

The Disciple's Theme

by John Henry Jowett

The unsearchable riches of Christ are the boundless and immeasurable wealth of God's grace and love, which is available to all people through faith in Christ.

Scripture: Romans 16:7, 1 Corinthians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 3:8, Philippians 4:13, 1 Timothy 1:15, 1 Peter 4:10, 1 John 4:16

Topics: "Gospel Preaching", "Christian Humility"

Description

John Henry Jowett preaches about the profound humility and absolute confidence of the Apostle Paul in proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ. The Apostle's sense of unworthiness is contrasted with his triumphant assurance in the redeeming grace that can destroy sin, transfigure sorrow, and rectify broken relationships. Jowett emphasizes the need for preachers to feel unworthy yet confident in their calling to proclaim the Gospel, just as Paul did, recognizing that the grace given to preach is essential for sharing the good news of Christ's riches with the world.

Transcript

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, was this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." - Ephesians 3:8.

Mark how the apostle describes the evangel- "the unsearchable riches of Christ!" It suggests the figure of a man standing, with uplifted hands, in a posture of great amazement, before continuous revelations of immeasurable and unspeakable glory. In whatever way he turns, the splendor confronts him! It is not a single highway of enrichment. There are sideways, byways, turnings here and there, labyrinthine paths and recesses, and all of them abounding in unsuspected jewels of grace. It is as if a miner, working away at a primary vein of ore, should continually discover equally precious veins stretching out on every side, and overwhelming him in rich embarrassment. It is as if a little child, gathering the wild sweet heather at the fringe of the road, should lift his eyes and catch sight of the purple glory of a boundless moor. "The unsearchable riches of Christ!" It is as if a man tracking out the confines of a lake, walking its boundaries, and when the circuit were almost complete should discover that it was no lake at all, but an arm of the ocean, and that he was confronted with the immeasurable sea! "The unsearchable riches of Christ!" This sense of amazement is never absent from the apostle's life and writings. His wonder grows by what it feeds on. Today's surprise almost makes yesterday's wonder a commonplace. Again and again he checks himself, and stops the march of his argument, as the glory breathes upon him the new freshness of the

morning. You know how the familiar lines run. "According to the riches of His grace." "That He should grant you, according to the riches of His glory." "God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." "The riches of the glory of the mystery among the gentiles." "The same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him." In everything ye are enriched in Him." "The exceeding riches of His grace." His thought is overwhelmed. He is dazzled by the splendor. Speech is useless. Description is impossible. He just breaks out in awed and exultant exclamation. "O, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" the riches are "unsearchable," untrackable, "beyond all knowledge and all thought."

But now, to the Apostle Paul, these "unsearchable riches" are not merely subjects of contemplation, they are objects of appropriation. This ideal wealth is usable glory, usable for the enrichment of the race. The "unsearchable riches" fit themselves into every possible condition of human poverty and need. The ocean of grace flows about the shore of common life, into all its distresses and gaping wants, and it fills every crack and crevice to the full. That is the sublime confidence of the Apostle Paul. He stands before all the desert places in human life, the mere cinder heaps, the men and the women with the burnt out enthusiasms and affections, and he boldly proclaims their possible enrichment. He stands before sin, and proclaims that sin can be destroyed. He stand before sorrow, and proclaims that sorrow can be transfigured. He stands before the broken and perverted relationships of men, and proclaims that they can all be rectified. And all this in the strength of the "unsearchable riches of Christ!" To this man the wealth is realizable, and can be applied to the removal of all the deepest needs of men. Let us fasten our attention here for a little while, in the contemplation of this man's amazing confidence in the triumphant powers of grace.

He stands before sin and proclaims its possible destruction. It is not only that he proclaims the general ministry of pardon and the general removal o sin. He finds his special delight in specializing the ministry, and in proclaiming the all-sufficiency of the redeeming grace in its relationship to the worst. There is about him the fearlessness of a man who knows that his evangel is that of a redemption which cannot possibly fail. Turn to those gloomy catalogues which are found here and there in his epistles, long appalling lists of human depravity and human need, and from these estimate his glowing confidence in the powers of redeeming grace. Here is such a list: - "Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, abusers of themselves with men, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, extortioners." Such were some of the foul issues upon which the saving energies of grace were to be brought. And then he adds- "And such were some of you. But ye were washed!" And when the apostle uses the word "washed" he suggests more than the washing out of an old sin, he means the removal of an old affection; more than the removal of a pimple, he means the purifying of the blood; more than the canceling of the guilt, he means the transformation of the desire. Such was this man's belief in the saving ministry of divine grace. Do we share his confidence? Do we speak with the same unshaken assurance, or do we stagger through unbelief? Does our speech tremble with hesitancy and indecision? If we had here a company of men and women whose condition might well place them in one of the catalogues of the Apostle Paul, could we address to them an evangel of untroubled assurance, and would our tones have that savor of persuasion which would make our message believed? What could we tell them with firm and illuminated convictions? Could we tell them that the cinder heaps can be made into gardens, and that the desert can be made to rejoice and blossom as the rose? I say, should we stagger in the presence of the worst, or should we triumphantly exult in the power of Christ's salvation?

It has always been characteristic of great soul-winners that, in the strength of the unsearchable riches of Christ, they have proclaimed the possible enrichment and ennoblement of the most debased. John Wesley appeared to take almost pride in recounting and describing the appalling ruin and defilement of mankind, that he might then glory in the all-sufficient power of redeeming grace. "I preached at Bath. Some of the rich and great were present, to whom, as to the rest, I declared with all plainness of speech; (1) That by nature they were all children of wrath. (2) That all their natural tempers were corrupted and abominable . . . One of my hearers, my Lord -, stayed very impatiently until I came to the middle of my fourth head. Then, starting up, he said, "'Tis hot! `tis very not," and got downstairs as fast as he could." My Lord- should have stayed a little longer, for John Wesley's analysis of depravity and human need was only and always the preface to the introduction of the glories of the unsearchable riches of Christ. My Lord- should have waited until Wesley got to the marrow of his text, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."

There was a similar sublime confidence in the preaching of Spurgeon. What a magnificent assurance breathes through these words, "The blood of Christ can wash out blasphemy, adultery, fornication, lying, slander, perjury, theft, murder. Though thou hast raked in the very kennels of hell, yet if thou wilt come to Christ and ask mercy he will absolve thee from all sin." That too, I think is quite Pauline. Henry Drummond has told us that he has sometimes listened to confessions of sin and to stories of ill-living so filthy and so loathsome that he felt when he returned home that he must change his very clothes. And yet to these plague-smitten children Drummond offered with joyful confidence the robe of righteousness and the garment of salvation. We need this confident hope today. Men and women are round about us, will less, heartless, hopeless, and there is something stimulating and magnetic about a strong man's confident speech. If we proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ, let us proclaim them with a confidence born of experimental fellowship with the Lord, and with the untrembling assurance that the crown of life can be brought to the most besotted, and the pure white robe to the most defiled.

What else does Paul find in the unsearchable riches of Christ? He finds a gracious ministry for the transfiguration of sorrow. The unsearchable riches of Christ bring most winsome light and heat into the midst of human sorrow and grief. "Our consolations also abound through Christ." Turn where you will, in the life of Paul, into his darker seasons and experiences, and you will find that the sublime and spiritual consolation is shedding its comforting rays. "We rejoice in tribulations also." Who would have expected to find the light burning there? "We sorrow, yet not as others who have no hope." "Not as others!" It is sorrow with the light streaming through it! It is an April shower, mingled with sunshine and rain; the hope gleams through tears. The light transfigures what it touches! Even the yew tree in my garden, so somber and so sullen, shows another face when the sunlight falls upon it. I think I have seen the yew tree smile!

Even pain shows a new face when the glory-light beams upon it. Said Frances Ridley Havergal, that exultant singing spirit, with the frail, shaking, pain-ridden body. "Everybody is so sorry for me except myself." And then she uses the phrase, "I see my pain in the light of Calvary." It is the yew tree with the light upon it! Such is the ministry of the unsearchable riches in the nighttime of pain. Professor Elmslie said to one of his dearest friends towards the end of his days, "What people need most is comfort." If that be true, then the sad, tear-stricken, heavy-laden children of men will find their satisfaction only in the unsearchable riches of Christ.

What further discoveries does the Apostle make in the unsearchable riches of Christ? He not only confronts sin and claims that it can be destroyed, and stands before sorrow and claims that it can be transfigured, he stands amid the misunderstandings of men, amid the perversions in the purposed order of

life, the ugly twists that have been given to fellowships which were ordained to be beautiful and true, and he proclaims their possible rectification in Christ. When Paul wants to bring correcting and enriching forces into human affairs, he seeks the wealthy energy in "the unsearchable riches of Christ."

He finds there for all ethical and social enrichments in this vast spiritual deposit. He goes into the home, and seeks the adjustment of the home relationship, and the heightening and enrichment of the marriage vow. And by what means does he seek it? By bringing Calvary's tree to every hearthstone, the merits of the bleeding sacrifice to the enrichment of the wedded life. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church and gave himself for it." He goes into the domain of labor, and seeks the resetting of the relationships of master and servant.

And by what means does he seek it? By seeking the spiritual enrichment of both master and servant in a common communion with the wealth of the blessed Lord. He takes our common intimacies, our familiar contracts, the points where we meet in daily fellowship, and he seeks to transform the touch which carries an ill contagion into a touch which shall be a vehicle of contagious health. And by what means does he seek it? By bringing the Cross to the common life and letting the wealth of that transcendent sacrifice reveal the work of the individual soul.

Everywhere the Apostle finds in the "unsearchable riches of Christ" life's glorious ideal, and the all-sufficient dynamic by which it is to be attained. Here, then, my brethren, are the "unsearchable riches" of Christ- riches of love, riches of pardon, riches of comfort, riches of health, riches of restoring the sin-scorched wastes of the soul, riches of transfiguring the sullenness of sorrow and pain, and riches for healthily adjusting the perverted relationships of the home, the state, and the race.

These riches are ours. Every soul is heir to the inheritance! The riches are waiting for the claimants! And some, yea, multitudes of our fellows have claimed them, and they are moving about in the humdrum ways of common life with the joyful consciousness of spiritual millionaires. One such man is described by James Smetham. He was a humble member of Smetham's Methodist class-meeting. "He sold a bit of tea. . . and staggered along in June days with a tendency to hernia, and prayed as if he had a fortune of ten thousand a year, and were the best off man in the world."

His "bit of tea" and his rupture! But with the consciousness of a spiritual millionaire! "All this," said the old woman to Bishop Burnett, as she held up a crust, "all this and Christ!" These are the fold who have inherited the promises, who have even now inherited the treasures in heaven: and "unto me, who am less than the least of all the saints, is this grace given, to preach these unsearchable riches of Christ."

Let me turn, in conclusion, from the disciple's theme to the preacher himself. "Unto me, who am less than the least of all the saints." Then the disciple is possessed by a sense of profound humility. "Unto me" -the standing amazement of it, that he should have been chosen, first, to share the wealth, to claim the inheritance, and then to make known his discovery to others. "Unto me, who am less than the least" -he violates grammar, he coins a word which I suppose is used nowhere else.

It is not enough for Paul to obtain a word which signifies the least, he wants a place beneath the least- "unto me, who am less than the least" -such a word does he require in order to express his sense of his own unworthiness. "Less than the least." He gazes back; surely I don't misinterpret the Apostle when I say it - he gazes back upon the days of his alienations, upon the days when he was deriding and scorning the supposed riches of his Master's kingdom. Again and again, in places where I least expect it, I find the Apostle turning a powerful and, I think, pain-ridden gaze into those early days when he lived in revolt.

If you turn to Romans 16, that collection of miscellanies, a chapter which suppose we don't often read, which is concerned largely with salutations and the courtesies of common life, you get here and there most vivid glimpses into the consciousness of the Apostle. Here is one: "Salute Andronicus, and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners who were in Christ before me." Do you feel the sob of it- "who were in Christ before me"? They were serving Him, following Him, proclaiming Him, while I was still a declared and implacable foe; they were in Christ before me.

But unto me, less than Andronicus, less than Junia, and less than the least of all, unto me was the grace given. I think we shall have to share it with him - this sense of unworthiness at being called and elected by grace to preach the Gospel. We shall have to enter into controversy even with the old Puritan who said, "I do not quarrel with Paul's language, but I do dispute his right to push me out of my place." " 'Less than the least,' said the Puritan, 'is my place.' Surely the preacher must sometimes lay down his pen, and pause in the very middle of his preparation, in a sense of extreme wonderment that the condescending Lord should have chosen him to be the vehicle and messenger of eternal grace.

The man who feels unworthy will be kept open and receptive towards the fountain. "Why did Jesus choose Judas?" said an inquirer once to Dr. Parker. "I don't know," replied the Doctor, "but I have a bigger mystery still. I cannot make out why He chose me." "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints was this grace given." I wish I could just read that in the very tone and accent in which I think the Apostle himself would have proclaimed it. I think the early part of it would have been almost tremblingly.

Mark the mingling of profound humility with the tone of absolute confidence. When the Apostle looked at himself he was filled with shrinkings and timidities, but when he thought about his acceptance and his endowment he was possessed by confident triumph. Whatever shrinking he had about himself, he had no shrinking that he was the elect of God, endowed with the grace of God, in order to proclaim the evangel of God. It was just because he was so perfectly assured of his acceptance and of his vocation that he felt so perfectly unworthy.

Did not Cromwell say of George Fox that an enormous sacred self-confidence was not the least of his attainments? I am not quite sure that Oliver Cromwell correctly interpreted George Fox. I would be inclined to withdraw the word "self" and insert the word "God," and then we have god, not only what George Fox ought to be, but what the Apostle Paul was, and what every minister of the Gospel is expected to be in Christ; we are expected to be the children of an enormous God-confidence, we are to children absolutely assured that we are in communion with Christ, and are even now receptive of His grace.

"Unto me was the grace given." Without that grace there can be no herald, and without that grace there can, therefore, be no evangel. You have heard the old legend of the noble hall, and the horn that hung by the gate waiting for the heir's return; none could blow the horn except the heir to the noble pile. One stranger after another would come and put the horn to his lips, but fail to sound the blast. Then the heir appeared, took the horn down from the gate, blew it, and there came a blast that rang down the valley and wound round the hills. "Unto me was the grace given" to blow the horn; "unto me was the grace given" to preach; and none but the heir can blow the horn of the Gospel. Our main work, our supreme work, our work, before which all other pales and becomes dim, is to tell the good news, to go everywhere, letting everybody know about the unsearchable riches of Christ. When Professor Elmslie was dying, he said to his wife, "No man can deny that I have always preached the love of God"; and just before he died he said again, "Kate, God is love, all love. Kate, we will tell everybody that, but especially our own boy - at least, you will - we will tell everybody that; that's my vocation." That is the vocation of the disciple, to tell

everybody of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

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