

Rev. 2:2-3. Self-Denial Christianity

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon emphasizes the necessity of self-denial in Christianity, urging believers to follow Christ's example and remain faithful to the truth amidst worldly distractions.

Scripture: Revelation 2:2

Topics: "Self-Denial", "Faithfulness to Truth"

Description

Horatius Bonar emphasizes the call to self-denial in Christianity, drawing from Revelation 2:2-3 to illustrate the commendable works, labor, and patience of the Ephesian church. He contrasts their self-denying faith with the self-indulgence prevalent in modern Christianity, urging believers to forsake luxury and ease for the sake of Christ. Bonar highlights the importance of faithfulness to truth, warning against the dangers of compromise and the acceptance of false teachings. He calls for a return to the rigorous, sacrificial nature of true discipleship, as exemplified by Christ and the early church. Ultimately, Bonar challenges Christians to embody a faith that is both self-denying and steadfast in truth.

Transcript

"I know your works, and your labor, and your patience, and how you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tried those who say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars. And have borne, and have patience, and for my name's sake have labored, and have not fainted." --Revelation 2:2,3.

'CHRIST did not please Himself' (Romans 15:3). Yet if any one were entitled to please Himself, it was the Son of the Blessed, the Son of the Highest. He was no flesh-pleaser, no man-pleaser, no self-pleaser. He 'pleased the Father' (John 8:29). He was the highest type or specimen of that which was found so pre-eminently in Enoch, who was commended as one who pleased God. (Hebrews 11:5).

PAUL did not please himself. 'I have made myself a servant to all' (1 Corinthians 9:19). 'I keep under my body' (1 Corinthians 9:27; Greek, 'I buffet or maltreat'). There exists no picture of a self-denied man like that of 2 Corinthians 6:3-10. Let us study the whole passage, especially these words--'In much endurance, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonment, in tumults, in labors, in watching, in fastings.' What minister of Christ, what Christian man or woman, does not blush and hang the head as he reads these words?

What do we say to our self-indulgence, our sloth, our love of ease, our avoidance of hardship, our luxury our pampering of the body, our costly feasts, our silken couches, our brilliant furniture, our gay clothing,

our braided hair, our jeweled fingers, our idle mirth, our voluptuous music, our jovial tables, loaded with every variety of wine and rich viands? Are we Christians? Or are we worldlings? Where is the self-denial of primitive days? Where is the separation from a self-pleasing luxurious world? Where is the cross, the true badge of discipleship, to be seen except in useless religious ornaments for the body, or worse than useless decorations for the sanctuary? "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion!" Is not this the description of multitudes who name the name of Christ? They may not always be "living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry." But even where these are absent, there is 'high living,'--luxury of the table or the wardrobe--in conformity to 'this present evil world.'

'At ease in Zion!' Yes! there is the shrinking from hard service; from 'spending and being spent;' from toil and burden-bearing and conflict; from self-sacrifice and noble adventure, for the Master's sake. There is conformity to the world instead of conformity to Christ. There is a following afar off, instead of a keeping pace with Him whom we profess to follow. There is a laying down, instead of a taking up of the cross. Or there is a velvet-lining of the cross, lest it should gall our shoulders as we carry it. Or there is an adorning of the cross, that it may suite the taste and the manners of our refined and intellectual age. Anything but the bare, rugged and simple cross!

We think that we can make the strait gate wider and the narrow way broader, so as to be able to walk more comfortably to the heavenly kingdom. We try to prove that modern enlightenment has so elevated the race, that there is no longer the battle or the burden or the discipline; or has so refined the world and its pleasures, that we may safely drink the poisoned cup, and give ourselves up to the inebriation of the Siren song.

'At ease in Zion!' Even when the walls of the city are besieged, and the citadel on the point of being stormed! Instead of grasping our weapons, we lie down upon our couches. Instead of the armor, we put on the silken robe. We are cowards when we should be brave; we are faint-hearted when we should be bold as Elijah or as Paul. We are lukewarm when we should be fervent; cold when we should be full of zeal. We compromise and shuffle and apologize, when we should lift up our voice like a trumpet. We pare down truth, or palliate error, or extenuate sin, in order to placate the world, or suit the spirit of the age, or 'unify' the Church.

At Ephesus we find them from the first--a self-denying Christianity; and now, some fifty years after its foundation, we still find, even amid the decay of first love, the same self-denial, and endurance of toil and suffering. It still bore noble testimony to a self-denying Lord and a self-sacrificing religion. It was still a noble and unworldly church, amid much declension and coldness. What must have been its original nobility and self-crucifixion, when even in its declension and coldness, it can be spoken of in the way here done by its gracious Lord!

'The angel' of the Ephesian church is sent to bear from Patmos the following message, partly of commendation and partly of rebuke--first the former, and then the latter--to show the tenderness and patience of the Lord, who will not reprove us until he has said all He can in our favor.

The SPEAKER or writer takes to himself two special titles. (1) He who holds the seven stars in His right hand; (2) He who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. The skies with all its stars is His; the earth also is His; all above and below is His. He walks among His churches; constantly moving to and fro with watchful care and love. For eighteen centuries He has thus been walking and watching--trimming His lamps, and supplying them with oil--sometimes also removing them out of their places. Thus this glorious

One spoke to Ephesus; He speaks also to us.

(1) I know your WORKS. He knows what they are exactly. He knows their value precisely. He will neither under-estimate nor over-estimate them. The cup of cold water shall be duly valued and rewarded.

(2) I know your LABOR. The word denotes hard toil. Ephesus had had her days and nights of toil--and all this is acknowledged. She had not pleased herself; she had not lived in ease and luxury. She had set herself to self-denying work. Of what kind we know not. It is registered above--and we shall one day know it all.

(3) I know your PATIENCE. The word means patient endurance of suffering or toil--the patience of Christ, the patience of men who knew that they were called to a self-denying life in following a self-denying Lord. Not impatience, nor fretfulness, nor anger, nor excitement; nor yet ease, and comfort, and luxury--but patience. 'Fret not yourself' (Psalm 37:1) is the Church's watchword in evil days. It is to this that she is called--to calmness, forbearance, control of spirit--unruffled temper in the endurance of wrong--or the bearing of burdens and crosses.

(4) I know how you cannot bear those who are evil. It is not compromise or tame submission to sin, and evil, and error, and apostasy that is commended here. It is bold resistance to sin; bold rebuking of error and departure from truth and holiness and Christian consistency; for the Lord lays great stress upon the TRUTH, and upon testimony for the truth--as well as upon a HOLY LIFE. All true religion is founded upon truth--upon a true creed--a creed that rests upon God's testimony to His own truth.

(5) I know you have tried those who say they are your apostles, and are not. This church had been zealous for the truth; zealous against error; zealous against all false pretensions to apostleship. Error came in very early. Scarcely had Paul left Galatia, when the whole Church went astray into deadly error; receiving 'another gospel,' and other teachers; and drawing upon itself the sharpest rebukes the apostle ever gave. It was against the teachers of this false gospel that he said, 'Let him be accursed.' Such stress did he lay upon truth, as the foundation of a church--in such abhorrence did he hold all departure from the truth. She must hold up that truth to the world. She must make known a true and full testimony, otherwise she becomes unfaithful to Him who is the true and faithful witness--to Him of whom it is said, 'The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'--to Him who said, 'You are my witnesses.' A true church will 'try' all pretenders to apostleship; and try them by the unerring touchstone--the testimony which her Head has entrusted to her to maintain until He come.

(6) I know you have found them liars. They were discovered to be liars, in two senses.(1) As respects their teaching, which was false; (2) As respects their pretensions to apostleship, which were found untrue. 'Liars' is the fearful name which the Master gives to all such. In our day departures from the faith are not accounted evil things, but as "the excellent development of modern liberty and enlightenment." Heresy is becoming identical with liberal thought, which refuses to be bound by any restraints. Truth is made light of. The Church's testimony for God and for His truth is denied, and she is regarded as a mere literary institution for fostering speculation and free thought. Such she was not in the Father's purpose. She was to be the witness for God on earth; and if she failed in her testimony, she became useless, and was to be branded as a liar--one of those of whom it written, that 'all liars have their portion in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone.'

(7) I know you have borne, and have patience, and for my name's sake have labored, and have not fainted. This is, so far, a repetition of the previous commendation. Endurance, patience, unfainting toil for

Christ's name--these are the features of the Ephesian church. She was not what she once was; yet she has still a high place and a noble name for self-denial and self-sacrifice. She still bears her cross--and follows her crucified Master. She is not slothful, nor easy-minded, nor luxurious, nor self-pleasing; she is still an earnest laborer in the vineyard, bearing the burden and heat of the day. She had, amid much declension, upheld the truth which was given to her. She had proved herself a faithful witness or testifier. She had not let go of sound doctrine. For this the Lord still honors and blesses her. He is jealous of His truth--hates all departure from it. For what is truth? It is the embodiment of Himself, whose name is the truth, and who is the witness for the truth sent by the Father.

1. Learn self-denying Christianity. Not the form or name, but the living thing. 'Christ did not please Himself.' Let us in this respect be His true followers; bearing burdens for Him; doing work for Him; submitting to the sorest toil for Him; not grudging effort, or cost, or sacrifice, or pain; spending and being spent for Him; relinquishing the lazy, luxurious, self-pleasing, fashionable religion of the present day. A self-indulgent religion has nothing in common with the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ; or with that cross of ours which He has commanded us to take up and carry after Him, renouncing ease and denying self. Our time, our gifts, our money, our strength, are all to be laid upon the altar. We are to be 'living sacrifices' (Romans 12:1)

2. Learn faithfulness to His truth. We hear it often said that what the age needs, and what the Church needs, is religion--not theology. But the whole Bible takes for granted that there can be no true religion without a true theology. The Bible is God's testimony to Himself and to His Son--the Christ of God. There can be no acceptable religion or worship or service except that which is founded upon that testimony. The belief of that testimony is life everlasting--the belief of any other testimony is death eternal. Let us be true witnesses for the truth--let us shun and hate error--trying those that propagate it, and finding them 'liars', as the Ephesian church did. Let the Master's word in reference to the errors of the early churches sound in our ears--'Which thing I hate.'

A church may, no doubt, have a true testimony, and yet be a very unfaithful church; she may have the FORM of sound words and the form of godliness--and yet be cold like Sardis, or lukewarm like Laodicea. Yet, on the other hand, it is not possible that, with a false testimony, or a testimony to what is untrue, she can represent her Master and Head. A false testimony must make a false church. The belief of a lie will not save a man; nor will the belief of a lie win for a church the favor of the Lord. A true creed is of unspeakable importance, even though at times it has been associated with inconsistency and death.

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