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

**18. WALKING IN THE LIGHT by JAMES DENNEY**

*"If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin."*

*1 John 1:7*

This is one of the passages in Scripture in which the language is so spiritual, and so remote from that which we use in daily life, that it is apt to leave no impression on our minds. We have no inclination to dispute it, but it does not arrest us. If we do not think of it, it sounds familiar, but it grows strangely unfamiliar if we try to realize what it means. I have heard an eminent scholar express impatience with the first epistle of John as a whole; it seemed to him, he said, the innocent prattle of a good old man, not to be too seriously followed. But a scholar much more eminent -perhaps the most distinguished New Testament scholar of the last generation, Dr. Hort - characterized this same book as the most passionate in the New Testament. It is the book, if our minds were only at home in the region in which it moves, which says the last word about all the great things in the Christian religion; the simplest if you will, and the most free from effort, but also the most profound, the most searching, and the most impassioned of all.

This text brings before us two of the great experiences and privileges of Christians, and the condition on which they depend. These experiences are, first, mutual fellowship, and second, continuous sanctification. This interpretation of the Apostle's language has indeed been disputed. The words "We have fellowship one with another" have been supposed to refer not to the fellowship of Christians among themselves, but to the fellowship of Christians with God, the "we" representing under one term God and the writer of this letter and those for whom he speaks; and the words "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin" have been interpreted not of continuous sanctification or progress in holiness, but of the annulling of the responsibility for sin; in theological language, they have been taken to refer to justification, not sanctification. When it comes to experience, the things which are here distinguished are never separated. The mutual fellowship of Christians is a fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, and there is no justification known to Scripture which does not sanctify, nor any sanctification which does not rest on a fundamental annulling of the responsibility for sin. But though this makes the difference of interpretation practically unimportant, I believe the way in which I put it at first is that which truly represents the mind of St. John: the experiences in which it comes out that a certain condition is being fulfilled are the fellowship of Christians with each other and their progressive sanctification. The condition on which these experiences depend is that of walking in the light as God is in the light. Following the order in the text, I shall speak first of what is meant by this condition.

**1. If we walk in the light as He is in the light.** - Light and darkness are words which the Apostle uses both in the Gospel and the epistle, but which he never explains. Partly they do not need explanation and partly they do not admit of it. We feel the freedom with which they are used when he says in one sentence that God is light, and in the next that God is in the light. We feel that in some aspects light and darkness might be regarded as equivalent to holiness and sin, but the text itself is enough to show that they are not to be simply identified. The Christian conscious of sin is called by the Apostle to walk in the light as God is in the light in order that the blood of Jesus may cleanse him from all sin. What is suggested by "light" throughout the passage is something absolutely luminous and transparent, in which there is no concealment and no need for any. To say that God is light is to say for one thing that in God there is nothing to hide: if He is dark, it is with excess of bright; it is because He dwells in light that is in accessible, not because there is anything in Him which of its own nature craves obscurity. This is the line on which our thoughts are led by the following verses, where the opposite of walking in the light is evidently hiding sin, or denying that we have sinned. It is some kind of secrecy - which no doubt has its motive in sin - that is meant by darkness, and this gives us the key to walking in the light. To walk in the light means to live a life in which there is nothing hidden, nothing in which we are insincere with ourselves, nothing in which we seek to impose upon others. We may have, and no doubt we will have, both sin and the sense of sin upon us - "if we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" - but we may walk in the light nevertheless, if we deal truly with our sin, and it is only as we do so that we enjoy Christian fellowship and are cleansed by the blood of Jesus. What, then, is specially required of us if we would walk in the light?

It requires in the first place prompt confession of sin. The sin that lies upon the conscience unconfessed darkens the whole moral being. But to confess is not the first impulse when we have sinned. Pride, fear, shame, and other powerful feelings keep us back. Our first impulse is to hide our sin, or rather to ignore it; to try to believe that the best that can now be done is to forget it, and to go on as if it had never been; to brace ourselves up to bear the inevitable consequences as stoically as we can; in any case, to say nothing about it, in the hope that in time it may work itself out, and that God will say nothing about it either. The thirty-second Psalm, which tells the story of a penitent and pardoned sinner, begins it with the words, "When I kept silence". That is the first impulse. But to keep silence is to walk in the dark and to walk alone. The unconfessed sin separates us from God, and from all His redeeming and cleansing power. Of course He knows it, but it is not enough that He should know, it is necessary that we should tell Him. If we are going to walk in the light, there must be no shunning of God's presence, no restraint of prayer, no hiding of anything from Him even for an hour.

Further, to walk in the light means that we con fess our sins without reserve. Sometimes we do not really confess when we think we are doing so: we rather admit our sins than confess them, and we seek in all possible ways to explain, to extenuate and to excuse them. We may confess them in words, but in the secret of our hearts we do not take blame; we do not admit full responsibility for them. We think of the evil nature we have inherited, of the bias in our constitution to this or that attractive vice, of the defects of our education, of the violence of temptation, of the compulsion of circumstances; we do not deny what we have done - we cannot - but we mitigate it by every possible plea. This is not walking in the light. In all such self-excusing there is a large element of voluntary self-deception which keeps the life in the dark. To walk in the light requires us to accept our responsibilities without reserve, to own our sin that we may be able to disown it, and not to own it with such qualifications and reserves as amount to saying in the long run, It was indeed I who did it, but after all it is not I who should bear the blame. A man who makes it his business not to confess his sin, but to understand and to explain it, no matter how philosophical he may seem, is walking in darkness, and the truth is not in him. There is nothing in his attitude which gives him the benefit either of fellowship with Christians or of the cleansing blood of Jesus.

Finally, to walk in the light means that when we confess our sins to God we do not keep a secret hold of them in our hearts. Many a man confesses the sin he has done, and knows that he is going to do it again. It is not only in his nature to do it; it is in his inmost desire. He has been found out, exposed, humiliated, punished; yet he is saying to himself, "When shall I awake? I will seek it yet again." It need not be said that there is no hope here: this is the man who is shut up at last in the iron cage of despair. Where there is something hidden in the heart, hidden from God and from man, yet with the last word to say in the life, the darkness is as deep and dreadful as it can be. The desire to keep such a secret hold of sin is itself a sin to be confessed, to be declared in its exceeding sinfulness, to be unreservedly renounced; and it is only when the life is brought into the light by such openness that the Christian experiences of which the Apostle speaks are put within its reach. The man who has a guilty secret in his life is a lonely man. There can be no cordial Christian overflow from his heart to the hearts of others, nor from theirs to his. And he is a man doomed to bear in his loneliness the uneffaced stain of his sin. The cleansing virtue of the atonement cannot reach him where he dwells by himself in the dark. He is cut off from the two great blessings of the Gospel which are conditioned by walking in the light - the fellowship of Christians with one another, and the sanctifying power of the blood of Jesus. Let us briefly consider these.

**2. (a) We have fellowship one with another.** - The fellowship of Christians with each other has its basis in their common fellowship with the Father and the Son, but it is a separate and priceless good. The joy of the Christian religion is largely bound up with it, and without joy there can be little effectiveness, because little attraction or charm. How good it is, and how strengthening, to feel the heart enlarged by sharing in the Christian experiences which are common to all believers! how happy a state, not to be alone in that which is deepest in our life, but to know that there are those who passionately sympathize with us, who feel with us and with whom we can feel, to the very depths of our spiritual nature! The New Testament epistles are one prolonged illustration of what this fellowship means. It means, to put it briefly, that Christians are people who have in common the interests and experiences which dominate these letters, who are moved and uplifted by them as the Apostles and their correspondents were, who instinctively speak of them as they spoke, and who find in their relation to each other in Christ the most inspiring and joyful element in their life. It is something like this the Apostle means when he says, "We have fellow ship one with another". But what of our present experience in this connexion?

It can hardly be doubted that the want of fellowship, in this primary Christian sense, is at this moment one of the greatest wants in the Church's life - the one which is most to be deplored, which more almost than any other makes the Church helpless and exposes it to contempt. Is it not pitiable to see the substitutes that are found for it, and the importance which is assigned to them, only because the real thing is not there? We speak of having "a social meeting" of the Church, as if a meeting could not be social unless its Christian character were disguised or put into the background. We approve of the Literary Society because it keeps young people in contact with the Church, as if this kind of contact had anything to do with the ends for which the Church exists. We congratulate ourselves on the success of a bazaar, because though it did involve an immense amount of labour and of waste, it brought the members of the congregation together, and united them in a common interest over the organ or the renovation of the buildings. We may even find the choir picnic important, and if we open a reading- room where men may play at dominoes we call it "extending the social side" of the Church's work. How incongruous and unreal all this would look in the first epistle of John! How small and trivial it does look in face of many other fellowships which absorb men in the world around us! The fellowship of the members of a political club in promoting what they think the good of the nation - the fellowship of scholars in the advancement of science - the fellowship of the members of a Trades Union in promoting the material interests of their class - all these are more powerful, more stimulating, more attractive than the small incidental fellowships which seem to be all that is real in some churches. Why is it that the powerful and fundamental fellowship constituted simply by membership in the Church has fallen into the back ground? Why do we not feel the power and the charm of a common relation to the Father and to His Son Jesus Christ, of a common participation in that eternal life which was with the Father and has been revealed for us in the Son? Why is not this the centre round which we rally, where we find our greatest joy, where we can be most truly one, and are inspired for the highest ends?

According to the Apostle, it is because we do not walk in the light as God is in the light. We sit here side by side, but how far are we really present to each other? How many of us are there who have things to hide? How many who have done what no one knows, and what they have not told unreservedly even to God? How many are there whose minds are quietly and steadily set on something which they dare not avow, whose future depends on keeping others in the dark, and who do not realize that in the sense of the Apostle the very same act keeps themselves in the dark too? How many are there whose minds have been secretly loosened from what once seemed convictions, who have been intellectually estranged from the Gospel, who would create a sensation if they stood up in the midst of Christian worship and revealed their whole thoughts about God and Christ, about Church and Bible, about prayer and sacraments? These are the things which make fellowship impossible. These are the things which make us dumb, because they silence on our lips the language of the New Testament, the only language which true Christianity can speak. The want of fellowship, if the Apostle is right, constitutes an impeachment of our moral sincerity. If we were walking in the light it would be otherwise. If we always told the truth, if we never made reserves, if we dealt sincerely with God, with one another, and with our own souls, we should have a fellowship with one another such as we have never known; we should speak the language of the Apostles as our mother- tongue, and we should find, not in other associations but in the Church itself, the most satisfying and in spiring society in the world. Walk in the light as God is in the light, and your hearts will open to each other in Him. You will discover on every side unsuspected friends. You will get new inspirations for your Christian life, new impulses and opportunities of sharing in the Christian life of others. The Church will no longer be a weariness to you, a place to which you come with reluctance and which you leave with relief; it will be the home and joy of your heart.

**2. (b)** The restoration of Christian fellowship is not the only blessing which comes with walking in the light: there is also continuous and progressive sanctification. The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin. This is not spoken of simply as God's will, as that which He intends shall take place; it is spoken of as actually going on. When they walk in the light, the atoning death of Jesus actually exerts its sanctifying power upon Christians; they become continually purer and more pure from all sin.

It cannot be said too strongly that this is God's interest in the Church. As St. Paul puts it, this is the will of God, even your sanctification. What He is concerned for is that men who have been defiled and stained by sin, men who have been dyed with it through and through, should be completely purified. It is a tremendous task. Think only of the congregation gathered here, and of what sin means in us if we take it in all its forms and dimensions and powers. Think of the sinful passions which are rooted in our nature - what St. John calls the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life. Think of the habits, some of thought and imagination, some of grosser indulgence, which practice has burnt into the blood. Think of the sins of youth and of age; of the pride and wilfulness and folly; of the discontent and querulousness and rebellion; of the sloth and shiftlessness, of the envy and malice and un-charitableness, of the selfishness and ingratitude, of the disobedience and obstinacy, of the insincerity, falsehood, and treachery, of the love of the world and the forget-fulness of God, which are all represented here. Think of the deep stain these things leave, and then consider that it is the will of God to cleanse us altogether from them, and that He has provided a power which is able to do so. Dreadful as is the power of sin in all its forms and ramifications, there is a power in the world which is still more strong and wonderful - the blood of Christ. The blood of Christ cleanses from all sin. It does not cloak, it cleanses. It purges sin away, and makes the flesh of the leper come again as the flesh of a little child. This is what the Gospel promises, or rather we should say, This is what the Gospel is. It is a stupendous assertion, but the very wonder of it is the evidence of its truth. It is not too good to be true; it is too good and too great not to be true. There are books on the atonement in abundance which, apart from all other arguments, discredit themselves finally by reducing the revelation of God in the Passion of His Son to the poorest moral commonplace. The whole of the New Testament is a protest against this. The atoning death of Jesus is the supreme miracle of grace, and its effects in human nature are no less wonderful than the power by which they are wrought. It cleanses from all sin. It prevails against, over powers and expels all that has ever degraded and de filed the children of God.

Can we set to our seal that this is true? Is sin surely disappearing from our life and nature under the power of the atonement? Are we who are members of the Church learning day by day that the most powerful thing in the world is not the sin we know so well, but the blood of Christ's cross, and that under this Divine and irresistible influence the dark stain of sin is vanishing away? This is the concern which God has in our life. Others may look on us with interest to see what progress we are making in our business, or in our education, or in our social career; but what God looks at is our progress in being purified from sin. For this purpose was the Son of God manifested; for this purpose He bore our sins in His own body to the tree; and to God this purpose cannot but be as dear as the agony and passion of His Son. Is it as dear to us? Is it the one concern of our life, as it is the supreme interest of God in Christ, that we should be cleansed from all sin? If it is, then we must observe the condition under which the sanctifying power of the atonement becomes effective; we must walk in the light, as He is in the light. I have already explained what this involves, but must repeat part of it here in this new connexion. The atonement is in effective and indeed uninteresting mainly for two reasons, which though they are the opposite of each other lead alike to walking in the dark. It is not interesting if we are not seriously interested in sin. If sin is regarded with comparative indifference - if it is treated as a slight or superficial matter which we can deal with for ourselves - if the responsibility toward God in which it involves us is not realized - if it is explained and explained away till we do not feel very uneasy, not to say very guilty about it - if we have never learned the power of the bad conscience to paralyze the will - then of course the atonement will seem gratuitous to us, and we will not get experience of its cleansing power. And on the other hand, it is not interesting if we are seriously interested in sin. The man who has been compromised with evil and who for reasons of his own intends to continue so - the man who thinks he cannot afford to break finally with something against which his conscience protests, and is therefore secretly resolved that he will stick to it - this man also can have nothing to do with the atonement. For the atonement means the blood of Christ. It means deliverance by one who died for sin, and whose power is a power enabling us to die to it. It means the inexorable love of God with which evil cannot dwell - a love which must be shut out of his life, though the saving power of God is in it, by everyone who, whatever his professions, refuses to treat his sin as what it is to God.

This is why the Apostle puts in the forefront of his wonderful declaration of the Gospel the searching condition - if we walk in the light as He is in the light. There is power in the blood of Jesus to cleanse us from all sin, and there is no power to cleanse us anywhere else, but it needs the condition of openness and sincerity. We cannot be cleansed from the sin we do not confess. We cannot be cleansed from the sin we excuse. We cannot be cleansed from the sin to which we are secretly resolved to cling. And if not from these, then not from any. The Gospel is simple and whole; there is no such thing as negotiation, transaction, or compromise possible in the relations of God and man. Everything is absolute. We may take the Gospel or leave it, but we cannot bargain about it. We may be cleansed from all sin, or from none, but not from some on condition of retaining others. Walk in the light, and all this will be self-evident. Renounce with all your heart everything secret and insincere. Let there be nothing hidden in your life, no un-avowed ends, no prevarications, no reserves. Simple truth is the one element in which we can be united to each other, and in which the redeeming love of God can work for our sanctification. Insincerity, the dark atmosphere in which so many souls live, is in its turn one of the forms of sin from which the blood of Christ cleanses; and as we confess it, and disown it, and bring it to the cleansing blood, it also loses its power. We can learn even to be sincere under the power of the death of Jesus - to hide nothing from God, to practise no delusions on ourselves, to refrain from imposing on others. This is the way in which all the wealth of the Gospel becomes ours; when we walk in it we realize that the Apostles wrote for us, and that the greatest and most wonderful things they say of Christ and His blood are the simple truth.