They show the path of comfort for every lonely heart. "I am not alone, for the Father is with Me." If earth be dark, let us look to Heaven. If the world with its millions seems to have no friend in it for us, let us turn to Him who never leaves us. If dear ones are torn from our grasp, let us grasp God. Solitude is bitter; but, like other bitters, it is a tonic. It is not all loss if the trees which with their leafy beauty shut out the sky from us are felled, and so we see the blue.

Christ's company is to us what the Father's fellowship was to Christ. He has borne solitude that He might be the companion of all the lonely. And the same voice which said, "Ye shall leave Me alone," said also, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

But that communion of Christ with the Father was broken, in that awful hour when He cried: "My God why hast Thou forsaken Me?" We tread there on the verge of mysteries beyond our comprehension; but this we know--that it was our sin and the world's made His by His willing identifying of Himself with us, which built up that black wall of separation. That hour of utter desolation, forsaken by God, deserted by men, was the hour of the world's redemption. And Jesus Christ was forsaken by God and deserted by men, that you and I might never be either the one or the other, but might find in His sweet and constant companionship at once the fellowship of a man and the presence of a God.

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