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

**19. MORAL IMPOSSIBILITIES by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils."*

*1 Corinthians 10:21*

What the Apostle means in this saying is evidently that we cannot drink of these two cups simultaneously or consistently, but of course it is in our power to drink of either. There is such a thing in the world as the cup of the Lord, and we can take it in our hands and put it to our lips. To-day many of us have done so. Perhaps it was under a deep sense of what it signified, perhaps with a sort of perplexity in our minds that in a spiritual religion like ours such a place should have been claimed by a material rite. It is certain that many church members have no clear convictions about the sacraments, and are uncomfortable in the celebration of them. They may think in some indistinct fashion that they are symbolical, but they use even the idea of symbol in a wrong way. A symbol in their thoughts is something to be distinguished from reality; just because it is a symbol, it keeps them, one might say, at arm's length from the thing symbolized. But the true use of a symbol is to bring the reality near; it is to give us a grasp of it such as we could not otherwise obtain. A Christian spirit does not play off the reality in the sacrament, and the symbol, against each other; it grasps the reality through the symbol; it does not answer to its experience to say that in the communion it partakes of the symbols of Christ's body and blood; it has Jesus Christ Himself in all the reality of his incarnation and passion as its meat and drink. It is nothing less than the cup of the Lord which we drink, nothing less than the table of the Lord of which we partake.

The sacraments, no doubt, may easily become encrusted with superstition. They did so even in the days of the Apostles. The Corinthians to whom Paul writes evidently thought the sacraments had a magical power, and could keep them safe even when they ran into spiritual perils and tempted God. The Apostle had to point them by way of warning to ancient Israel, which had also had its sacraments; they were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; they all had the same spiritual meat, the same spiritual drink; yet they perished in the wilderness. The sacraments are not charms or spells which make any conduct safe. Nevertheless, though superstition may gather round them, they enshrine the ultimate truths of the Christian religion; they safeguard, in a form more impressive and less open to distortion than words, the realities by which faith lives. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? Is it not the cup of the Lord? Is it not He who puts it into our hand? Is not His love in it, the love with which He loved us when He gave His life a ransom, the love which bears sin, and brings regenerating pardon? Is not that love in the cup, here, now, within reach, ours, commended to us by the Lord Himself? If these things are not so, I do not know what the Christian religion means, or how it can subsist; and however men may become bewildered in their minds over the fundamental truths of revelation, Christ has in this ordinance a witness to Himself which finds its way to the heart. For generations Protestants have been accustomed to denounce the mass of the Romish Church as idolatrous, superstitious, materialistic, and I know not what else - and all with perfect truth; yet the mass, as everyone knows, is the heart of that Church's strength. Why is that so? It is because underneath all the incrustations of materialism, superstition, and priestly assumption, the ultimate truth of the Gospel lies hidden - the truth which the cup of the Lord presents to us - that here and now the love which bears and bears away the sin of the world has come to meet us, and graciously offers itself to us. The Gospel, it might be said, is buried in the mass; but when you have done your worst in this way to the Gospel, you have done no more than to bury it alive; you cannot kill it, and through all encumbering grave clothes it will thrill and subdue and hold the hearts of men. There could be no stauncher Protestant than I, but if Protestant Churches disparage the sacraments, and dissipate the Divine realities to which they bear witness, then the Romish Church, in spite of its superstition and its tyranny, will prevail against them, and it will have a divine right to prevail. How many among us there are who have none but negative ideas of the Lord's Supper! If they were asked what they believed about it they could hardly say anything except that they did not believe in a real presence anyhow. And yet the cup which we bless is the cup of the Lord! Dear friends, we do not need to believe in a real presence of the Lord in the material elements; probably we cannot; but if we are Christians at all we must believe in a real presence of the Lord in the celebration of the Supper - a real presence in the sense of the elements and the use to which we put them. We must believe that the table of which we partake is the Lord's table, that the cup which we drink is the Lord's cup. We must believe that the Lord is with us to all the intents and purposes signified by the elements and the actions. He is with us in the virtue of His broken body and His shed blood; He is with us as the Lord who bore our sins in His own body on the tree, and made one sacrifice for them for ever; He is with us that the unsearchable power of His atoning love may enter into us, condemning, subduing, annihilating, regenerating; He is with us to impart Himself to us, to be the meat and drink of our souls. We have a real presence, a presence which the supper enables us to realize in all its wonderful grace. We have this Divine, this truly supernatural thing, at the heart of our Christian life; it does not rest on the wisdom of man, but on the presence and power of a redeeming God. And this is what we stay ourselves upon when we drink the cup of the Lord, and partake of His table.

The Apostle takes for granted all that has now been said. He contemplates the Corinthians sitting at the Lord's table, making His redeeming love their own, entering into this wonderful union with Him. It is with this in mind that he says, "Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils; ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table and of the table of devils." What does he mean by such extraordinary language?

He is thinking of the pagan religions from which the Corinthians had been converted, and amid which they lived. It was not only the Church which had its sacraments, paganism had sacraments too. The Apostle could see in his mind's eye a company of worshippers go up to the temple of Aphrodite or Apollo. He could see them sprinkled with lustral water, and standing by in sacred silence while the victim was slain in sacrifice; he could see them join in the songs and dances that filled up the time between the sacrifice itself and the preparation of the sacramental meal, and that reflected the religious mood of the festival, whatever it might be; he could see them at last give themselves up to the joy of the meal which crowned the festal day in honour of the god. We know pretty well what this meal was. Aristotle derives the Greek verb which means "to be drunk" from the words which mean "after the sacrifice"; it was a scene of revelling and excess; Paul calls it "the cup of devils," "the table of devils," and pronounces participation in it inconsistent with participation in the table and the cup of the Lord. "Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils."

The language seems needlessly harsh to some modern readers. It is not easy for those who study what is called comparative religion to think of the religions of ancient Greece as having nothing in them or behind them but powers opposed to God - to think of heathenism as a whole as sustained by forces demonic, not Divine. In the main, this is due to the fact that students of comparative religion are not in contact with these ancient worships as they actually functioned in the lives of men, but only with what they judge to have been the ideal impulses in which they originated. The Apostle speaks of heathenism and its sacraments as he knew them in relation to his own work, and if his estimate of them is not that of a modern professor of the science of religion, it is just as the estimate of Hinduism which we get from a missionary in Benares is very different from the philosophical representation of Hinduism we get from a student of its sacred books. The two witnesses or interpreters do not contradict each other; they are really speaking of different things. The Corinthians also thought Paul's language harsh, but for a different reason. It was not unjust to the pagan religion, but to them. They knew quite well what a pagan sacrament was, but they felt themselves proof against it, and able to share in it with their old neighbours without getting any harm. Some thought their own sacraments secured them. Some had learned from Paul himself the lesson that an idol is nothing in the world, and armed in that intellectual conviction, or as they might have said in that Christian principle, they thought they could participate in the pagan worship as grown men might in some children's game, without having either their minds or their characters affected by it. It is this fine abstract idea of the power of a principle to shield the soul from moral peril that Paul is afraid of. He knows the Corinthians better than they know themselves, and he knows that they are daring the impossible. No matter how sure a man's hold may be of the Christian principle that an idol is nothing in the world and therefore can do nothing to harm any enlightened person; if he takes part in such a transaction as I have described, then its atmosphere, its circumstances, its spirit, will prevail against him; he will be brought in spite of himself into the great communion of heathen life again. Let him say what he will, it is another world than that in which we live at the Lord's table; it is spiritual influence of another quality which tells there upon the soul: and the two are irreconcilable. "Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons".

Our interest, however, is not in the Corinthians and in the Apostle's right to speak as he did to them; it is in the application of his words to ourselves and to the conditions of our own life. Is it necessary to say to us, "Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils"? Are we in any danger of entering into communions which are incompatible with our communion in the blood of Christ?

Surely to ask this question is to answer it. We do not see, indeed, in our streets the temples or the altars of false gods; at least we do not see the names of the false gods written upon them. But that is part of our peril. It is easy enough to say that an idol is nothing in the world - that we do not believe in demons and their influence - but that does not take us very far. It is easy enough, as one of our most brilliant Greek scholars has put it, to say that there are no such persons as Bacchus and Aphrodite; the real question is, Are there no such things? Are there no powers in the world in which we live which are radically and finally hostile to Christ? Is it not as true now as when the New Testament was written that our wrestle is not with flesh and blood - not simply with other human creatures like ourselves, whom we could fight, so to speak, with our hands - but against influences which are far more subtle, pervasive, and powerful than that of another human will - against a poisonous moral atmosphere which chokes the very life of Christ in the soul? Such an atmosphere was created for the Corinthians by the old heathen worship and its associations, for in Corinth as in Canaan they did their abominations unto their gods; for us, it may be created in other ways, yet be none the less fatal to our communion with Christ. Can we specify any of these ways so as to warn ourselves against them?

Probably the cup of devils is drunk most frequently still under the sign of liberty. Even a Christian man says to himself that everything in human life ought to be of interest to him. It belongs to his intelligence to concern itself with all the experiences of his kind, and the most attractive way to look at these experiences is in literature. This is the mirror in which life is reflected, and it cannot be wrong to gaze into it. It is indeed the mark of a large and liberal intelligence to have the amplest toleration here; to allow the mind to familiarize itself with all that has been said and thought by human beings; to cultivate breadth, appreciation, geniality; to avoid a censorious and puritanic temper. The world that is good enough for God should be good enough for us, and we should not be too good to take it as it is.

It is by pleas like these, or in a mood like this, that men and women who have drunk the cup of the Lord allow themselves to drink the cup of devils. They deliberately breathe a poisoned spiritual air as if it could do them no harm. But it does do harm. I do not believe there is anything in which people are so ready to take liberties which does so much harm. There are bad books in the world, just as there are bad men, and a Christian cannot afford to take either the one or the other into his bosom. There are books, and books of genius too, which should not be read, because they should never have been written. The first imagination and conception of them was sin, and the sin is revived when they are conceived again in the mind even of a Christian reader. It is revived with all the deadly power that belongs to sin. We cannot give our minds over to it with impunity. It confuses, it stains, it debilitates, it kills. It is the cup of devils, and we cannot drink it and drink the cup of the Lord. There is a strange persistence in the idea that all things are lawful in this region, and that it is in some way a sign of moral weakness to put a limit to one's liberty. And this makes it the more dangerous. Christ, it was said by someone writing on Pascal, has two great enemies, the god Priapus and the god Pan. You can get to the end of it with the first, the author of this observation thought, but never with the second. You can vanquish sensuality in its gross forms, but can never quite get over the idea that the world is one, and that it can do you no harm to regard everything that is in it, especially when it is presented to you in the form of literature, with indulgent toleration. I say again, it is not true. Such indulgent toleration is the cup of devils, and it can never be compatible with the cup of the Lord. The Lord died for the difference between right and wrong, to which this mental temper would render us indifferent; and we drink of His cup that we may be conformed to His death. No charm of art or genius should prevail with us to breathe an air which is fatal to the soul's health; rather must we say of such charms, as the law of God said to Israel of the idols of the Canaanites, "Thou shalt not desire the silver nor the gold that is on them". Nothing has value for a Christian, he can count nothing but loss, if it impairs the reality, the certainty, and the worth of his experiences at the table of the Lord.

I dare say some might be found to argue that the violence of Paul's language here is due to idiosyncrasies of the man, and that we find a more serene and impartial look at life in the words of Jesus. The Lord, it may be said, is more genial, and has a more sympathetic appreciation of life as it is. I can only say that this seems to me the very reverse of the truth. The most severe and inexorable things that are said in the New Testament about the impossibility of combining the life of discipleship with any such indulgent toleration of all that men call natural are the things said by Jesus. He is the great teacher of separation, of renunciation, of the cross. The one thing which alarms Him, and calls forth from His love the most passionate warnings, is the disposition in men to believe that nature always has its rights and that we can never go far wrong if we simply recognize them. "If thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off and cast them from thee; it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee; it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire." All things are not lawful for us if we wish to remain in the Lord's company and to share in His life. If a man holds the principle that nature is entitled to assert itself through all the impulses implanted in it, and holds it so absolutely that he will go wherever his feet can carry him - that he will handle whatever his fingers itch to touch - that he will glut his eyes with gazing on whatever they crave to see - the result will not be that that man will have an ampler and a richer character; it will be that he has no character at all. It will not be an abundant entrance into life, it will be the sinking of an exhausted nature into hell. For creatures such as we are, in a world like this, these, according to the teaching of Jesus, are the alternatives; and they are alternatives. This is the philosophy of Puritanism, when all the liberal criticism of it is over: "Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils; ye cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of devils". And as surely as we would have Christ and the atonement, the judgment and the mercy of God, the Spirit of holiness and the hope of heaven remain real to us, so surely must we renounce the things which cast on all these the shadow of unreality or insignificance, and neutralize in our life their redeeming power. Dear friends, there are such things. We all know them. We have all loved them. We have all feared them. It is our Lord Himself who says to us, "Cut them off, for your life".

We read in the seventeenth Psalm of men whose portion in life is of the world, but it is the happiness of those who drink the cup of the Lord that their portion in life is of God. All that is most real to them and most dear is that which is brought home to their hearts at the Lord's table. They think with awe and with exultation of what God is, and of what He has done for us and is giving to us in His Son. They say to themselves, This is the world, this is the environment of realities, in which I must live and move and have my being now. Other things pass, but this remains. Other things are dubious and baffling, but this is sure and clear. The presence which is ever with us, in the secret of which we have been hidden, under the overshadowing of which we go forth, is the presence of an eternal love which has borne our sins and is calling us to holiness in fellowship with itself. How can we ever forget it? How can it cease to be the motive which inspires and controls all our life? How can we ever be ashamed of it? How can we venture to argue against it, and to excuse ourselves for bringing other things into competition with it? Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Do we think we can face the responsibility of our life if He is not with us? What tempts many to unfaithful accommodation is the dread of standing alone. They do not like to be singular, especially when singularity brings the reproach of being censorious and intolerant, or timid and small minded. But no one is alone who bears any reproach for being true to Christ. It is under these conditions that the Lord comes most near and makes His presence most real to the soul. The jealousy that we might have stirred up against us stirs up itself on our behalf. "I," saith the Lord, "will be a wall of fire round about them." "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye." This is our hope when we take in all seriousness the responsibilities of our calling. When we put aside the tempting cups which on all sides are held out to us, it is not to impoverish our life. It is to say, "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and my cup: Thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places, yea I have a goodly heritage. ... Thou wilt show me the path of life; in Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."