

Man's Own Character No Ground of Peace

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon emphasizes that true peace with God cannot be found in personal character or deeds, but solely through faith in Christ's redemptive work.

Scripture: Romans 3:20, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Grace", "Acceptance Before God"

Description

Horatius Bonar emphasizes that personal character and goodness cannot provide peace or acceptance before God, as God's judgment on sin is absolute and condemning. He argues that true conviction of sin reveals our helplessness and the futility of relying on our own efforts to gain favor with God. The only way to approach God is through Christ, who alone provides the necessary grounds for acceptance, independent of our flawed character. Bonar warns against self-righteousness and the delusion of finding peace in our own deeds, asserting that real peace comes from recognizing our need for Christ's redemptive work. Ultimately, he calls believers to rest in God's grace rather than their own merits.

Transcript

If God testify against us, who can testify for us? If God's opinion of man's sinfulness, his judgment of man's guilt, and his declaration of sin's evil be so very decided, there can be no hope of acquittal for us on the ground of personal character of goodness, either of heart or life. That which God sees in us furnishes only matter for condemnation, not for pardon.

It is vain to struggle or murmur against God's judgment. He is the Judge of all the earth; and he is right as well as sovereign in his judgment. He must be obeyed; his law is inexorable; it cannot be broken without making the breaker of it (even in one jot or tittle) worthy of death.

When the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of the soul it sees this. Conviction of sin is just the sinner seeing himself as he is, and as God has all along seen him. Then every fond idea of self-goodness, either in whole or in part, vanishes away. The things in him that once seemed good appear so bad, and the bad things so very bad, that every self-prop falls from beneath him, and all hope of being saved, in consequence of something in his own character, is then taken away. He sees that he cannot save himself; nor help God to save him. He is lost, and he is helpless. Doings, feelings, strivings, prayings, givings, abstainings, and the life, are found to be no relief from a sense of guilt, and, therefore, no resting-place for a troubled heart. If sin were but a disease or a misfortune, these apparent good things might relieve him, as being favorable symptoms of returning health; but when sin is guilt even more than disease; and when

the sinner is not merely sick, but condemned by the righteous Judge; then none of these goodnesses in himself can reach his case, for they cannot assure him of a complete and righteous pardon, and, therefore, cannot pacify his roused and wounded conscience.

He sees God's unchangeable hatred of sin, and the coming revelation of his wrath against the sinner; and he cannot but tremble. An old writer thus describes his own case; "I had a deep impression of the things of God; a natural condition and sin appeared worse than hell itself; the world and vanities thereof terrible and exceeding dangerous; it was fearful to have ado with it, or to be rich; I saw its day coming; Scripture expressions were weighty; a Saviour was a big thing in mine eyes; Christ's agonies were earnest with me; I thought that all my days I was in a dream till now, or like a child in jest; and I thought the world was sleeping."

The question, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord?" is not one which can be decided by an appeal to personal character, or goodness of life, or prayers, or performances of religion. The way of approach is not for us to settle. God has settled it; and it only remains for us to avail ourselves of it. He has fixed it on grounds altogether irrespective of our character; or rather on grounds which take for granted simply that we are sinners, and that therefore the element of goodness in us, as a title, or warrant, or recommendation, is altogether inadmissible, either in whole or in part.

To say, as some inquiring ones do at the outset of their anxiety, I will set myself to pray, and after I have prayed a sufficient length of time, and with tolerable earnestness, I may approach and count upon acceptance, is not only to build upon the quality and quantity of our prayers, but is to overlook the real question before the sinner, "How am I to approach God in order to pray?" All prayers are approaches to God, and the sinner's anxious question is, "How may I approach God?" God's explicit testimony to man is, "You are unfit to approach me;" and it is a denial of the testimony to say, "I will pray myself out of this unfitness into fitness; I will work myself into a right state of mind and character for drawing near to God." Anxious spirit! Were you from this moment to cease from sin, and do nothing but good all the rest of your life, it would not do. Were you to begin praying now, and do nothing else but pray all your days, it would not do! Your own character cannot be your way of approach, nor your ground of confidence toward God. No amount of praying, or working, or feeling, can satisfy the righteous law, or pacify a guilty conscience, or quench the flaming sword that guards the access into the presence of the infinitely Holy One.

That which makes it safe for you to draw near to God, and right for God to receive you, must be something altogether away from and independent of yourself; for, yourself and everything pertaining to yourself God has already condemned; and no condemned thing can give you any warrant for going to him, or hoping for acceptance. Your liberty of entrance must come from something which he has accepted; not from something which he has condemned.

I knew an awakened soul who, in the bitterness of his spirit, thus set himself to work and pray in order to get peace. He doubled the amount of his devotions, saying to himself, "Surely God will give me peace." But the peace did not come. He set up family worship, saying, "Surely God will give me peace." But the peace came not. At last he bethought himself of having a prayer meeting in his house as a certain remedy. He fixed the night; called his neighbors; and prepared himself for conducting the meeting, by writing a prayer and learning it by heart. As he finished the operation of learning it, preparatory to the meeting, he threw it down on the table saying, "Surely that will do, God will give me peace now." In that moment, a still small voice seemed to speak in his ear, saying, "No, that will not do; but Christ will do." Straightway the scales fell from his eyes, and the burden from his shoulders. Peace poured in like a river. "Christ will do,"

was his watchword for life.

Very clear is God's testimony against man, and man's doings, in this great matter of approach and acceptance. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done," says Paul in one place,[1] and "to him that worketh not," says he in a second; [2] "not justified by the works of the law," say he in a third.[3]

The sinner's peace with God is not to come from his own character. No grounds of peace or elements of reconciliation can be extracted from himself, either directly or indirectly. His one qualification for peace is, that he needs it. It is not what he has, but what he lacks of good that draws him to God; and it is the conscienceness of his lack that bids him look elsewhere, for something both to invite and embolden him to approach. It is our sickness, not our health, that fits us for the physician, and casts us upon his skill.

No guilty conscience can be pacified with anything short of that which will make pardon a present, a sure, and a righteous thing. Can our best doings, our best feelings, our best prayers, our best sacrifices, bring this about? Nay; having accumulated these to the utmost, does not the sinner feel that pardon is just as far off and uncertain as before? and that all his earnestness cannot persuade God to admit him to favor, or bride his own conscience into true quiet even for an hour?

In all false religion, the worshipper rests his hope of divine favor upon something in his own character, or life, or religious duties. The Pharisee did this when he came into the temple, "thanking God that he was not as other men." [4] So do those in our day who think to get peace by doing, feeling, and praying more than others, or than they themselves have done in time past; and who refuse to take the peace of the free gospel till they have amassed such an amount of this doing and feeling as will ease their consciences, and make them conclude that it would not be fair in God to reject the application of men so earnest and devout as they. The Galatians did this also when they insisted on adding the law of Moses to the gospel of Christ as the ground of confidence toward God. Thus do many act among ourselves. They will not take confidence from God's character or Christ's work, but from their own character and work; though in reference to all this it is written, "The Lord hath rejected thy confidences, and thou shalt not prosper in them." [5] They object to a present confidence, for that assumes that a sinner's resting place is wholly out of himself, - ready-made, as it were, by God. They would have this confidence to be a very gradual thing, in order that they may gain time, and, by a little diligence in religious observances, may so add to their stock of duties, prayers, experiences, devotions, that they may, with some humble hope, as they call it, claim acceptance from God. By this course of devout living they think they have made themselves more acceptable to God than they were before they began this religious process, and much more entitled to expect the divine favor than those who have not so qualified themselves. In all this the attempted resting-place is self, - that self which God has condemned. They would not rest upon unpraying, or unworking, or undevout self; but they think it right and safe to rest upon praying, and working, and devout self, and they call this humility! The happy confidence of the simple believer who takes God's word at once, and rests on it, they call presumption or fanaticism; their own miserable uncertainty, extracted from the doings of self, they speak of as a humble hope.

The sinner's own character, in any form, and under any process of improvement, cannot furnish reasons for trusting God. However amended, it cannot speak peace to his conscience, nor afford him any warrant for reckoning on God's favor; nor can it help to heal the breach between him and God. For God can accept nothing but perfection in such a case, and the sinner has nothing but imperfection to present. Imperfect duties and devotions cannot persuade God to forgive. Besides, be it remembered that the person of the worshipper must be accepted before his services can be acceptable; so that nothing can be of any use to

the sinner save that which provides for personal acceptance completely, and at the outset. The sinner must go to God as he is, or not at all. To try to pray himself into something better than a condemned sinner, in order to win God's favor, is to make prayer an instrument of self-righteousness; so that, instead of its being the act of an accepted man, it is the purchase of acceptance, - the price which we pay to God for favoring us, and the bribe with which we persuade conscience no longer to trouble us with its terrors. No knowledge of self, nor conscientiousness of improvement of self, can soothe the alarms of an awakened conscience, or be any ground for expecting the friendship of God. To take comfort from our good doings, or good feelings, or good plans, or good prayers, or good experiences, is to delude ourselves, and to say peace when there is no peace. No man can quench his thirst with sand, or with water from the Dead Sea; so no man can find rest from his own character however good, or from his own acts however religious. Even were he perfect, what enjoyment could there be in thinking about his own perfection? What profit, then, can there be in thinking about his own imperfection?

Even were there many good things about him, they could not speak peace: for the good things which might speak peace, could not make up for the evil things which speak trouble; and what a poor, self-made peace would that be which arose from his thinking as much good and as little evil of himself as possible. And what a temptation, besides, would this furnish, to extenuate the evil and exaggerate the good about ourselves, - in other words, to deceive our own hearts. Self-deception must always, more or less, be the result of such estimates of our own experiences. Laid open, as we are, in such a case, to all manner of self-blinding influences, it is impossible that we can be impartial judges, or that we can be "without guile,"[6] as in the case of those who are freely and at once forgiven.

One man might say, My sins are not very great or many; surely I may take peace. Another might say, I have made up for my sins by my good deeds; I may have peace. Another might say, I have a very deep sense of sin; I may have peace. Another might say, I have repented of my sin; I may have peace. Another might say, I pray much, I work much, I love much, I give much; I may have peace. What temptation in all this to take the most favorable view of self and its doings! But, after all, it would be vain. There could be no real peace; for its foundation would be sand, not rock. The peace or confidence which comes from summing up the good points of our character, and thinking of our good feelings and doings, or about our faith, and love, and repentance, must be made up of pride. Its basis is self-righteousness, or at least self-approbation.

It does not mend the matter to say that we look at these good feelings in us, as the Spirit's work, not our own. In one aspect this takes away boasting, but in another it does not. It still makes our peace to turn upon what is in ourselves, and not on what is in God. Nay, it makes use of the Holy Spirit for purposes of self-righteousness. It says that the Spirit works the change in us, in order that he may thereby furnish us with a ground of peace within ourselves.

No doubt the Spirit's work in us must be accompanied with peace; but not because he has given us something in ourselves to draw our peace from. It is that kind of peace which arises unconsciously from the restoration of spiritual health; but not that which Scripture calls "peace with God." It does not arise from thinking about the change wrought in us, but unconsciously and involuntarily from the change itself. If a broken limb be made whole, we get relief straightway; not by "thinking about the healed member, but simply in the bodily case and comfort which the cure has given. So there is a peace arising out of the change of nature and character wrought by the Spirit; but this is not reconciliation with God. This is not the peace which the knowledge of forgiveness brings. It accompanies it, and flows from it, but the two kinds of peace are quite distinct from each other. Nor does even the peace which attends restoration of spiritual

health come at second hand, from thinking about our change; but directly from the change itself. That change is the soul's new health, and this health is in itself a continual gladness.

Still it remains true, that in ourselves we have no resting place. "No confidence in the flesh" must be our motto, as it is the foundation of God's gospel.

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