

Parishoners of Kilmacolm

by Alexander Whyte

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual growth, perseverance in service, and a right relationship with God, even in the absence of feelings and enjoyment.

Scripture: Psalm 42:1, Proverbs 27:7, Matthew 5:4, Romans 7:18, 2 Corinthians 1:3, Ephesians 2:8, Philippians 3:8, Hebrews 4:16, Hebrews 10:22, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Spiritual Renewal", "Christian Discipleship"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches on the spiritual condition of the parish of Kilmacolm in 1639, highlighting the hunger for true spiritual nourishment among the parishioners due to the lack of impactful preaching and pastoral care. The letters written to Samuel Rutherford reveal a desire for deep spiritual insight and guidance, emphasizing the importance of digging deep into one's heart to understand corrupt motives and to have a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ. Rutherford addresses the dangers of spiritual complacency, the necessity of sincere repentance, and the misconception that perfect service is required for acceptance by Christ. He encourages seeking assurance in Christ's atonement, standing firm on the foundation of faith, and finding comfort and peace through self-mortification and enduring trials for Christ's sake.

Transcript

'For want of time I have put you all in one letter.'--Rutherford.

There is a well-known passage in Lycidas that exactly describes the religious condition of the parish of Kilmacolm in the year 1639. For the shepherd of that unhappy sheepfold also had climbed up some other way before he knew how to hold a sheephook, till, week after week, the hungry sheep looked up and were not fed. The parishioners of Kilmacolm must have been fed to some purpose at one time, for the two letters they write to Rutherford in their present starvation bear abundant witness on every page to the splendid preaching and the skilful pastorate that this parish must at one time have enjoyed. There must have been men of no common ability, as well as of no common profundity of spiritual life in Kilmacolm during those trying years, for the letters they wrote to Rutherford would have done credit to any of Rutherford's ablest and best correspondents--to William Guthrie or David Dickson, or Robert Blair, or John Livingstone. Indeed, the expert author of the Therapeutica himself would have been put to it, to answer fully and satisfactorily those two so acute and so searching letters. The Kilmacolm people had heard about the famous answers that Samuel Rutherford, now home again in Anwoth, had written both from Anwoth

and from Aberdeen to all classes of people and on all kinds of subjects; copies, indeed, of some of those now already wide-spread letters had come to Kilmacolm itself, till, at one of their private meetings for conference and prayer, it was resolved that a small committee of their elders should gather up their painful experiences in the spiritual life that got no help from the parish pulpit, and should set them by way of submission and consultation before the great spiritual casuist. Everybody else was getting what counsel and comfort they needed from the famous adviser of Anwoth, and why not they, the neglected parishioners of Kilmacolm? And thus it was that two or three of the oldest and ablest men in the kirk-session so wrote to Rutherford, as, after some delay, to get back the elaborate letter from Anwoth numbered 286 in Dr. Bonar's edition.

I am tempted to think it possible that the old, long-experienced, and much-exercised saints of Kilmacolm may have demanded a little too much of their minister: at any rate, I am quite as anxious to hear what Rutherford shall say to them as they can be to hear from him themselves. And all that leads me to believe that not only must there have been some quite remarkable people in the parish church at that date, but that they must also have had some very special pulpit and pastoral work expended on them in former years. Or, if not that, then their case is just another illustration of what Rutherford says in his reassuring answer, namely, that the life of grace among a people is not at all tied up to the lips of their minister. Which, again, is just another way of putting what the Psalmist says of himself in his humble and happy boast: 'I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Thy precepts.'

1. The first complaint that came to Anwoth from Kilmacolm was expressed in the quaint and graphic language natural to that day. 'Security, strong and sib to nature, is stealing in upon us.' The holy law of God, they mean, was never preached in their parish; at any rate, it was never carried home to any man's conscience. Nobody was ever disturbed. Nobody's feelings were ever hurt. Nobody in all the parish had ever heard a voice of thunder saying, Thou art the man. Toothless and timid generalities made up all the preaching they ever heard either on the ethical or on the evangelical side: and generalities disturb no man's peace of mind. The pulpit of Kilmacolm was but too sib to the pew, and both pulpit and pew slept on together in undisturbed security. And that supplied Samuel Rutherford with an excellent text for a sermon he was continually preaching in every utterance of his--the constant danger we all lie under as long as we are in this life. Danger from sin, and, in its own still subtler way, as much danger from grace; danger from want, and danger from fulness; danger from our weakness, and danger from our strength. So much danger is there that if any man in this life is in a state of security about himself he is surely the foolishlest of all foolish men. For,

Thy close pursuers' busy hands do plant

Snares in thy substance, snares attend thy want;

Snares in thy credit, snares in thy disgrace;

Snares in thy high estate, snares in thy base

Snares tuck thy bed, and snares attend thy board;

Snares watch thy thoughts, and snares attack thy word;

Snares in thy quiet, snares in thy commotion

Snares in thy diet, snares in thy devotion;
Snares lurk in thy resolves, snares in thy doubt;
Snares lurk within thy heart, and snares without;
Snares are above thy head, and snares beneath
Snares in thy sickness, snares are in thy death.

What a fool and what a sluggard nature must be, as Rutherford here says she is, if she can lull us into security about ourselves in such a life as this! And what a noble field does this snare-filled life supply for all a preacher's boldest and best powers!

2. They have some new beginners in Kilmacolm in spite of all its spiritual stagnation, and the older people are full of anxiety lest those new beginners should not be rightly directed. 'Tell them for one thing,' says Rutherford in reply, 'to dig deep while they are yet among their foundations. Tell them that a sick night for sin is not so common either among young or old as I would like to see it. Make them to understand what I mean by digging deep. I mean deep into their own heart in order to discover and lay bare to themselves the corrupt motives from which they act every day even in the very best things they do. And that of itself will give them many sufficiently sick days and nights too, both as new beginners and as old believers. And tell them, also, from me, that once they have seen themselves in their own hearts, and Jesus Christ in His heart, it will be impossible for them ever to go back from Him. Absolutely impossible. So much so that it is perfectly certain that he who goes back from Christ has never really seen himself or Christ either. He may have seen something somewhat more or less like Christ, but, all the time, it was not Christ. Let your soul once come up to close quarters with Christ, and I defy you ever to forget Him again. Tell all your new beginners that from me, Samuel Rutherford, who, after all, am not yet well begun myself.'

3. You complain bitterly of a dead ministry in your bounds. I have heard as much. But I will reply that a living ministry is not indispensable to a parish. All our parishes ought to have it, and we ought to see to it that they all get it; but neither the conversion of sinners, nor the sanctification and comfort of God's saints, is tied up to any man's lips. You will read your unread Bibles more: you will buy more good books: you will meet more in private converse and prayer: and it will not be bad for you for a season to look above the pulpit, and to look Jesus Christ Himself more immediately in the face.' As Fraser of Brea also said in a striking passage in his diary, so Rutherford says in his reply letter: 'in your sore famine of the water of life, run your pipe right up to the fountain.'

4. If the parishioners of Kilmacolm were severe on their minister it was not that they let themselves escape. And there was something in their present letters that led Rutherford to warn them against a mistake that only people of the Kilmacolm type will ever fall into. 'Some of the people of God,' says their sharp-eyed censor, 'slander the grace of God in their own soul.' And that is true of some of God's best people still. We meet with such people now and then in our own parishes to-day. They are so possessed with penitence and humility; they have such high and inflexible and spiritual standards for measuring themselves by; the law has so fatally entered their innermost souls that they will not even admit or acknowledge what the grace of God has, to all other men's knowledge, done in them. Seek out, says Rutherford, the signs of true grace in yourselves as well as the signs of secret sin. And when you have found such and such an indubitable sign of grace, say so. Say this, and this, and this, pointing it out, is assuredly the work of God in my soul. When you, after all defeat, really discover your soul growing in

grace; in patience under injuries; in meekness under reproofs and corrections; in love for, or at least in peace of heart toward, those you at one time did not like, but disliked almost to downright hatred; in silent and assenting acceptance, if not yet in actual and positive enjoyment, of another man's talents and success, gain and fame; in the decay and disappearance of party spirit, and in openness to all the good and the merit of other men; in prayerfulness; in liberality, and so on; when you cannot deny these things in yourself, then speak good of Christ, and do not traduce and backbite His work because it is in your own soul. 'Some wretches murmur of want while all the time their money in the bank and their fat harvests make them liars.' Rutherford thinks he has put his finger upon some such saintly liars in the kirk-session of Kilmacolm.

5 'Fear your light, my lord,' wrote Rutherford to Lord Craighall from Aberdeen; 'stand in awe of your light.' But the poor Kilmacolm people did not need that sharp rebuke, for they had written to Rutherford at their own instance to consult him in their terror of conscience about this very matter, till Rutherford had to exhaust his vocabulary of comfort in trying to pacify his correspondents just in this sufficiently disquieting matter of light in the mind with great darkness in the heart and the life. Our light in this world, he tells them, is a broad and shining field, whereas our life of obedience is at best but a short and straggling furrow. Only in heaven shall the broad and basking fields of light and truth be covered from end to end with the songs of the rejoicing reapers. And Rutherford is very bold in this matter, because he knows he has the truth about it. A perfect life, he says, up to our ever-increasing light, is impossible to us here, if only because our light always increases with every new progress in duty. The field of light expands to a new length and breadth every time the plough passes through it. And, knowing well to whom he writes on this subject, Rutherford goes on to say that there is a sorrow for sin, and for shortcoming in service, that is as acceptable with God in the evangelical covenant as would be the very service itself. But, then, it must be what Rutherford calls 'honest sorrow after a sincere aim.' And let no man easily allow himself to take shelter under that, lest it turn out to him like taking shelter in a thunderstorm under a lightning rod. For what an aim must that be, and then, what a sorrow, that is as good in the sight of God as a full obedience is itself. At the same time, 'A sincere aim, and then an honest sorrow, both of the right quality and quantity, taken together with Christ's intercession, must be our best life before God till we be over in the other country where the law of God will get a perfect soul in which to fulfil itself. Your complaint on this head is already booked in the New Testament (Rom. vii. 18).'

6. 'The less sense of liberty and sweetness, the more true spirituality in the service of God,' is Rutherford's reply to their next perplexity. Ought we to go on with our work and with our worship when our hearts are dry and when we have no delight in what we do? That is just the time to persevere, replies their evangelical guide, for it is in the absence of all sense of liberty and sweetness that our duties prove themselves to be truly spiritual. A sweet service has often its sweetness from an altogether other source than the spiritual world. Let a man be engaged in divine service, or in any other religious work, and let him have sensible support and success in it; let him have liberty and enjoyment in the performance of it; and, especially, let him have the praise of men after it, and he will easily be deceived into thinking that he has had God's Spirit with him, and the light of God's countenance, whereas all the time it has only been an outpouring on his deceived heart of his own lying spirit of self-seeking, self-pleasing, and self-exalting. While, again, a man's spirit may be all day as dry as the heath in the wilderness, and all other men's spirits around him and toward him the same, yet a very rich score may be set down beside that unindulged servant's name against the day of the 'well-dones.' 'I believe that many think that obedience is lifeless and formal unless the wind be in the west, and all their sails are filled with the joys of sense. But I am not of their mind who think so.'

7. The scrupulosity of the Kilmacolm people was surely singular and remarkable even in that day of tests and marks and scruples in the spiritual life. The ministry may not have been wholly dead in and around Kilmacolm, though it could not keep pace and patience with those so eager and so anxious souls who would have Rutherford's mind on all possible points of their complicated case. Six of their complaints we have just seen, but their troubles are not yet all told. 'Surely,' they wrote, a Master like our Lord, who gave such service when He was still a servant Himself,--surely He will have hearty and unfeigned service from us, or none at all. Will He not spue the lukewarm servant out of His mouth?' I grant you, wrote Rutherford, that our Master must have honesty. The one thing He will unmask and will not endure is hypocrisy. But if you mean to insinuate that our hearts must always be entirely given up to His service in all that we do, else He will cast us away, for all I am worth in the world I would not have that true of me. I would not have that true, else where would my hope be? An English contemporary of Rutherford's puts it memorably: 'Our Master tries His servants not with the balances of the sanctuary, but with the touchstone.' Take that, says Rutherford, for my reply to your opinion that Christ must always have a perfect service at our hands, or none at all.

8. Again, hold by the ground-work when the outworks and the superstructure are assailed. Fall back the more nakedly upon your sure foundation. Keep the ground of your standing and acceptance clear, and take your stand on that ground at every time when despair assaults you. For great faults and for small, for formality in spiritual service, for cold-heartedness and for half-heartedness, you have always open to you your old and sure ground, the blood and the righteousness of your Covenant-surety. Seek still the blood of atonement for faults much and little. Know the gate to the fountain, and lie about it. Make much of assurance, for it keepeth the anchor fixed.'

9. The last paragraph of Rutherford's letter to the parishioners of Kilmacolm is taken up with the consolation that always comes to a Christian man's heart after every deed of true self-mortification. That is an experience that all Christian men must often have, whether they take note sufficiently of it or no. Let any man suffer for Christ's sake; let any man be evil-entreated and for Christ's sake take it patiently; let him be reviled and persecuted in public or in private for the truth; let him deny himself some indulgence--allowed, doubtful, or condemned--and all truly for the sake of Christ and other men; and immediately, and as a consequence of that, a peace, a liberty, a light as of God's countenance will infallibly visit his heart. After temptation resisted and overcome angels will always visit us. 'Temptations,' says Bunyan in the fine preface to his *Grace Abounding* 'when we meet them first are as the lion that roared upon Samson; but, if we overcome them, the next time we see them we shall find a nest of honey within them.' 'Blessed are they that mourn,' says our Lord, 'for they shall be comforted.' After my greatest mortifications,' said Edwards, 'I always find my greatest comforts.' And even Renan tells us of a Roman lady who had 'the ineffable joy of renouncing joy.' 'A Christ bought with strokes,' says Rutherford in closing, 'is the sweetest of all Christs.'

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