

Insensibility

by Horatius Bonar

The gospel remains the same, and it suits you as you are, regardless of your feelings or lack thereof.

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1, Matthew 11:28

Topics: "Grace", "Coming to Christ"

Description

Horatius Bonar emphasizes that a lack of feeling or conviction does not diminish the gospel's power or the welcome of Christ. He argues that faith should lead to feeling, not the other way around, and that those who feel most insensible are often the most in need of Christ's grace. Bonar encourages believers to come to Christ as they are, without waiting for feelings of repentance or conviction, as these will come through faith in Him. He warns against the sin of insensibility and urges the congregation to recognize their need for Christ's healing and forgiveness. Ultimately, he reassures that Christ's love and grace are available to all, regardless of their emotional state.

Transcript

You say that you do not feel yourself to be a sinner; that you are not anxious enough; that you are not penitent enough.

Be it so. Let me, however, ask you such questions as the following: -

1. Does your want of feeling alter the gospel? Does it make the good news less free, less blessed, less suitable? Is it not glad tidings of God's love to the unworthy, the unlovable, the insensible? Your not feeling your burdens does not affect the nature of the gospel, nor change the gracious character of Him from whom it comes. It suits you as you are, and you suit it exactly. It comes up to you on the spot, and says, Here is a whole Christ for you, - a Christ containing everything you need. Your acquisition of feeling would not qualify you for it, nor bring it nearer, nor buy its blessings, nor make you more welcome, nor persuade God to do anything for you that he is not at this moment most willing to do.

2. Is your want of feeling and excuse for your unbelief? Faith does not spring out of feeling, but feeling out of faith. The less you feel the more you should trust. You cannot feel aright till you have believed. As all true repentance has its root in faith, so all true feeling has the same. It is vain for you to attempt to reverse God's order of things.

3. Is your want of feeling a reason for your staying away from Christ? A sense of want should lead you to Christ, and not keep you away. "More are drawn to Christ," says old Thomas Shepherd, "under a sense of a dead, blind heart, than by all sorrows, humiliations, and terrors." The less of feeling or conviction that you have, you are the more needy; and is that a reason for keeping aloof from him? Instead of being less fit for coming, you are more fit. The blindness of Bartimeus was his reason for coming to Christ, not for staying away. If you have more blindness and deadness than others, you have so many more reasons for coming, so many fewer for standing afar off. If the whole head is sick and the whole heart faint, you should feel yourself the more shut up to the necessity of coming, - and that immediately. Whatever others may do who have convictions, you who have none dare not stay away, nor even wait an hour. You must come!

4. Will your want of feeling make you less welcome to Christ? How is this? What makes you think so? Has he said so, or did he act, when on earth, as if this were his rule of procedure? Had the woman of Sychar any feeling when he spoke to her so lovingly? Was it the amount of conviction in Zaccheus that made the Lord address him so graciously, "Make haste, for today I must abide at thy house?" The balm of Gilead will not be the less suitable for you, nor the physician there the less affectionate and cordial, because, in addition to other diseases, you are afflicted with the benumbing palsy. Your greater need only gives him an opportunity of showing the extent of his fullness, as well as the riches of his grace. Come to him, then, just because you do not feel. "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." Whatever you may feel, or may not feel, it is still a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Do not limit the grace of God, nor suspect the love of Christ. Confidence in that grace and love will do everything for you; want of confidence, nothing. Christ wants you to come; not to wait, nor to stay away.

5. Will your remaining away from Christ remove your want of feeling? No. It will only make it worse; for it is a disease which he only can remove. So that a double necessity is laid upon you for going to Him. Others who feel more than you may linger. You cannot afford to do so. You must go immediately to Him who is exalted "a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel, and the forgiveness of sins." Seeing that distance and distrust will do nothing for you, try what drawing near and confidence will do. To you, though the chief of sinners, the message is, "Let us draw near." God commands you to come, without any further delay or preparation; to bring with you your sins, your unbelief, your insensibility, your heart, your will, your whole man, and to put them into Christ's hands. God demands your immediate confidence and instant surrender to Christ. "Kiss the Son," is his message. His word insists on your return, - "Return unto the Lord thy God." It shows you that the real cause of the continuance of this distance is your unwillingness to let Christ save you in his own way, - and a desire to have the credit of removing your insensibility by your own prayers and tears.

6. Is not your insensibility one of your worst sins? A hard-hearted child is one of the most hateful of beings. You may pity and excuse many things, but not hard-heartedness. "Thou art the man." Thou art the hard-hearted child! Cease then to pity yourself, and learn only to condemn. Give this sin no quarter. Treat it not as a misfortune, but as unmingled guiltiness. You may call it a disease; but remember that it is an inexcusable sin. It is one great all pervading sin added to your innumerable others. This should shut you up to Christ. As an incurable leper you must go to him for cure. As a desperate criminal, you must go to him for pardon. Do not, I beseech you, add to this awful sin, the yet more damning sin of refusing to acknowledge Christ as the healer of all diseases, and the forgiver of all iniquities.

Repentance is only to be got from Christ. Why then should you make the want of it a reason for staying away from him? Go to Him for it. He is exalted to give it. If you speak of waiting, you only show that you

are not sincere in your desire to have it. No man in such circumstances would think of waiting. Your conviction of sin is to come, not by waiting, but by looking; looking to Him whom your sins have crucified, and whom, by your distrust and unbelief, you are crucifying afresh. It is written, "They shall look on me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn?"

Beware of fancying that convictions are to save you, or that they are to be desired for their own sakes. Thus writes an old minister, "I was put out of conceit with legal terrors; for I thought they were good, and only esteemed them happy that were under them; they came, but I found they did me ill; and unless the Lord had guided me thus, I think I should have died doting after them." And another says, "Sense of a dead, hard heart is an effectual means to draw to Christ; yea, more effectual than any other can be, because it is the poor, the blind, the naked, the miserable, that are invited."

As to what is called a "law-work," preparatory to faith in Christ, let us consult the Acts of the Apostles. There we have the preaching of the apostolic gospel and the fruits of it, in the conversion of thousands. We have several inspired sermons, addressed both to Jew and Gentile; but into none of these is the law introduced. That which pricked the hearts of the thousands at Pentecost was a simple narrative of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, concluding with these awful words, which must have sounded like the trumpet of doom to those who heard them, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." These were words more terrible than law; more overwhelming than Sinai heard. Awful as it would have been to be told, "Ye have broken the whole law of God;" what was this to being told, "Ye have crucified his Son?" The sin of crucifying the Lord of glory was greater than that of breaking a thousand laws. And yet in that very deed of consummate wickedness was contained the gospel of the grace of God. That which pronounced the sinner's condemnation, declared also his deliverance. There was life in that death; and the nails which fastened the Son of God to the cross, let out the pent up stream of divine love upon the murderers themselves!

The gospel was the apostolic hammer for breaking hard hearts in pieces; for producing repentance unto life. It was a believed gospel that melted the obduracy of the self-righteous Jew; and nothing but the good news of God's free love, condemning the sin yet pardoning the sinner, will, in our own day, melt the heart and soften human rock-work into men." "Law and terrors do but harden;" and their power, though wielded by an Elijah, is feeble in comparison with that of a preached cross. "O blessed cross of Christ," as Luther, using an old hymn, used to say, "there is no wood like thine!"

The word repentance signifies in the Greek, "change of mind;" and this change the Holy Spirit produces in connection with the gospel, not the law. "Repent and believe the gospel: does not mean get repentance by the law, and then believe the gospel; but let this good news about the kingdom which I am preaching, lead you to change your views and receive the gospel. Repentance being put before faith here, simply implies, that there must be a turning from what is false in order to the reception of what is true. If I would turn my face to the north, I must turn it from the south; yet I should not think of calling the one of these preparatory to the other. They must, in the nature of things, go together. Repentance, then, is not, in any sense, a preliminary qualification for faith, - least of all in the sense of sorrow for sin. "It must be reckoned a settled point," says Calvin, "that repentance not only immediately follows upon faith, but springs out of it...They who think that repentance goes before faith, instead of flowing from or being produced by it, as fruit from a tree, have never understood its nature. And Dr. Colquhoun remarks, "Justifying and saving faith is the mean of true repentance; and this repentance is not the mean but the end of that faith."

That terror of conscience may go before faith, I do not doubt. But such terror is very unlike Bible repentance; and its tendency is to draw men away from, not to, the cross. Alarms, such as these, are not uncommon among unbelieving men, such as Ahab and Judas. They will be heard with awful distinctness in hell; but they are not repentance. Sorrow for sin comes from apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, from the sight of the cross and of the love which the cross reveals. The broken and the contrite heart is the result of our believing the glad tidings of God's free love, in the death and resurrection of his Son. Few things are more dangerous to the anxious soul than the endeavors to get convictions, and terrors, and humiliations, as preliminaries to believing the gospel. They who would tell a sinner that the reason of his not finding peace is that he is not anxious enough, nor convicted enough, nor humble enough, are enemies to the cross of Christ. They who would inculcate a course of prayer, and humiliation, and self-examination, and dealing with the law, in order to believing in Christ, are teaching what is the very essence of Popery; not the less poisonous and perilous, because refined from Romish grossness, and administered under the name of gospel.

Christ asks no preparation of any kind whatsoever, - legal or evangelical, outward, or inward, - in the coming sinner. And he that will not come as he is shall never be received at all. It is not exercised souls, nor penitent believers, nor well humbled seekers, nor earnest users of the means, nor any of the better class of Adam's sons and daughters, but "sinner", that Christ welcomes. He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. This man receiveth sinners.

Spurious repentance, the produce and expression of unbelief and self-righteousness, may be found previous to faith - just as all manner of evils abound in the soul before it believes. But when faith comes, it comes not as the result of this self-wrought repentance, - but in spite of it; and this so called repentance will be afterwards regarded by the believing soul as one of those self-righteous efforts, whose only tendency was to keep the sinner from the Saviour. They who call on penitent sinners to believe, mistake both repentance and faith; and that which they teach is no glad tidings to the sinner. To the better class of sinners (if such there be), who have by laborious efforts got themselves sufficiently humbled, it may be glad tidings; but not to those who are without strength, the lost, the ungodly, the hard-hearted, the insensible, the lame, the blind, the halt, the maimed. "It is not sound doctrine," says Dr. Colquhoun, "to teach that Christ will receive none but the true penitent, or that none else is warranted to come by faith to him for salvation. The evil of that doctrine is that it sets needy sinners on spinning repentance, as it were, out of their own bowels, and on bringing it with them to Christ, instead of coming to him by faith to receive it from him. If none be invited but the true penitent, then impenitent sinners are not bound to come to Christ; and cannot be blamed for not coming."

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