**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**08. THE GREAT CHARTER by JAMES DENNEY**

*"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."*

*Genesis 1:26*

The Bible begins with the story of creation, and invites us to think of the religious import of the truth that the whole universe is dependent upon God. But its main interest is not in creation, or as we now say in nature, but in man; and in this ancient narrative man has a place apart. His creation is no doubt part of the creation of all things, but it is preceded by a Divine deliberation, it is carried out after a Divine pattern, and it is accompanied by a great charter: "Let them have dominion over all the earth".

These things need to be emphasized. Within the last generation, more than at any earlier period, our minds have been trained to look mainly at the connexion between man and nature. Man, it cannot be denied, is a natural being, a part of the physical universe, like everything else that we see. He has a physical ancestry, originates in physical processes, is subject to the same conditions of life as the other animals, needs the same air, light, heat, food, and so forth, is subject to the same diseases, and succumbs at last to the same death. His being is part of the one vast web of life which is perpetually being woven and unravelled in the world. This is truth, and cannot be put too strongly. It is what the Bible means when it says, He also is flesh.

But is it the whole truth? Is man merely a piece of nature? is he merely the last term in an ascending series of animals, the consummation or crown of the natural process? No one who has really reflected would answer in the affirmative. It is true that all forms of life are akin; it is true that we are blood relations of everything that breathes: it is true that there is only one chemistry, one physiology, for the interpretation of life in every degree from the amphioxus up to man. But if this is a humbling and perhaps a depressing truth - if it casts the shadow of physical necessity over what we are accustomed to regard as the realm of human freedom - let us consider on the other hand that the only chemist, the only physiologist, the only interpreter of nature in her one and pervasive life is man. Man is not only a part of nature, he confronts nature as nothing which is only a part of it could do. He confronts it and includes it at the same time. He is not only the crown of nature, he is in some sense its king. It is his territory, his inheritance. He confronts it with a sovereign self-consciousness. He is not only, like other living creatures, a subject which science studies; unlike other living creatures he is the creator of the very science by which this study is carried on. Though he lives in time, he is not time's fool; a relation to God, to eternal truth, to inviolable duty, to a free calling in which nature is subject to him, is just as much a part or characteristic of his being as his kinship to nature as a whole, and the rooting of his life in the physical system around him. This is not only recognized in every sound philosophy: it stands on the first page of the Bible as part of its conception of the true constitution of man. It is what the Bible means when it tells us that God created man in His own image, and gave him dominion over all the earth.

If we meant to study the image of God in man, the best plan would probably be to go directly to the New Testament. The beginnings of human life and history lie beyond our reach, and all that anthropology can do for us seems to illustrate rather the natural than the supernatural in man, rather his relation to nature than what is just as certain, though not so easily traced, his relation to God. When our minds are turned to this last, it is the second Adam, not the first, to whom we must look. It is He alone - Jesus Christ our Lord - who is expressly called in Scripture "the image of the invisible God". It is in Him we see the Divine likeness in which - or, as some people would now prefer to say, for which - we were made. To see Him, and especially to believe in Him, evokes those capacities in us through which our life is connected with God, and so enables us to attain the ends for which we are created. But it is not the Divine image in particular that I wish to speak of, but the Divine charter which was given to our race along with it. This is expressed here in the words, "Have dominion ... over all the earth". It is not a peculiarity of the Old Testament: on the contrary, it is precisely the same thought which we find in the New, where St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "All things are yours ... the world, or life, or death, things present or things to come; all are yours". The sovereign self-consciousness of man in presence of the world is part of the true religion from beginning to end, and it is well worth while, therefore, to consider the ways in which it is exercised.

Speaking generally, it may be said that this sovereign self-consciousness of man, resting as it does on his relation to God, binds him to exercise his sovereignty over nature in accordance with what he knows to be God's will. Man is not an absolute or irresponsible king; his sovereignty is delegated to him by God; it belongs to him only as he is made in the image of God, and it must be exercised within the limits of the Divine charter. Where God is unknown or forgotten - where the true religion is unknown or debased - man may live in childish terror of the world and its forces, or he may use and abuse them in ways which are merely degrading to himself; but in his true sovereignty he is at once free, and under responsibility to God. Creation is the realm in which his sovereignty is exercised, and he exercises it in a way which reveals at once his kinship to the Creator and his sense of responsibility to Him. What, then, let us ask in more detail, are the ways in which man avails himself of the charter which God has written on his nature, "Have dominion"?

**1.** Originally, no doubt, man exercised his sovereignty in the world instinctively, that is, without conscious reflection. There is something in him always which impels him to regard the earth as his in an exclusive sense. He finds it preoccupied by other creatures, but that does not embarrass him. He believes it is meant for his abode, and that his claim to it is superior to every other. He feels quite justified in exterminating some animals, in domesticating others to do him service, and in using others again to support his life. No doubt in this general exercise of sovereignty man may have erred, just as those smaller sovereigns have erred whose rule did not extend to "all the earth," but only to one little corner of human society; no doubt he may have been, and may still be, selfish, tyrannical, and cruel. To say that all things, and in particular all forms of life, are lower than humanity, and therefore have value only in relation to it, is not to say that human beings can lawfully use other forms of life in any way they please. It is only as made in God's image that man is entitled to exercise sovereignty, and he dare not exercise it in a way that debases or denies that image itself. A higher race of men is not exercising its dominion legitimately - it is not exercising it in a way congruous to the charter and to the Divine relationship of man on which it is based - when it virtually denies the image of God in a lower, and treats its members as if they were brutes or tools. It is not exercising its dominion legitimately when it brutalizes its own nature - in other words, defaces and insults the Divine image in man - by torturing dumb creatures for its recreation, as in bull fighting, pigeon shooting, and many so-called sports. Cruelty to animals is not justified by the Divine charter which says, "Have dominion". Even the infliction of pain in the pursuit of knowledge which has the assumed good of humanity in view has moral dangers which it is not safe to ignore. If vivisection makes a man inhuman, it is for that man an illegitimate exercise of man's dominion over the creatures. The creatures belong to God, and they are ours only as we are His. We can do as we will with them, and with the whole world around us, so long as our doings contribute to the building up in the world the kingdom of Him whose right it is to reign. But arrogance, heartlessness, in humanity, arbitrary self-will, are no part of the Divine charter God has granted to our race. We can have no "dominion over all the earth" except as partaking in and contributing to His sovereignty, who is just and good in all His ways.

**2.** It marks a more advanced stage in human progress when man begins to exercise his delegated sovereignty over all the earth through science. Science is the methodical interpretation of nature, the mapping out of our great inheritance, the cataloguing of its resources and of our treasures in them. Nothing more clearly reveals the truth that man is made, and is continually being more completely made, in the Divine image. Kepler spoke of the aim of all his scientific efforts as the thinking of God's thoughts after Him. To think God's thoughts after Him is to that extent to be initiated into His secrets and to obtain command of His resources. He who learns to think God's thoughts learns at the same time, in a corresponding measure, to wield God's power. And so far at least as nature is concerned, there seems to be no limit set to the extent to which we may do either. In this sense we may go on extending our dominion over the creatures indefinitely.

For the last three hundred years, this has been increasingly the task of man. The proportion of human intelligence devoted to the enlargement of science and to its practical applications becomes continually greater; more minds are educated in this way, and more intelligence is given to this pursuit, than at any earlier period. The sciences of nature have been created - astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology. The forces in nature have been studied, mastered, and ap plied. Dominion over all the earth in a true and lofty sense is easily and widely exercised. The astronomer enables man to make the trackless seas his pathway to distant lands. The physicist masters the laws of heat, and the steam engine toils for us in every factory, on every railroad, on almost every ship in the world. The laws of light are mastered, and even a child can play with a camera, and make the sun take pictures for him. The laws of electricity are mastered, and not to speak of light and power, we send messages by the telegraph, or speak through the telephone, as though space had ceased to be. The human mind has never done anything over which it has been so elated. No triumph has ever been attended by such an incessant blowing of trumpets. And in a way this is quite legitimate, for all this interpretation and exploitation of nature is the fulfilment of the great charter - Have dominion. But more and more with the years there has become audible behind this song of triumph a strain of misgiving, and sometimes even of disappointment and despair. It is as though man were burdened by his very achievements - wearied, as the prophet says, with the greatness of his way. He has captured nature, but captive nature has in turn made him her captive. His train can run sixty miles an hour, and no matter how the pace shakes his nerves, he dare not travel more slowly. He can speak across the four hundred miles which separate Glasgow from London, and he must do business at that tension, or make room for those who can. Nature has revenged herself by getting dominion over him. What shelter to grow ripe has he, what leisure to grow wise? It is as though we could do everything with our inheritance except have dominion over it.

Disconcerting as this may be for the moment, there is no reason why we should be discouraged by it. It is only the reappearance in our own time of an experience which has haunted the whole history of advancing knowledge. He that increaseth knowledge, the preacher tells us, increaseth sorrow; to master the laws and the resources of nature is not (in this mood) a high calling with which God has called us, a noble charter which He has bestowed upon our kind; it is a sore travail which God has given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. Always, too, from time to time in the history of science there have been on this ground what may be called Puritanic reactions against it - protests, which their authors no doubt regarded as spiritual, against man's intoxication with it, against the strain which its practical applications put upon human nerves, against the luxuries and conveniences which it multiplies and makes necessary, so that the hardy simplicity and composure of a manlier age are lost. Even the Bible, in which all human experiences are reflected, reflects this one also. Genesis itself shows us that Babylon is only built at the cost of Eden, and Jeremiah holds up the impracticable virtue of the Rechabites, which would have extinguished not only drunkenness but civilization, as a pattern to his de generate contemporaries. The true inference to draw from such moral phenomena is that science and its applications are not the ultimate fulfilment of the charge - Have dominion. In one sense they do fulfil it, but in another they only set it for us over again. They reveal more clearly the world in which man's sovereignty is to be exercised: he sees his task (or his privilege) on a higher plane, in a more exacting form. It was easier - or we think it was - to have the sense of sovereignty in a simple, narrow, leisurely world; it is hard to achieve and hard to retain it in that complicated and swiftly moving world in which science com pels us to live. But this only means that in such a world as ours it is peculiarly necessary to hear God say, Have dominion, as made in the image of God. Remember your relation to Me. Remember the super natural likeness in which you are made, and in the sense of your connexion with God, whose all these things are and whom they all serve, do not be over borne by them; be their sovereign, not their slave. Strengthen yourself in God, and reflect that it is only by making the task harder and harder that it is possible for God to give you a larger and larger possession of the image in which you were made.

**3.** Instinctive impulse, and science with its wonderful applications, are modes in which man exercises a dominion over nature, but his sovereignty is even more wonderfully demonstrated in art. In art, as contrasted with applied science, there is always something creative. It is the nearest approach which man can make to working as God works. Man's dominion over the world, his power to appropriate and to use for his own ends all the glory and beauty of nature, all the joy and sorrow, all the splendour and the mystery of life, is nowhere more signally displayed than in the great works of painters and sculptors, musicians and poets. They demonstrate the freedom and sovereignty of the spiritual being in a way hardly less than Divine, and they help all who can appreciate them to partake in the same dominion. We are lifted above the world and every sort of bondage to the necessities with which it encompasses us, when we enter into the genius to which nature and the life of man are but the raw material or the unconscious prompting for works of enduring truth and beauty. The gifted minds to whom the rest of us are debtors in this region show us in one conspicuous way how the Divine charter is made good - Have dominion over all the earth.

But if this cannot be easily denied, it can just as little be put forward as the whole solution of the problem. How many men of genius could be named who were so far from having this universal sovereignty that they were not even masters of themselves? Genius may be used to assert and display man's dominion over the world, but it may lie neglected and unused, or it may be used to unworthy ends. It is a gift, and like every other gift it needs guidance. It is not genius which is made in the Divine image, but man; and apart from a sense of responsibility to God and humanity, genius may quite well be prostituted and wasted. It may be used in a way which enslaves man to what is beneath him in nature, instead of helping him to realize dominion over it; and when this happens, the power it exerts in degrading is as great as that which it might have exerted in uplifting and inspiring man. It is hardly true to say that in such cases the light that leads astray is light from heaven. Genius is not of itself a light from heaven. It is rather part of the nature over which man is to have dominion, as well as a power of asserting dominion over other parts; and man, in virtue of his nature as made in the Divine image, is entitled to judge all natural gifts, even the supreme gifts of genius, and the use to which they are put. Genius helps us to attain the sovereignty to which we are called only when he who is endowed with it has won the same sovereignty over his genius itself - in other words, when he uses it in the sense of responsibility to God, and in view of man's chief end. It is always the altar which sanctifies the gift. What can be truly said at last is that when gifts of genius are laid on the altar of God they help us, as no other powers or efforts do, to attain to the sovereignty set before us in our creation.

**4.** In conclusion, the sovereignty which was bestowed on man at the beginning, in virtue of his creation in the image of God, is only exercised effectively as that image is renewed and realized in us. It is only exercised effectively through true religion, or the life in God. If we wish to see it in its normal operation we have to look to Jesus, who was "the image of the in visible God," or to those who have been redeemed by Him and are fulfilling the Divine calling of the race in His strength. Who can truly say that the great charter - Have dominion - has been made good to him? Who can truly say that it is being made good? Only the man who through Christ has been made right with God to the very depth of his being, and who has the inward assurance that henceforth everything in God's world is his ally. It is he who has the consciousness of superiority to all outward things, and who knows that all that befalls him, however untoward it may seem, must contribute to his life toward God. If it is, not an echo of this text which we find in the eighth chapter of Romans, it is the Christian key to it. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God." "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." All things are ours when we are His. This is the form in which our sovereignty is asserted in the New Testament.

But who is equal to such utterances as these? In the first chapter of Genesis we have the Divine ideal for man; in the eighth of Romans the Divine fulfilment of it, amid all the trials of life, by the way of redemption. But the ordinary life we live, and by which we are apt to measure reality, is too little in contact with either. Often we feel that the world is our enemy, that all things are against us, and that they are too hard for us. The growing sense that man is implicated in nature makes it harder to believe in his sovereignty over it. Once men thought of the world mainly as the scenery of their life, the stage on which the moral drama was transacted, and then it was easy enough to feel independent; but now we know it is not only scenery, but soil; the roots of our being are interwoven with it, and we do not know how to conceive of freedom, not to speak of dominion. In proportion, too, as the merely physical conditions of existence are mastered, the moral task seems to become more complicated. Few of us here need to fear cold or hunger; to that extent our dominion over the earth has been made good. But the organized and elaborate system of life through which this has been secured has a new power of its own to bring us into bondage, and it is a new and not an easier task to live a free and sovereign life in it in the image of God. It is a task we can only fulfil if we have the assurance of a present love of God reaching deeper into life than its most distressing and hopeless conditions. The whole message of the New Testament is that there is such a love, and that it has been made sure to us in Christ. The one thing which makes the world impracticable to us, which baffles every attempt on our part to live a free and sovereign life in it, is sin; we face it with an evil conscience and a corrupt nature, and all things are against 'us. It is not every one who can say, We know that all things work together for good to them that love God. It is they only who have learned, as St. Paul had, that in Christ a love of God has come into the world which has gone to the very depth of our need, which has taken on itself the strain of the problem our sin had created, which has given us a new standing ground from which to face our calling, and has made us more than conquerors. Civilization, science, and art do not themselves establish man's dominion in the world; they rather challenge man again and again, at higher and higher levels, under more and more exacting conditions, to establish his dominion if he can. And he can, when at the cross of Christ, where the love of God bears even the sin of the world, he takes hold of that last and deepest reality which subdues all things to itself. His sovereignty comes back to him when he is united to Christ, whom God has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.