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

**10. A CHOSEN GENERATION by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Beloved of God, called to be saints."*

*Romans 1:7*

This is Paul's description of the Church at Rome, the address upon his letter. The address upon a letter naturally consists of something which will guide the bearer to those for whom it is meant; it gives their names, or their business, or the place at which they live. Probably the bearer of this letter to Rome would have to seek out its recipients in the Jewish quarter; for though the Church was mainly Gentile, like every primitive Church it originated among the Jews, and only by degrees became quite independent of them. The Jewish quarter was poor and squalid, and even among its poor and squalid inhabitants the Christians held an inconspicuous place. When Paul came to Rome himself, a few years later, the representatives of his people either knew nothing or affected to know nothing of the new sect except that it was everywhere spoken against. But to Paul its external circumstances and its repute in the world were nothing; he saw not the outward appearance but the reality: to him it consisted of persons who could be addressed in this wonderful style, "Beloved of God, called to be saints". Beloved of God - what a rock to lean upon! Called to be saints - what a height to aspire to!

It is chiefly about the second I wish to speak at present - our calling to be saints. It is necessary to notice that it is the second, and that it depends upon the first. It is as the objects and possessors of God's love that we are called with so high a calling. If we stood alone and unsupported in the world we should not dare to lift our eyes or our hearts so high. Many of us never think of it because we have riot taken to ourselves that on which it depends. But the Gospel has come to us, and the very meaning of the Gospel is that we are not alone in the world. God is here, Christ is here, the Atonement is here, the gift of the Holy Spirit is here, and they are all here for us. They are all here, bringing into our hearts the assurance of the redeeming love of God; and as that love, incredible at first, becomes real and ever more real to our wondering spirits, a new world rises before our eyes in its marvellous light. A day begins to dawn for us that we had never hoped for. Out of the darkness, confusion, weakness, and despair that overlay our life, something begins to shine clear, steady, hopeful, in spiring - something which is as incredible at first as the love of God, yet which may fill us at last with as deep and grateful a joy - our high calling in Christ Jesus. This is what the love of God makes possible for us and puts within our reach. Those who know that they are God's beloved know also that in consequence of being so they are called to be saints. To be saints is not now a dream or a madness; with the love of God beneath us it is our calling. In other words, it is at once a clear duty, and a sure and glorious hope.

The text has only two words in it - called and saints - and to get into the heart of it we must explore them both. It is best to begin with the second, so that we have two main questions to answer. First, What is meant by saints? Second, What is meant further when saints are regarded as such in virtue of a call, or as saints by vocation?

**1.** What is meant by saints? It is easy to answer the question formally. Saints means holy people, and in Scripture this means people belonging to God. When Paul speaks of Christians as called to be saints, he means that they are called to be His. The negative side of the idea is, "Ye are not your own"; the positive side of it is, "You are God's, you are His people, His representatives in the world". The oldest and perhaps the profoundest way in which religion is conceived in the Bible is as a covenant between God and man. The covenant has to be made. It has to be instituted by God, and entered into by man. Before it is made, God and man, so to speak, stand apart; God is there and man is here, and there is a sense in which both are frustrated. God is excluded from the life of the world, and man knows that the life he lives in himself - the natural secular life - is not eternal or Divine, a life which is life indeed. But when God draws near to us in His redeeming love, and enters into covenant with us in Christ, there is a real union of the human and the Divine; God fulfils Himself in the world through us, and we in our mortal life, with all its imperfections and failures, represent not our own cause or interest in the world but His. In the great city to which this letter was sent there were men to be found representing the most diverse interests, pleasure, pride, business, literature, art, science, law, government; but amidst its thronging myriads the Apostle's heart was pledged to the little company which represented, however unworthily, the cause and interest of God the Redeemer. It is they who are in his mind when he says, "called to be saints".

We should not pass this point without saying: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us". Is it not wonderful, when we think of what we have been, that God should call us to be His? to live in union and communion with Him, and to stand for Him in the world? Is it not wonderful that in His condescension He should so trust and honour us?

If we ask how we are to aim at carrying out our calling to be God's people, it is part of its very greatness that there is no short and easy answer. Of course we can say that God's people must be a distinct people in the world; in some way or other they must be recognizedly and even separately His. But if we ask in what way, we find that any definite answer invariably breaks down at some point. In the course of Christian history there have been two great and typical attempts made to determine the kind of separateness which belongs or ought to belong to the saints as the people of God. The first is the Roman Catholic, which may be said to proscribe the world as a whole, to excommunicate nature and society, and to renounce, as inconsistent with the calling of the saint, the common relations and duties of life. Only a person who goes out of the world altogether and who lives in a hermitage or a monastery, renouncing property, family ties, and individual will, is a "religious," and may become a "saint". On this view the saints are only a class of Christians, a very small class, to whose calling the others are sacrificed; for the others must be more in the world than their own needs would require in order to maintain the saints as well as themselves. This conception was certainly not the one in Paul's mind. He did not think of some Christians as called to be saints, and of others - of the great mass, indeed - as condemned to be content with some lower life; on the contrary, he writes, "to all that are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints"; to him a saint and a Christian are the same thing. Every person whom the love of God touches is called to be His and completely His; and a separation from the world which is not in its full extent possible for every Christian is not that on which our calling to be saints depends.

The other type of separateness which has been illustrated in history may without injustice be called the evangelical one, if we use that term in its conventional rather than its New Testament meaning. It proscribes the world, not as a whole, like the Roman Catholic view, but piecemeal - in such and such parts and aspects of it as are judged by earnest Christians to be inconsistent with devotion to God. It says, not of the world as a whole, but of some things in it, "Touch not, taste not, handle not"; and it makes of the corresponding abstentions the badge of the people of God. When the great evangelical revival of the eighteenth century took place, it was accompanied with a conception of the saints' calling, or of the duty of God's people, of this kind. For those who took this calling seriously, there could be no dancing, no novel reading, no card parties, no theatre going: these things were all of the world, not of God, and those who took part in them could claim to be God's people no longer. Doubtless this judgment, for those who first framed it and made it the rule of their own life, was sound enough. I do not wish to suggest that it has nothing in it worth thinking of now. Who will question that if we were in earnest with our calling to be saints such things would have a different complexion and a different proportion in some of our lives from that which they have at present? Nevertheless, to try to fulfil the saint's calling, simply by observing such abstentions as the circumstances of one particular age or one particular revival have pronounced obligatory, is futile. Experience condemns it as unequivocally as it does the Roman Catholic plan. When it has its perfect work, it does not produce the New Testament saint, but a character conventional, ungrounded, inconsistent, ineffective, and insincere.

But what other way, it may be asked, is left? The answer is that the New Testament way is left; and that it can be characterized intelligibly enough for anyone who wishes to make trial of it. Perhaps it may be said of it generally that the separateness from the world which it implies is not the means to saintliness, but the manifestation or result of it. Saintliness is not produced by separation; it is expressed in separateness, but it is produced by the love of God. All the separation which is required will be apparent in lives in which the love of God is the supreme and all-embracing motive; but separations which have another motive or have an end in themselves are essentially unsound. It is possible, I think, to indicate positively the characteristics of the life of the saint as a life determined throughout by the love of God in Christ; and it is only as we succeed in doing so that we do justice to the New Testament view.

It is a life of inner unity and consistency - the life of the man who can say at last, "This one thing I do". Much of the sin and misery of common life is literally dissipation. We do this and do that, are busy here and there, but our energies do not converge upon anything; we do not know what we are doing. This is one of the things which impresses many with the futility of life, and makes them cry, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity". But it disappears from the life of those in whom the redeeming love of God absorbs all good motives into itself and dominates everything. And it is a mark of the true saint to have the assurance that nothing in his life is vain, and that God from whom it all comes is using it all.

Further, the life of the saint is one in which perfect freedom and full responsibility are combined. There is no law laid down for the saint beforehand: there is no such thing as statutory obedience in his life, whether the statutes be conceived as Divine or human. Under God, or rather under the consciousness of the redeeming love of God, and of all it has done for him, the saint is a law to himself. Remember that other expression: "beloved of God". The whole of Christianity, all that is meant by the calling to be a saint, is in that; but everybody has to find out what it involves for himself, in the peculiar relations and conditions of his own life. He has to say to himself, "Here I stand, encompassed by the love of God - not my own, but His. Here I stand, believing that my life is dear to Him, and that through it His will and purpose are to be fulfilled in the world. Here I stand, under the constraint of the atoning death of Jesus, and the gift of His Holy Spirit - not my own, I repeat, but His. It is out of this conviction, out of the sense of obligation involved here, that my whole life must flow. It is only what does come, freely yet irresistibly, spontaneously yet with a necessity leaving me no alternative, out of this sense of obligation, which belongs to my calling as a saint or fulfils it." In one word, what makes the saint is responsibility freely faced in the sense of the love of God. Naturally we shrink from responsibility. Either we are self-willed, which virtually means that we deny that there is such a thing as responsibility, or we are timid, and glad to have someone relieve us of our most exacting responsibility by telling us what our duty is. The Romanist can put it on his spiritual director; the Protestant can evade it by being conventional, and doing what other people do; but it is impossible to fulfil the calling of the saint on such cheap terms. To fulfil that calling we must realize that we are not under law but under grace, and that it is all between ourselves and God. We must face our circumstances - which for us are the world - ourselves, in the full sense of the love which God has to us; and we must decide on our own responsibility what we have to do or to abstain from doing, what we have to resign or to keep, if we would abide in that love, and prove ourselves not our own, but His. In truth, there is no difference in this respect between a man and a saint. It is responsibility which makes a man; and the saint is just a man who takes the whole of life's responsibilities upon his conscience - as one beloved of God.

The life of the saint, according to the New Testament, will also be marked by moral originality. He has been redeemed from all that is conventional in conduct - from the vain conversation, we should say the empty life, received by tradition from the fathers. He is not the repetition of other men, nor the observer of alien rules. To live under a rule, as people live in a monastic order, is the very antithesis of the saint's calling. Every act of the saint is an act of creation in the moral world. The like of it was never seen before. No law prescribed it, yet once it is done we see it is supremely right. The great illustration of this is Jesus Himself, the only person who is spoken of in the New Testament as "the saint (or holy one) of God". Nothing strikes us more in Jesus than His incalculableness, the startling newness and freshness of all His words and deeds. Who could imagine Him living under a monastic rule? Who could imagine Him observing the moral conventions of any denomination or sect? Yet He is the only inspiration of the saint's life, and He left us an example that we should follow in His steps. But who does follow except the man who in the sense of God's redeeming love is no longer a slave but a son, and does in a way which is all his own the will of the Father?

To add one further characteristic: the life of the saint is morally effective. It tells upon the world as genuine goodness tells, and the will and purpose of God are fulfilled by it. The saint is a person living in the consciousness of the love of God, and everything that is in him, so far as he is a saint, is in correspondence with that love. His holiness, that which makes him a saint, must be in correspondence with it. There must be something redemptive in it, something which appeals to and wins men. There is such a thing as holiness which is not inspired by the sense of God's love, but by selfishness, or by the desire to put God under obligations to us; and such holiness can always be detected as a sham by this - it has no redeeming power. It does not touch the sinful, and waken in their unhappy hearts a longing to share in it; it does not stretch out helpful hands of which they can take hold. But those who are called to be saints are called to be holy as God is holy - that God whose redeeming power has lifted them up and set so great a hope before them; and if they are fulfilling their calling, then all through their life men will feel the presence of God the Redeemer. Holiness, the character of saints, of those who are God's, is born of the sense of God's love; and it brings the sense of that love in all its redeeming power, and in all the new hopes which it inspires, to those who behold it.

**2.** The greatness of this life may well seem too great, and, indeed, we may hear professedly Christian people saying, "Of course I don't pretend to be a saint". How odd such a sentence would look in the New Testament, where the saints and the Christians are the same thing. "I don't pretend to be a saint" can only mean "I don't take the Christian religion quite seriously". It is as if a man said, "I don't mean to deny that there is something in what is said of the love of God, and the atonement for sin, and the gift of the Spirit; but to take it all in simple earnest, as literal truth, and to take it with all the obligations this would imply - no, I certainly don't do that, and don't think of doing so". Could anything be more profane than to respond in this equivocal way to the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us? Better be irreligious outright than mock with this deliberate want of earnestness the redeeming love of God. But sometimes special causes discourage us from taking our calling to be saints with seriousness and hope. There is the past which we can never forget, which haunts us with shame. Yes, but God knows it better than we, and yet His love has come to us in Christ, and there is nothing too hard for it to deal with. "Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depth of the sea." There is the ever-present sin which still de feats us - which surprises and humbles us even while we look to the love of God. But to speak truly, is it not when we look away from God's love that we fall? We dare not say that the evil that is in us is stronger than He; it is written, "He will subdue their iniquities". Then there is the discouraging wisdom of this world, what those who have lived without God call the teaching of experience. It is needless and hopeless (it tells us) to aim so high; you must be sensible; you must remember what human nature is both in yourself and in other people, and not expect too much from it. To be a saint may be a calling in the New Testament, but it is not a calling in the streets of a modern city, and the less lofty your language, the less absurd you will appear. Of course those who do not believe in God and His love cannot speak in any other strain. If there is no God, or if we are not beloved of God, then we are not called to be His, or called to be saints. All I would say of this worldly wisdom may be said in the Apostle's word: "This persuasion cometh not of Him who calleth you".

As against all such discouraging thoughts, let us turn to the final and conclusive encouragement which we have in the other word of the text - called. What does it mean to say that we are called to be saints, or are saints in virtue of a call? When we remember that for the Apostle it is always God who calls, we may surely say such things as these. First, our calling to be saints is not a matter of indifference. There are things in the world which are of little consequence: it hardly matters what our relation to them is. But a Divine calling cannot be one of such things. Remember, it is God who calls. He calls through the Gospel; He calls through the life and words, through the death and resurrection of His Son; He calls through the gift and ministry of His Spirit; and He never calls us to anything else or less than this - to be saints. It cannot be a matter of no consequence how we respond to such a call. Further, in view of God's call we can say that when we aspire to be saints, or to be His people in this world, it is not a matter of presumption on our part. It is not a life for which we volunteer, or on which we adventure of our own motion, or which we have to carry through on our own resources; it is a life to which we have a Divine summons, and that summons is our justification. Paul in the first sentence of this epistle describes himself as "called to be an Apostle". No one could become an Apostle just by wishing or resolving to be one: he required to have a call from God. It is the same with being a Christian - that is, a saint. It would be presumption if we looked at it as an adventure, but when God calls us the presumption is to hold back. Most important of all: to have a calling to be saints is to be assured that the issue of the life to which we are pledged is not a matter of uncertainty. We can face it not only with humility but with hope. In his history of the early church, Dr. Rainy sets this down as the great change which came upon the world with the appearance of Christianity: the life of goodness became an assured career. Before the Gospel came, despair had fallen upon the ancient world; society had abandoned the very idea and hope of goodness; "deep weariness and sated lust made human life a hell". But suddenly a change came. Men appeared in that lost world with an infinite hope in their hearts - an assured and triumphant hope, to be holy as God is holy; and it spread from heart to heart till in the Christian Church a new people of God became visible upon earth, a society which with all its imperfections was a communion of saints. What was it that made the change? It was the sense of a Divine call that had come to men. And how had it come? It came through the revelation of the love of God. If we are ignorant of this, then any life like that which the saints set before them must appear fantastic and unreal. But if we know what that word means, "beloved of God," it will open to us the meaning of the other, "called to be saints". And that brings us back to the point from which we started. It is because we have this to lean upon that we dare aspire so high. It is only as we lean upon it that our calling to be God's becomes credible, practicable, real. They are the two most wonderful things in the world, the most incredible to start with, the most humbling, the most uplifting, the most Divine - "beloved of God," "called to be saints". In the celebration of the Supper to-day we have been reassuring ourselves of the first. We have been taking the redeeming love of God to ourselves again in all its fulness, the love manifested in the passion of our Lord; shall we not take it also in its infinite obligation, in its infinite hope? For to be the people of God in the world is for those who are so called to it not only a duty but a hope. It is a thing to lift up our hearts to with humility, assurance, and joy. And when we are discouraged by the remembrance of what we have been or what we are, let us remember that it is not on this our calling rests; it rests on the solemn and wonderful truth that we are beloved of God. Underneath all our sinfulness and weakness, underneath our past, our present, and our future, lies a finished work of Christ, a great deep of love on which our wrecked and stranded lives can be floated into the assurance of hope, and filled with all the fulness of God. We cannot speak of these things as they should be spoken of. We cannot fix our hearts on all that is involved in them as they should be fixed. But as we think of how God loves us and of how He has shown His love - as we clasp these gracious words to our hearts and claim our inheritance in them: beloved of God, called to be saints - we can say, "Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood, and made us a kingdom, even priests to His God and Father: to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen."