

John Fleming

by Alexander Whyte

The sermon explores the deep friendship and correspondence between Samuel Rutherford and John Fleming, emphasizing spiritual growth and the importance of dedicating time to God.

Scripture: Romans 12:19, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Ephesians 5:15, James 3:5, 2 Peter 3:18

Topics: "Christian Friendship", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches on the deep friendship between Samuel Rutherford and John Fleming, emphasizing how their trials drew them closer together. Rutherford, in his letters to Fleming, addresses the importance of time management, controlling the tongue, avoiding revenge, making God the chief end of all actions, and prioritizing growth in grace above all else.

Transcript

'I wish that I could satisfy your desire in drawing up and framing for you a Christian Directory.'--Rutherford.

Samuel Rutherford and John Fleming, Bailie of Leith, were old and fast friends. Away back in the happy days when Rutherford was still a student, and was still haunting the back-shop of old John Meine in the Canongate of Edinburgh, he had formed a fast friendship with the young wood-merchant of Leith. And all the trials and separations of life, instead of deadening their love for one another, or making them forget one another, had only drawn the two men the closer to one another. For when Rutherford's two great troubles came upon him,--first his dismissal from the Latin regency in Edinburgh University, and then his banishment from his pulpit at Anwoth,--John Fleming came forward on both occasions with money, and with letters, and with visits that were even better than money, to the penniless and friendless professor and exiled pastor. 'Sir, I thank you kindly for your care of me and of my brother. I hope it is laid up for you and remembered in heaven.'

Robert M'Ward, the first editor of Rutherford's Letters, with all his assiduity, was only able to recover four letters out of the heap of correspondence that had passed between the rich timber-merchant of Leith and the exiled minister, but those four tell us volumes, both about the intimacy of the two men and about the depth and the worth of the bailie's character. Fleming wrote a letter to Rutherford in the spring of 1637, which must have run in some such terms as these:--' My life is fast ebbing away, and I am not yet begun aright to live. I am in mid-time of my days. I sometimes feel that I am coming near the end of them; and what evil days they have been! My business that my father left me is prosperous. I have a good and kind wife, as you know. My children are not wholly without promise. My place in this town is far too honourable

for me, and I have many dear friends among the godly both in Leith and in Edinburgh. But I feel bitterly that I have no business to mix myself among them, and to be counted one of them. For, what with the burdensome affairs of this great seaport, and my own growing business, my days and my nights are like a weaver's shuttle. I intend and I begin well, but another year and another year comes to an end and I am just where I was. I have had some success, by God's blessing, in making money, but I am a bankrupt before Him in my soul. My inward life is a ravelled hesp, and I need guidance and direction if I am ever to come out of this confusion and to come to any good. Protestant and Presbyterian as I am,' he goes on, 'if I could only find a director who would take trouble with me and command me as I take trouble with and command my servants, I vow to you that I would put the reins without reserve into his hands. Will you not take me in hand? You know me of old. We used to talk in dear old John Meine's back-shop on week-nights and upstairs on Sabbath nights about these things. And long as it is since we saw much of one another, I feel that you know me out and in, and through and through, as no one else knows me. Tell me, then, what I am to do with myself. I will try to do what you tell me, for I am wearied and worn out with my stagnant and miserable life. Pity me, Mr. Samuel, my honoured and dear friend, for my pirn is almost run out, and I am not near saved.'

'My worthy and dearly beloved brother in the Lord,' replied Rutherford to Fleming, 'I dare not take it upon me to lay down rules and directions for your inner life. I have not the judiciousness, nor the experience, nor the success in the inner life myself that would justify me. And, besides, there is no lack of such Directories as you ask me for. Search the Scriptures. Buy Daniel Rogers, and Richard Greenham, and especially William Perkins. My own wall is too much broken down, my own garden is too much overrun with weeds; I dare not attempt to lay down the law to you. But I will do this since you are so importunate; I will tell you, as you have told me, some of my own mistakes and failings and shipwrecks, and the rocks on which I have foundered may thus be made to carry a lantern to light your ship safely past them.'

'Fool, said my Muse to me, look in thy heart and write;'

and, like Sir Philip Sydney, Samuel Rutherford looked into his own heart, and drew a Directory out of it for the better Christian conduct of his friend John Fleming.

1. Now--would you believe it?--the first thing Samuel Rutherford found his own heart accusing him in before God was, of all things, the way he had wasted his time. Would you believe it that the student who was summer and winter in his study at three o'clock in the morning, and the minister who, as his people boasted, was always preparing his sermons, always visiting his people, always writing books, and always entertaining strangers--would you believe it that one of his worst consciences was for the bad improvement of his time? What an insatiable thirst for absolute and unearthly perfection God has awakened in the truly gracious heart! Give the truly gracious heart a little godliness and it cries out night and day for more. Give it more, and it straightway demands all. Give it all and it still accuses you that it has literally got none at all. Samuel Rutherford gave all his time and all his strength to his pastoral and his professorial duties, and yet when he looked into his own heart to write a letter to Bailie Fleming out of it, his whole heart condemned him to his face because he had so mismanaged his time, and had not aright redeemed it. 'You complain that your time is fast speeding away, and that you have not even begun to employ it well. So is mine. I give a good part of my time to my business, as you say you do to yours; but, just like you, that leaves me no time to give to God. God forgive me for the way I forget Him and neglect Him all the time that I am bustling about in the things of His house! Let us both begin, and me especially, to give some of God's best earthly gift back to Him again. Let us spare a little of His time that He allows us and bestow it back again upon Himself. He values nothing so much as a little of our allotted time. Let us

meditate on Him more, and pray more to Him. Let us throw up ejaculations of prayer to Him more and more while we are at our daily employments; you in the timber-yard, down among the ships, at the desk, and at the Council-table; and I among my books, and among my people, and in my pulpit. These are always golden moments to me, and why they do not multiply themselves into hours and days and years is to me but another proof of my deep depravity. And, John Fleming, sanctify you the Sabbath. As you love and value your immortal soul, sanctify and do not waste and desecrate the Sabbath. Let no man steal from you a single hour of the Sabbath-day. Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God.'

2. And again and again in his letters to Fleming Rutherford returns to the sins of the tongue. Rutherford himself was a great sinner by his tongue, and he seems to have taken it for granted that the bailies of Leith were all in the same condemnation. 'Observe your words well,' he writes out of the bitterness of his own heart. 'Make conscience of all your conversations.' Cut off a right hand, pluck out a right eye, says Christ. And I wonder that half of His disciples have not bitten out their offending tongues.

What a world of injury and of all kinds of iniquity has the tongue always and everywhere been! In Jerusalem in David's day; and still in Jerusalem in James's day; in Anwoth and Aberdeen and St. Andrews in Rutherford's day; and in Leith in John Fleming's day; and still in all these places in our own day. The tongue can no man tame, and no wonder, for it is set on fire of hell. 'I shall show you,' says Rutherford, 'what I would fain be at myself, howbeit I always come short of my purpose.'

Rutherford made many enemies both as a preacher and as a doctrinal and an ecclesiastical controversialist. He was a hot, if not a bad-blooded man himself, and he raised both hot and bad blood in other men. He was a passionate-hearted man, was Rutherford; he would not have been our sainted Samuel Rutherford if he had not had a fast and a high-beating heart. And his passionate heart was not all spent in holy love to Jesus Christ, though much of it was. For the dregs of it, the unholy scum and froth of it, came out too much in his books of debate and in his differences with his own brethren.

His high-mettled and almost reckless sense of duty brought him many enemies, and it was his lifelong sanctification to try to treat his enemies aright, and to keep his own heart and tongue and pen clean and sweet towards them. And he divined that among the merchants and magistrates of Leith, anger and malice, rivalry and revenge were not unknown any more than they were among their betters in the Presbytery and the General Assembly. He knew, for Fleming had told him, that his very prosperity and his father's prosperity had procured for Fleming many enemies.

The Norway timber trade was not all in the Fleming hands for nothing. The late Council election also had left Fleming many enemies, and his simple duty at the Council-table daily multiplied them. It was quite unaccountable to him how enemies sprang up all around him, and it was well that he had such an open-eyed and much-experienced correspondent as Rutherford was, to whom he could confide such ghastly discoveries, and such terrible shocks to faith and trust and love. 'Watch well this one thing, Bailie Fleming, even your deep desire for revenge.

Be sure that it is in your heart in Leith to seek revenge as well as it is in my heart here in Aberdeen. Watch, as you would the workings of a serpent, the workings of your sore-hurt heart in the matter of its revenges. Watch how the calamities that come on your enemies refresh and revive you. Watch how their prosperity and their happiness depress and darken you, Disentangle the desire for revenge and the delight in it out of the rank thickets of your wicked heart; drag that desire and delight out of its native darkness; know it,

name it, and it will be impossible but that you will hate it like death and hell, and yourself on account of it.

Do you honestly wish, as you say you do, for direction as to your duty to your many enemies in Leith, and to God and your own soul among them? Then begin with this: watch and find yourself out in your deep desire for revenge, and in your secret satisfaction and delight to hear it and to speak it. Begin with that; and, then, long after that, and as the divine reward of that, you will be enabled to begin to try to love your enemies, to bless them that curse you, to do good to them that hate you, and to pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you. You need no Directory for these things from me when you have the Sermon on the Mount in your own New Testament.'

3. And, still looking into his own heart and writing straight out of it, Rutherford says to Fleming, 'I have been much challenged in my conscience, and still am, for not referring all I do to God as my last and chiefest end.' Which is just Samuel Rutherford's vivid way of taking home to himself the first question of the Shorter Catechism which he had afterwards such a deep hand in drawing up. I do not know any other author who deals so searchingly with this great subject as that prince among experimental divines, Thomas Shepard, the founder of Yale in New England. His insight is as good as his style is bad. His English is execrable, but his insight is nothing short of divine. 'The pollution of the whole man, and of all his actions,' he says in his Parable of the Ten Virgins, 'consists chiefly in his self-seeking, in making ourselves our utmost end. This makes our most glorious actions vile; this stains them all. And so the sanctification of a sinner consists chiefly in making the Lord our utmost end in all that we do. Every man living seeks himself as his last end and chiefest good, and out of this captivity no human power can redeem us.... Make this your last and best end--to live to Christ and to do His will. This is your last end; this is the end of your being born again--nay, of your being redeemed by His blood--that you may live unto Christ.' And in the same author's Meditations and Spiritual Experiences, he says, 'On Sabbath morning I saw that I had a secret eye to my own name in all that I did, and I judged myself to be worthy of death because I was not weaned from all created glory, from all honour and praise, and from the esteem of men.... On Sabbath again, when I came home, I saw into the deep hypocrisy of my own heart, because in my ministry I sought to comfort and quicken the people that the glory might reflect on me as well as on God.... On the evening before the sacrament I saw it to be my duty to sequester myself from all other things and to prepare me for the next day. And I saw that I must pitch first on the right end. I saw that mine own ends were to procure honour to myself and not to the Lord. There was some poor little eye in seeking the name and glory of Christ, yet I sought not it only, but my own glory, too. After my Wednesday sermon I saw the pride of my heart acting thus, that when I had done public work my heart would presently look out and inquire whether I had done it well or ill. Hereupon I saw my vileness to be to make men's opinions my rule, and that made me vile in mine own eyes, and that more and more daily.' 'I have been much challenged,' writes Rutherford to Fleming, 'because I do not refer all I do to God as my last end: that I do not eat and drink and sleep and journey and speak and think for God.' And, the fanatic that he is, he seems to think that that is the calling and chief end not only of ministers like himself and Shepard, but of the bailies and timber-merchants of Edinburgh and Leith also.

4. Lastly, in the closing sentences of this inexhaustible letter, Rutherford says to his waiting and attentive correspondent. 'Growth in grace, sir, should be cared for by you above all other things.' And so it should. Literally and absolutely above all other things. Above good health, above good name, above wealth, and station, and honour. These things, take them all together, if need be, are to be counted loss in order to gain growth in grace. But what is growth in grace? It is growth in everything that is truly good; but Fleming, as he read his Directory daily, would always think of growth in grace as the right improvement of his

remaining time, and, especially, its religious use and dedication to God; as also of the government of his own untamed tongue; the extinction of the desire for revenge, and of all delight in the injury of his enemies; and, above all, and including all, in making God his chief end in all that he did. How all-important, then, is a sound and Scriptural Directory to instruct us how we are to grow in grace. And how precious must that directory-letter have been to a man in dead earnest like John Fleming. It was precious to his heart, you may be sure, above all his ships, and all his woodyards, and all his fine houses, and all his seats of honour. And if his growth in grace in Leith has now become full-grown glory in Heaven, how does he there bless God to-day that ever he met with Samuel Rutherford in old John Meine's shop in his youth, and had him for a friend and a director all his after-days. And when John Fleming at the table above forgets not all His benefits, high up, you may be very sure, among them all he never forgets to put Samuel Rutherford's letters; and, more especially, this very directory-letter we have read here for our own direction and growth in grace this Communion-Sabbath night.

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