

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION Chapter 28 Its Need Revisited-Continued

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Transcript

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

Chapter 28

Its Need Revisited-Continued

We commence this portion at the point where we left off in our last. Those who are at peace with sin are at enmity with God; but those who are reconciled to God are antagonistic to sin. It cannot be otherwise. Satan and God, sin and holiness, are diametrically and irreconcilably opposed. As the "sceptre of righteousness" (Heb. 1:8) holds sway over the kingdom of God and of Christ, iniquity is the dominant power in the empire of Satan, "he that commits sin is of the Devil" (1 John 3:8). It therefore follows that all real Christians are opposed to Satan as the common enemy, and evince the same by fighting against sin. Satan's principal work lies in drawing men to sin, and therefore are the saints bidden "resist the Devil and he will flee from you" (Jas. 4:7); and again, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the Devil, as a roaring lion, walks about seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). To resist the Devil is to refuse his temptations to fight against sin; contrariwise, to trifle with temptation and commit sin is to render service unto him. The forwarding of sin is the Devil's main instrument to lead his subjects into more and more of a revolt against their Maker, and the more any yield to his solicitations, the more do they perform his work. To sin is "to give place to the Devil" (Eph 4:27), and to depart from Christ is to "turn aside after Satan" (1 Tim. 5:15). Whenever we knowingly sin we join with Satan in his battle against God. We take sides with him and strengthen his cause. How that awful consideration should restrain us and make us tread warily! How it should humble us before God when we have yielded to temptation and thus aided His arch-enemy! Again; the love of God and the love of the world cannot possibly stand together: "Know you not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Jas. 4:4). Thus the lines are plainly drawn: if I am a friend of the world, the abettor of Satan, the servant of sin, I cannot possibly be at peace with God. But if I am reconciled to God, then I am in avowed and open antagonism to that evil trinity. While any soul is at peace with sin, he is certainly not at peace with God, for He is ineffably holy and hates all sin. It was sin which caused the breach between Him and us: "they rebelled and vexed His Holy Spirit, therefore He was turned to be their Enemy and He fought against them" (Isa. 63:10). Since sin is the inveterate enemy of God and man it must be fought, or it will destroy us. Therefore His call is "be reconciled to God." When a soul really responds to that call he ceases his opposition to God and enlists under the banner of Christ. Christ becomes his "Captain" (Heb. 2:10) and

he engages to fight against all His enemies. He severs his old allegiance with the world, the flesh and the devil, and binds himself by a solemn bond to live unto God and be the Lord's forevermore. From this time forward can be no truce between corruptions and grace, carnal reasonings and the teaching of Holy Writ. "Neither yield your members as weapons of unrighteousness unto sin, but yield yourselves unto God" (Rom. 6:13). "You have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin" (Heb. 12:4). The leading thought of the context is, the need for faithful perseverance in a time of persecution and suffering. In the urging of this the apostle set before them (and us) the grand example of Jesus Christ, and how we should improve the same. Then he points out that, severe as had been the trials experienced, yet not so fearful as might yet be encountered. They had indeed suffered considerably (10:32, 33), but so far God had restrained their enemies from going to extreme lengths. The afflictions already undergone did not discharge them from their warfare. Rather must they continue in this to the point of being prepared to lay down their lives. That warfare consisted of "striving against sin"—sin in themselves, which inclined them to take the line of least resistance; sin in their persecutors, who sought to drive them to apostatize. In Hebrews 12:4 the apostle continues to use the figure of the Public Games which he had employed in v. 1, only there he refers to the "race," while here he alludes to the mortal conflict or combat between gladiators, in which one contended for his life against another who had entered the lists against him. In like manner, the Christian has to contend with a mortal adversary, namely, sin, both external and internal. He is called upon to wrestle not with flesh and blood, but against the powers of darkness (Eph. 6:12), and therefore is he exhorted to take unto him "the whole armor of God." So too he is to strive against his own indwelling corruptions: "abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). Those lusts are violent and powerful, ever seeking to dominate and regulate the soul, antagonizing the principle of grace, endeavoring to overcome our faith and prevent our obedience to God. Sin is a deadly enemy which will slay us unless we daily strive against it with determination of mind and resolute effort. Here then is one of the principal features which distinguishes the children of God from the children of the Devil. Here is an essential part of the evidence which clearly makes manifest those in whom a miracle of grace has been wrought. Here is the proof that I am reconciled to God. By nature sin is my element and I take to it as ducks do to the water and swine to the mire. By nature I delight in sin: do I not love myself? And in loving myself I am delighting in sin, for sin is part and parcel of my being. I was shapen in iniquity and conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). If then I now hate my natural self, loathe sin, vigorously resist it, I must be a new creature in Christ Jesus, at peace with God. If I compare myself with what I was in my unregenerate days, is it not obvious that a radical change has taken place! Did I then abhor myself? No indeed, far from it. I was pleased with myself. Did I then look upon iniquity as that "abominable thing" which the Holy One hates and takes sides with Him against it? Alas, I did not: I thirsted after it, drank greedily of it, and took pleasure in it. The natural man may indeed seek to overcome some grosser lust, the yielding to which humiliates his pride. He may seriously endeavor to conquer an unruly temper, that he may not be put to shame before his fellows. But that is a very different matter. One who is truly reconciled to God has voluntarily entered into a covenant to fight against sin as sin, and not merely this or that particular form and outbreaking of it. He is daily engaged in contending with his indwelling corruptions, resisting the Devil, refusing the allurements of the world, mortifying his members which are upon the earth. Here then is the matter reduced to its simplest possible terms, here is the plain but sufficient rule by which you may test the validity of your profession. You know whether or not you really are fighting against sin. We do not say fighting against it as faithfully, diligently, zealously as you ought to be. Nor do we say meeting with that success which you could wish. It is the fact itself we would have you consider: if you are really warring against indwelling sin you must be one with God. Probably the reader says, Tell us more explicitly what you mean by fighting against sin. Very well. Fighting against sin implies that you hate it, for you do not war

against anything you love. Likewise it signifies you earnestly desire to avoid it, keep away from it, have no commerce with it. To countenance sin is rebellion against God; to condemn and oppose sin is conformity to Him. If I hate sin and am engaged in a warfare against it, I shall not trifle with temptation but watch jealously for and seek to suppress the first motions of sin in my heart. When my corruptions clamor for satisfaction I shall earnestly endeavor to deny them. When the apostle averred, "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection" (1 Cor. 9:27), he was describing one aspect of his fight against sin. When another of the apostles enjoined, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21), he was calling them unto a further part of the same conflict. It was an affectionate appeal for them to avoid, resist, and renounce will worship and whatever could captivate our affections. This fighting against sin is from evangelical motives. Here too the line is clearly drawn between the regenerate and the unregenerate. Whatever resistance the latter make against sin it is from carnal or legal considerations. That which deters the natural man from the outward commission of evil is either pride or self-respect, because he would retain the good opinion of his fellows, or the fear of consequences. But different far is it with the spiritual man: he would hate and resist sin even if assured there is no Hell awaiting evil-doers hereafter! It is love of God, a desire to please Him, a concern for His glory, a horror of doing that which would sully his profession, bring shame upon the cause of Christ, or stumble any of His little ones. Therefore it is that when Satan gets the better of him and he is overtaken in a fault, he mourns before God. If we are reconciled to God we love Him, and repentance is the first expression of that love—the sorrowing part of it. Those fighting against sin do not "allow" or excuse their failures, but grieve over, confess them, and seek to prevent a repetition of the same. Let us repeat, it is not the measure of our success in this warfare, but the genuineness of our sincerity in it, which is the criterion by which we are to measure ourselves. As one of the old worthies said, "This is the seal which assures us the patent is the authentic grant of the Prince of peace." Or as John Owen put it, "Mortification of sin is the soul's opposition to self, wherein sincerity is most evident." To which we may add, none of our exercises and efforts have any sincerity in them—neither reading, hearing, praying nor worship—unless we are genuinely endeavoring to earnestly and vigorously resist sin. Sin is ever assailing the soul, contending for rule and sovereignty over it. But if a principle of grace is in my heart, then it will constantly challenge sin's right to usurp authority and oppose its assaults. "The subduing of our souls to God, the forming of us to a resemblance unto Him, is a more certain sign that we belong to Him, than if we had with Isaiah seen in vision His glory with all His train of angels about Him" (S. Charnock). Granted, says the exercised soul, but there is so much in me that is not yet subdued to God, yea which is contrary to Him, and this it is which makes me seriously doubt my reconciliation. I fear that I should be uttering an idle boast and thinking of myself more highly than I ought to, if I declared myself to be engaged in seriously fighting against sin. Dear reader, hypocrites are never troubled over the deceitfulness of their hearts, nor are they concerned at all of being presumptuous, and if you really are exercised over such things, then must you not belong to a totally different class! Vain and empty professors are not exercised about their sincerity, but instead are filled with a self-confidence and sense of security which no expostulations or warnings of man can shake. They are total strangers to the jealous fears and holy exercises of soul which engage those with humble hearts. "They had rather go to hell on a feather bed than to Heaven in a fiery chariot" as one quaintly but solemnly expressed it. Am I reconciled to God, at peace with Him? Yes, if I am daily and sincerely engaged in fighting against sin. But, says the reader, if I am engaged in such a fight, mine is a losing one, for the more I endeavor to resist my corruptions, the more fiercely do they oppose me and thwart my efforts. Yea, so often do my lusts master me, I can only conclude that I am still at war against God. Not so, if you take sides against your lusts and grieve over their prevalence. As it is not the fighting of a number of individuals belonging to two different countries which causes one of those states to declare war against another, but rather its consenting to and

maintaining them in their hostility; so it is not the rising up of our lusts against our graces which constitutes an act of war against God, but only when we approve of them, consent to and defend their presumptuous enmity. While we take up and maintain a constant fight against God's enemies—no matter how often we may be worsted in the conflict—hating and disavowing their outrageous uprisings, the peace between God and us holds. In the chapters on our reception of that peace which Christ effected Godwards on behalf of His people, we showed at some length what God requires from the sinner if he is to become a personal partaker of that peace, and every exercised reader should go carefully over those articles again with one particular design before him—to discover whether he or she has met those requirements. From the lengthy quotation from Goodwin (Feb. issue), it was shown that in preparing us to be reconciled to God it is necessary that we be convinced we are His enemies, and that He accounts us such. Thus, if the reader has never been painfully convicted of his revolt against the Most High, he is in no condition to seek reconciliation unto Him. If I have been made aware that I am a lifelong rebel against Heaven, that all my days have been spent in fighting against God, then I shall be sensible and deeply affected by such a realization. I shall mourn over my wickedness. I shall "remember my ways and be ashamed." I shall be "confounded" and have not one word to say in my self-defence (Ezek. 16:61-63). If the Holy Spirit has awakened me from the sleep of self-security, opened my eyes to see my true character in the sight of God, filled me with horror and contrition over my dreadful enmity against Him, then I shall readily respond to that peremptory call, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts," and cease my hostility against the Lord. At first it will appear to me that I have sinned beyond the hope of forgiveness, that it is impossible God should ever be reconciled to such a rebel as I now know myself to be, that nought but the everlasting burnings can be the portion of such a wretch. But later, the same gracious Spirit who revealed to me my horrible plight, acquaints me that God has "thoughts of peace" (Jer. 29:11) toward those who throw down the weapons of their warfare against Him. But that seems too good to be true, and for a season the stricken soul finds itself unable to credit the same. To him it appears that a holy God can do nothing but abhor him, that a righteous God must surely exact vengeance upon him, that his doom is irrevocably sealed. Do you know anything of such an experience as that? When God begins a work of grace in a soul He does not cease when it is but half finished. If He wounds it is that He may heal; if at first He drives to despair, later He awakens hope. When the Law has performed its office—of stripping us of our self-righteousness—then we are prepared to listen to the message of the Gospel, which tells of the garments of salvation provided for bankrupts. The glorious evangel of Divine grace announces that God is not implacable but inclinable unto peace, that His wisdom had found a way whereby the requirements of His holiness and the demands of His justice are fully met so that He can without sully His honor, yea to the everlasting glory of His matchless name, show mercy to the very chief of sinners. As the soul begins to give credence to that good news, he is persuaded better things of God than his fears allowed, hope is born within him that even his case is not beyond remedy, and the sweet music is borne to his ears, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7). But it is in Christ, and Christ alone, that the thrice Holy God meets the sinner in pardoning mercy. Christ is the One who met His claims and endured His wrath on the behalf of all who put their trust in Him. Christ is the alone Mediator whereby transgressors can approach unto a reconciled God. It is the Lord Jesus who is "set forth a propitiation through faith in His blood" (Rom. 3:25). And therefore "He is able to save them to the uttermost which come unto God by Him" (Heb. 7:25). It is in and through Christ that sinners may enter into covenant with God and by whom He enters into covenant with them, for Christ is "the Surety" (Heb. 7:22) and "the Mediator" (Heb. 8:6) of the covenant. Christ is the One who came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), and who declares "him that comes to Me I will in nowise cast out" (John

6:37). Have you gone unto Him as a desperately-ill person seeks a physician, or as a drowning man clutches to a life-buoy? You either have, or you have not; and it should not be difficult for you to determine. But am I come to Christ in the right way? Answer, the only right way is to come as a lost sinner, trusting in His merits. Have you, then, complied with the terms expressed in Isaiah 55:1-3, for it is with those doing so that God makes an everlasting covenant. That is but another way of asking, Have you really embraced the Gospel offer, which is made freely to all who hear it? Have you seriously, thoughtfully, broken-heartedly received Christ as your own personal Lord and Saviour? Have you exercised faith in His mediatorial sacrifice? Your faith may indeed have been so weak that you touched but the hem of His garment, yet if it was His garment, that was sufficient. The saving virtue lies not in our faith but in Christ, faith being simply the empty and leprous hand which lays hold of the great Physician. Every penitent believer may be infallibly assured on the Word of Him that cannot lie that his sins were all transferred to his blessed Surety and forever put away by Him; and that he is now made the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). But the honest soul who would "make assurance doubly sure" should go further, and test himself by Psalm 50:5, Isaiah 56:4-6; Jeremiah 50:4,5. There we have described the character of those making a covenant with God and who "take hold of His covenant," and it is our wisdom and duty to seriously compare ourselves with those characters and ascertain whether we possess their marks. Have I surrendered to God as my absolute Lord and chosen Him to be my all-sufficient Portion? Have I renounced and relinquished the things which He hates and "chosen the things that please" Him? Have I given myself up to Him wholly to love and serve Him, and that not for a brief season only, but forever? Am I now manifesting the sincerity of my surrender by being concerned for His honor and having respect to His Law? Have the resolutions I formed at my conversion been translated into actual practice?—not perfectly so, but by genuine effort nevertheless. If so, then I have good reason to believe that I have savingly complied with His call "be reconciled to God."

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