

THE HOLY SPIRIT Chapter 13 The Spirit Convicting

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Transcript

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Chapter 13

The Spirit Convicting

Though man in his natural estate is spiritually dead, that is, entirely destitute of any spark of true holiness, yet is he still a rational being and has a conscience by which he is capable of perceiving the difference between good and evil, and of discerning and feeling the force of moral obligation (Rom. 1:32; 2:15). By having his sins clearly brought to his mind and conscience, he can be made to realize what his true condition is as a transgressor of the holy Law of God. This sight and sense of sin, when aroused from moral stupor, under the common operations of the Holy Spirit, is usually termed "conviction of sin"; and there can be no doubt that the views and feelings of men may be very clear and strong even while they are in an unregenerate state. Indeed, they do not differ in kind (though they do in degree), from what men will experience in the Day of Judgment, when their own consciences shall condemn them, and they shall stand guilty before God (Rom. 3:19). Not "Conviction of Sin" But there is nothing whatever in the kind of conviction of sin mentioned above which has any tendency to change the heart or make it better. No matter how clear or how strong such convictions are, there is nothing in them which approximates to those that the Spirit produces in those whom He quickens. Such convictions may be accompanied by the most alarming apprehensions of danger, the imagination may be filled with the most frightful images of terror, and Hell may seem almost uncovered to their terrified view. Very often, under the sound of the faithful preaching of Eternal Punishment, some are aroused from their lethargy and feelings of the utmost terror are awakened in their souls, while there is no real spiritual conviction of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. On the other hand, there may be deep and permanent spiritual convictions where the passions and the imagination are very little excited. Solemn is it to realize that there are now in Hell multitudes of men and women who on earth were visited with deep conviction of sin, whose awakened conscience made them conscious of their rebellion against their Maker, who were made to feel something of the reality of the everlasting burnings, and the justice of God meting out such punishment to those who spurn His authority and trample His laws beneath their feet. How solemn to realize that many of those who experienced such convictions were aroused to flee from the wrath to come, and became very zealous and diligent in seeking to escape the torments of Hell, and who under the instinct of self-preservation took up with "religion" as offering the desired means of escape. And how unspeakably solemn to realize that many of those poor

souls fell victim to men who spoke "smooth things," assuring them that they were the objects of God's love, and that nothing more was needed than to "receive Christ as your personal Savior." How unspeakably solemn, we say, that such souls look to Christ merely as a fire-escape, who never—from a supernatural work of the Spirit in their hearts—surrendered to Christ as Lord Does the reader say, "Such statements as the above are most unsettling, and if dwelt upon would destroy my peace." We answer, O that it may please God to use these pages to disturb some who have long enjoyed a false peace. Better far, dear reader, to be upset, yea, searched and terrified now, than die in the false comfort produced by Satan, and weep and wail for all eternity. If you are unwilling to be tested and searched, that is clear proof that you lack an "honest heart." An "honest" heart desires to know the Truth. An "honest" heart hates pretense. An "honest" heart is fearful of being deceived. An "honest" heart welcomes the most searching diagnosis of its condition. An "honest" heart is humble and tractable, not proud, presumptuous, and self-confident. O how very few there are who really possess an "honest heart." Characteristics of the Spirit's True Conviction The "honest" heart will say, "If it is possible for an unregenerate soul to experience the convictions of sin you have depicted above, if one who is dead in trespasses and sins may, nevertheless, have a vivid and frightful anticipation of the wrath to come, and engage in such sincere and earnest endeavors to escape from the same, then how am I to ascertain whether my convictions have been of a different kind from theirs?" A very pertinent and a most important question, dear friend. In answering the same, let us first point out that, soul terrors of Hell are not, in themselves, any proof of a supernatural work of God having been wrought in the heart: it is not horrifying alarms of the everlasting burnings felt in the heart which distinguishes the experience of quickened souls from that of the un-quickened; though such alarms are felt (in varying degrees) by both classes. In His particular saving work of conviction, the Holy Spirit occupies the soul more with sin itself than with punishment. This is an exercise of the mind to which fallen men are exceedingly averse: they had rather meditate on almost anything than upon their own wickedness: neither argument, entreaty, nor warning will induce them to do so; nor will Satan suffer one of his captives—till a mightier One comes and frees him—to dwell upon sin, its nature, and vileness. No, he constantly employs all his subtle arts to keep his victim from such occupation, and his temptations and delusions are mixed with the natural darkness and vanity of men's hearts so as to fortify them against convictions; so that he may keep "his goods in peace" (Luke 11:21). It is by the exceeding greatness of His power that the Holy Spirit fixes the mind of a quickened and enlightened soul upon the due consideration of sin. Then it is that the subject of this experience cries, "my sin is ever before me" (Ps. 51:3), for God now reproves him and "sets his sins in order" before his eyes (Ps. 50:21). Now he is forced to behold them, no matter which way he turns himself. Feign would he cast them out of his thoughts, but he cannot: "the arrows" of God stick in his heart (Job 6:4), and he cannot get rid of them. He now realizes that his sins are more in number than the hairs of his head (Ps. 40:12). Now it is that "the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it" (Isa. 40:7). The Spirit occupies the quickened and enlightened soul with the exceeding sinfulness of sin. He unmasks its evil character, and shows that all our self-pleasing and self-gratification are but a species of sinfulness—of enmity against Him—against His Person, His attributes, His government. The Spirit makes the convicted soul feel how grievously he has turned his back upon God (Jer. 32:33), lifted up his heel against Him and trampled His laws underfoot. The Spirit causes him to see and feel that he has forsaken the pure Fountain for the foul stream, preferred the filthy creature above the ineffable Creator, a base lust to the Lord of glory. The Spirit convicts the quickened soul of the multitude of his sins. He realizes now that all his thoughts, desires and imaginations, are corrupt and perverse; conscience now accuses him of a thousand things which hitherto never occasioned him a pang. Under the Spirit's illumination the soul discovers that his very righteousnesses are as "filthy rags," for the motive which prompted even his best

performances were unacceptable to Him who "weigheth the spirits." He now sees that his very prayers are polluted, through lack of pure affections prompting them. In short, he sees that "from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in him; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores" (Isa. 1:6). The Spirit brings before the heart of the convicted one the character and claims of God. Sin is now viewed in the light of the Divine countenance, and he is made to feel what an evil and bitter thing it is to sin against God. The pure light of God, shining in the conscience over against vile darkness, horrifies the soul. The convicted one both sees and feels that God is holy and that he is completely unholy; that God is good and he is vile; that there is a most awful disparity between Him and us. He is made to feelingly cry, "How can such a corrupt wretch like I ever stand before such a holy God, whose majesty I have so often slighted?" Now it is that the soul is made to realize how it has treated God with the basest ingratitude, abusing His goodness, perverting His mercies, scorning his best Friend. Reader, has this been your experience? Summary of Differences in "Conviction" In summary, there is a very real and radical difference between that conviction of sin which many of the unregenerate experience under the common operations of the Spirit, and that conviction of sin which follows His work of quickening and enlightening the hearts of God's elect. We have pointed out that in the case of the latter, the conscience is occupied more with sin itself than with its punishment; with the real nature of sin, as rebellion against God; with its exceeding sinfulness, as enmity against God; with the multitude of sins, every action being polluted; with the character and claims of God, as showing the awful disparity there is between Him and us. Where the soul has not only been made to perceive, but also to feel—to have a heart-horror and anguish over the same—there is good reason to believe that the work of Divine grace has been begun in the soul. Many other contrasts may be given between that conviction which issues from the common operations of the Spirit in the unregenerate and His special work in the regenerate. The convictions of the former are generally light and uncertain, and of short duration, they are sudden frights which soon subside; whereas those of the latter are deep, pungent and lasting, being repeated more or less frequently throughout life. The former work is more upon the emotions; the latter upon the judgment. The former diminishes in its clarity and efficacy, the latter grows in its intensity and power. The former arises from a consideration of God's justice; the latter are more intense when the heart is occupied with God's goodness. The former springs from a horrified sense of God's power; the latter issues from a reverent view of His holiness. Unregenerate souls regard eternal punishment as the greatest evil, but the regenerate look upon sin as the worst thing there is. The former groan under conscience's presages of damnation; the latter mourn from a sense of their lack of holiness. The greatest longing of the one is to be assured of escape from the wrath to come; the supreme desire of the other is to be delivered from the burden of sin and conformed to the image of Christ. The former, while he may be convicted of many sins, still cherishes the conceit that he has some good points; the latter is painfully conscious that in his flesh there "dwelleth no good thing," and that his best performances are defiled. The former greedily snatches at comfort, for assurance and peace are now regarded as the highest good; the latter fears that he has sinned beyond the hope of forgiveness, and is slow to believe the glad tidings of God's grace. The convictions of the former harden, those of the latter melt and lead to submission. (The above two paragraphs are condensed from the Puritan, Charnock). The Means of the Spirit's Convicting: Use of the Law The great instrument which the Holy Spirit uses in this special work of conviction is the law, for that is the one rule which God has given whereby we are to judge of the moral good or evil of actions, and conviction is nothing more or less than the formal impression of sin by the law upon the conscience. Clear proof of this is found in the passages that follow. "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20): it is the design of all laws to impress the understanding with what is to be done, and consequently with man's deviation from them, and so absolutely necessary is the law for this discernment, the Apostle Paul declared, "I had not known sin but

by the law" (Rom. 7:7)—its real nature, as opposition to God; its inveterate enmity against Him; its unsuspected lustings within. "The law entered that sin might abound" (Rom. 5:20): by deepening and widening the conviction of sin upon the conscience. Now it is that God holds court in the human conscience and a reckoning is required of the sinner. God will no longer be trifled with, and sin can no longer be scoffed at. Thus a solemn trial begins: the law condemns, and the conscience is obliged to acknowledge its guilt. God appears as holy and just and good, but as awfully insulted, and with a dark frown upon His brow. The sinner is made to feel how dreadfully he has sinned against both the justice and goodness of God, and that his evil ways will no longer be tolerated. If the sinner was never solemn before, he is solemn now: fear and dismay fills his soul, death and destruction seem his inevitable and certain doom. When the Lord Almighty Himself appears in the court of conscience to vindicate His honor, the poor criminal trembles, sighs for mercy, but fears that pardoning mercy cannot justly be granted such a wretch. Now it is that the Holy Spirit brings to light the hidden things of darkness. The whole past life is made to pass in review before the convicted soul. Now it is that he is made to experimentally realize that "the Word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). Secret things are uncovered, forgotten deeds are recalled; sins of the eyes and sins of the lips, sins against God and sins against man, sins of commission and sins of omission, sins of ignorance and sins against light, are brought before the startled gaze of the enlightened understanding. Sin is now seen in all its excuselessness, filthiness, heinousness, and the soul is overwhelmed with horror and terror. Whatever step the sinner now takes, all things appear to be against him; his guilt abounds, and his soul tremblingly sinks under it; until he feels obliged, in the presence of a heart-searching God, to sign his own death-warrant, or in other words, freely acknowledge that his condemnation is just. This is one of "the solemnities of Zion" (Isa. 32:20). As to whether this conviction is experienced at the beginning of the Christian life (which is often though not always the case), or at a later stage; as to how long the sinner remains under the spirit of bondage (Rom. 8:15); as to what extent he feels his wretchedness and ruin, or how deeply he sinks into the mire of despair, varies in different cases. God is absolute sovereign, and here, too, He acts as He sees good. But to this point every quickened soul is brought: to see the spirituality of God's Law, to hear its condemning sentence, to feel his case is hopeless so far as all self-help is concerned. Here is the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 30:6, "The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart." The blessed Spirit uses the sharp knife of the Law, pierces the conscience, and convicts of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. By this Divine operation the hardness of the heart is removed, and the iniquity of it laid open, the plague and corruption of it discovered, and all is made naked to the soul's view. The sinner is now exceedingly pained over his rebellions against God, is broken down before Him, and is filled with shame, and loathes and abhors himself. "Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child: wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it" (Jer. 30:6, 7)—such is, sooner or later, the experience of all God's quickened people. Of ourselves we could never be truly convicted of our wretched state, for "the heart is deceitful above all things," and God alone can search it (Jer. 17:9). O the amazing grace of the Holy Spirit that He should rake into such foul and filthy hearts, amid the dunghill of putrid lusts, of enmity against God, of wickedness unspeakable! What a loathsome work it must be for the Holy Spirit to perform! If God the Son humbled Himself to enter the virgin's womb and be born in Bethlehem's manger, does not God the Spirit humble Himself to enter our depraved hearts and stir up their vile contents in order that we may be made conscious thereof?! And if praise is due unto the One for the immeasurable humiliation which He endured on our behalf, is not distinctive praise equally due unto the Other for His amazing condescension in

undertaking to convict us of sin?! Thanksgiving, honor and glory for ever be ascribed unto Him who operates as "the Spirit of judgment" and "the Spirit of burning" (Isa. 4:4).

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