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

**20. THE DEADLINESS OF SLANDER by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Therefore I say unto you, Every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in that which is to come."*

*Matthew 12:31, 32*

In the Gospel narratives at this point we find two comments made upon Jesus which are almost equally startling, and which suggest that ordinary conceptions of our Lord are in some respects far from the truth. The tradition of Christian art has taught us to think of Jesus as living a life of untroubled calm; His countenance in pictures may be pensive or majestic or compassionate, but it is always in repose. Anything strained or overwrought would seem out of place. But here we see that alike upon friends and enemies He made a different impression. He was rapt, as He taught the multitudes, in a lofty excitement. When He encountered those who were regarded as possessed by evil spirits, the Spirit that was in Him reacted with intense vehemence against their delusions and degradation; the Gospels are full of the peremptory and commanding words that He spoke as He set them free. If we think of a scene like the cleansing of the temple, when zeal for His Father's house consumed Him like a flame; or of His baptism, when He saw the heavens open and heard the Father's voice; or of the hour when He turned on Peter with the terrible rebuke, "Get thee behind me, Satan"; we can feel how untrue is that conception of Jesus which represents Him as immovably placid. Perhaps it would be truer to think of Him as habitually rapt, exalted, intense. Certainly this is how we must think of Him on the occasion on which he is presented to us in the text. It was a condition which baffled the bystanders. His friends said, "He is beside himself"; the scribes from Jerusalem said, "He has an unclean spirit".

This is how it is put in Mark, but there is a striking difference to be rioted between the evangelists. Mark does not say anything about the Son of Man; he contrasts blasphemy against the Holy Spirit with sins and blasphemies in general. Matthew on the other hand contrasts it with speaking against the Son of Man. "Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in that which is to come." There are some difficulties about this version of our Lord's words into which it is not necessary to enter here; but assuming it to be reliable, we may be disposed to think that though Mark does not present us in set terms with the contrast which we find in Matthew - the contrast between speaking against the Son of Man and speaking against the Spirit - he does present us with the key to it. Two kinds of sin are in view in Matthew, and both are sins of speech; but though he mentions both, Matthew does not illustrate both. If we had to explain from his Gospel alone, first what is meant by speaking a word against the Son of Man, and next what is meant by speaking against the Holy Spirit, we should be much at a loss. But Mark, though he does not present us with this contrast, presents us with illustrations which enable us to understand and apply it. The petulant exclamation of the friends of Jesus, as they see how He is rapt and lost in His work - He is beside Himself - there we have the word spoken against the Son of Man; the malignant utterance of the scribes from Jerusalem, as they saw Him relieve the possessed - He has Beelzebub, He is in league with the devil - there we have the word spoken against the Holy Spirit.

It is not necessary to dwell long on the first. A life and work like that of Jesus must often have seemed baffling to those who were about Him and who had a natural affection for Him. We can understand how His mother and His brothers had a true though misplaced concern for His welfare. If there were a son or a brother in our house to whom the one thing real was the kingdom of God, who broke every earthly tie to give himself completely to it, who spent whole nights on the hillside in prayer to God over it, who was so absorbed in it that he could not find time for his necessary food and apparently did not care, should we not be tempted to think that he needed looking after? No doubt the friends of Jesus should have known Him better than they did. They ought to have had greater sympathy with Him, greater appreciation for His work. They ought not to have made it possible for Him to say, with the bitter accent of experience, "A man's foes are they of his own house hold". But though they sinned in these respects, it was not a hopeless or unpardonable sin. Their hearts were not really shut against Jesus; they were not deliberately and malignantly opposed to His work. I do not say this as though the sin of their speech could be explained away. If they were alarmed on Jesus' account, they were irritated and annoyed on their own; they were provoked that One who ought to have been able to take care of Himself should persist in causing need less anxiety; and their petulant exclamation, pardonable though it was, was gravely wrong when we remember who was its object. Nevertheless, it was only petulant, not malignant. It was something they could and would be sorry for afterwards; they would repent and it would be forgiven.

Is this speaking against the Son of Man a sin which can be committed now? Sitting in the church, we are perhaps inclined to think that it is not. We cannot stand in the same relation to Jesus as those who were His contemporaries on earth, and it is not possible for us to express impatience or irreverence in the same unthinking way. But it is difficult for anyone who hears or reads much of the unceasing discussion of Jesus which goes on all around us to avoid the impression that speaking against the Son of Man is a common sin. Probably there never was a time when the Gospels were so much read as at present. Jesus is surrounded by multitudes as dense and as deeply interested as ever thronged about Him in Galilee. They look on and listen, and feel free to express their opinions about Him, and often they do it with no sense of what He is and of what they themselves are. They make their comments unembarrassed by reverence. It is not in their minds that Jesus is the Lord, and that in the last resort it is not we who judge Him, but He who judges us. What is called the purely historical study of the Gospels - as if there were any such thing - is apt to betray into this wrong attitude some who should know better, and who really do know better; and then they may be heard to speak of Jesus in a tone which is painful to Christian feeling and injurious to the Lord Himself. You may catch it often in what are ostentatiously non-Christian or non-theological renderings of the Gospel; but you may catch it also in sermons and in students' essays and in common talk. The friends of Jesus who said "He is beside Himself" had lost for the moment or had not yet attained any real sense of what He was; they spoke of Him as if He were just one of themselves, who in an excess of zeal was like to go off His head. Their attitude is reproduced by a great many people who, without thinking what they are doing, really take the measure of Jesus in their own minds, point out His limitations, assign Him His place, show where and how far He paid tribute to His time, - betray, in short, in their whole relation to Him, the twentieth century's sense of its own superiority to the first. I am not going to deny that the twentieth century is in many ways superior to the first; nor even that it was part of the reality of our Lord's man hood that He should be man of the particular age in which He was born, and not of another; but if we cease to feel through all such distinctions that Jesus is the Lord, we shall run great risk of falling into the sin in question. Do not let us consider it a sin of no consequence because it is pardonable. It is pardonable on the same condition as other sins - namely, that it is repented of, confessed, renounced. To cultivate reverence of speech where there is no deeper reverence might be a doubtful gain; we know the kind of insincerity which is generated in this way. Nothing is more unpleasant than the piety which thinks it irreverent to speak of Jesus as the Gospels do - the piety of religious etiquette, for example, which always says "our blessed Lord" as if it were a sin to say "Jesus"; but in spite of the risks in this direction, the risks in the other seem to me at present greater. What we need to cultivate is a reverent sense of the greatness of Jesus; or rather, without any conscious cultivation of it, we need so to look at and listen to Him, so to love, trust, and obey Him, that the sense of what He is will grow upon us, resting continually on our hearts, and restraining us from all that is irreverent in thought or word.

But let us turn now to the other sin referred to in the text, that of speaking against or blaspheming the Holy Spirit. As speaking against the Son of Man was illustrated by the impatient outburst, "He is beside Himself"; so blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is illustrated by the fearful words, "He has Beelzebub; he is possessed by the prince of demons". Matthew tells us that at this very time there was brought to Jesus one possessed of a demon, blind and dumb; and that He healed him, so that the blind and dumb both saw and spoke. Jesus Himself was deeply impressed. He was conscious that the power which He exercised in restoring such dreadfully afflicted creatures was power which the Father had given Him. He reverenced God in it. To Him it was the supreme and decisive proof that God was visiting the world for its salvation. "If I by the finger of God am casting out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you." It does not matter whether a first century form of thought - that of possession by demons; or a twentieth century form of thought, which would speak of some kind of insanity, is used to describe the facts and to present them to the mind; the facts themselves are indubitable. There was a power which wrought through Jesus, bringing health to the disordered mind, composure to the shattered nerves, purity to the hideous imaginings, God and His peace and joy to lost and terror-stricken souls. If we may say so with reverence, the contemplation of its working filled Jesus Himself with devout joy; He saw in it the pledge of the Father's redeeming presence. It filled the multitudes with unimaginable hope: "Can this," they exclaimed, ''be the Son of David? Has the great Deliverer appeared at last?" But the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebub. He is in league with the devil. The power He wields is Satanic in its source, and His only aim is to deceive the people."

To understand this, we must remember that this was not the first thought of the scribes about Jesus, nor their first word, but their last. They had had their eye upon Him from the beginning, and they did not like Him. They disliked Him more the more they saw of Him. The earlier part of the Gospel according to Mark exhibits a series of occasions on which they had already come into collision with Him. They were perpetually finding fault with Him and His circle, and were ready on their own side, as theologians perhaps are apt to be, with the charge of blasphemy which is here so solemnly retorted. "Why do Thy disciples fast not? Why do they on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful? Why doth this man speak thus? He blasphemeth. Who can forgive sins but God only?" The attitude of Jesus to God and to man threatened everything the scribes counted dear. It threatened their conception of religion, and it threatened their religious reputation. If Jesus was right about these things, they were wrong - wrong to the very foundation. No doubt this was a trying position for them. It is hard to admit that we are wrong about the things which are most vital, and it is peculiarly hard when those who have this painful admission to make are the professional teachers of religion, and when they have been convinced of their error by one who has had no professional education, and has only been taught of God. But though it is hard to unlearn and to learn better, it ought not to be impossible. There were scribes whom the study of the Old Testament had prepared to appreciate Jesus. There was one who offered to follow Him wherever He went. There was one who answered Him with such spiritual intelligence as commended His admiration and perhaps His hope; "thou art not far," he said, "from the kingdom of God". But with the majority it was not so. Their early aversion to Jesus deepened into antipathy, and their antipathy settled into malignant hatred. There was nothing they would not do in their implacable antagonism. With His wonderful deeds of mercy under their eyes - with a power at work in Him, before their very faces, which its effects proved indisputably to be the gracious and redeeming power of God - they hardened their hearts and said, "Beelzebub". It was not the exclamation of men who were irritated at the moment and forgot themselves, so to speak; that could have been repented of and forgiven; it was the deliberate and settled malice of men who would say anything and do anything rather than yield to the appeal of the good Spirit of God in Jesus. This is the blasphemy against the Spirit, the sin which in its very nature is unpardonable. Jesus calls it eternal sin. It is sin which, look at it as long as you may, is never turned by repentance into anything else; and therefore it has no forgiveness, neither in this world nor in that which is to come.

The terrible solemnity of these words has oppressed many hearts. People of sensitive conscience have been tormented with the dread that they had committed the unpardonable sin - that without knowing it, or in some hasty but irretrievable word or act, they had placed themselves for ever beyond the reach of mercy. It would be wrong to say anything which encouraged sinful men to think lightly of their sins, but it is surely clear from what has been said already that this fatal sin cannot be committed inadvertently. It is the last degree of antipathy to Christ to which the soul can advance, the sin of those who will do anything rather than recognize in Him the presence of God.

You may think, perhaps, that in this case it is a sin which has very little interest for us - less even than that of speaking a word against the Son of Man. But consider the sin in its nature, as distinct from the particular form in which it was committed by the scribes. They were confronted by the appeal of God's goodness in Jesus, and rather than yield to it they contrived a hideous explanation of it which should render it impotent both for themselves and others. Is this a sin which is so very uncommon? Or is it not common enough to hear men who are annoyed and reproved by the good deeds of others ascribe these good deeds to base and unworthy motives, so as to relieve the pressure with which they would otherwise bear on their own consciences? This is the essence of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is the sin of those who find out bad motives for other people's good actions, so that goodness may be discredited, and its appeal perish, and they themselves and others live on undisturbed by its power. Take one of the most ordinary instances. When a selfish or mean man is confronted by the generosity of another, there is a spontaneous reaction in his moral nature. It is a reaction of admiration. Conscience tells us instinctively that such generosity is good; it is inspired by God; it is worthy of admiration and imitation. But something else in us may speak besides conscience. Perhaps we do not like the man who has done the generous thing; we grudge him the honour and the good will it brings; we would not be sorry to see him discredited a little. Perhaps we are naturally grasping and mean, and our selfish nature resents the reproof of another's generosity. We should be pleased to think he is no better than he need be. We hint at ostentation and the love of praise; we think of ambition, and of the desire to have a party, which is to be conciliated by such gifts; and the generosity of the man is perverted or ignored. It ceases to be a thing which speaks with power for God to us. This, I repeat, is essentially the sin against the Holy Spirit. It is the sin of finding bad motives for good actions, because the good actions condemn us, and we do not want to yield to their appeal. It is the sin of refusing to acknowledge God when he is manifestly there, and of introducing something Satanic to explain and discredit what has unquestionably God behind it. When this temper is indulged, and has its perfect work, the soul has sunk and hardened into a state in which God appeals to it in vain. The presence of Jesus Himself does not subdue it; it only evokes its virulent, rooted, implacable dislike. This is the sin against the Holy Spirit as it is presented to us in the Gospels.

One of the things which disguises it from us, and sometimes even makes it attractive to youthful minds, is that it often assumes the appearance of cleverness. I have spoken of it as the finding of bad motives for good actions. All human actions, we are accustomed to hear, proceed from mixed motives; and to disentangle these motives, to show how largely and how subtly evil mingles with the good, how far what is superficially noble and disinterested has selfishness in some form behind it, is a great part of what some people call the knowledge of human nature. A famous French moralist printed as the motto of his book the following sentence: Our virtues for the most part are but vices in disguise. A penetrating mind, working with this clue, can easily make a brilliant, fascinating, disquieting exhibition of human nature; but it is dangerous and miserable to go out into the world of real life in any such spirit. Pity of the man who thinks that most of the virtue in the world is vice in disguise, whose cleverness is only to unmask the pretender to goodness, whose boast is that he is never taken in! In the process of canonization there is a figure called the Advocatus Diaboli, the devil's counsel, who states the case against the saint on the principle we have been considering. He finds out all the bad motives which may have prompted all the saint's good actions, and urges them against his recognition by the Church. It is a poor occupation, and to exercise it in real life is to be really on the devil's side. Though our Lord says to His disciples, "Beware of men, be ye wise as serpents," He never teaches suspicion. It is a sign of spiritual health when we are quick to recognize and to welcome goodness, and our joy in the appreciation of it is one of the surest indications that we ourselves have a place in God's kingdom.

It is in this region that we must look to make the practical application of the solemn words of Jesus. Perhaps you may think I have brought them down to a level at which their solemnity is lost. But it is not so. As I have already pointed out, the stage at which the scribes now stood was not the first stage of their relations to Jesus. They had reached it by degrees. They did not commit the unpardonable sin in a moment of impatience or inadvertence the first time they met Him; they sank into the commission of it as on one occasion after another they indulged their aversion, resented His influence, counteracted His work, perverted His motives. It is in the same way only that anyone can ever come to blaspheme the Spirit, but the solemn possibility remains that in this way this dreadful guilt may still be incurred. Surely we may say emphatically of this as of all sins: Withstand the beginnings. Do not be suspicious of goodness in others. Do not be slow to believe in it, or ready to put an evil construction upon it. Speak no slander, no, nor listen to it. It is the chief of all our happiness and security in the world that we do not become blind to goodness, that we keep alive to the presence of God wherever that presence is manifested in the life of men, that we open our nature freely and joyfully to the impression of it, that we let ourselves be caught in the stream and carried on by it in the life which is life indeed. If you have a suspicious temper, fight against it; if you think it clever to detect the reality of selfishness or vice behind the virtues of others, suspect yourself; if you have any joy in the exposure of unworthy motives, be afraid. But above everything, if you wish to be remote from this unpardonable sin, rejoice in the work of Jesus. Acquaint yourself with what is being done in His name, and in His spirit and power - with the casting out of evil spirits, with the preaching of the Gospel to the poor, with the mighty works of love which men and women inspired by Him are doing in all the world; acquaint yourself with these things, rejoice in them, promote them, give thanks to God for them; and the thought of the sin against the Holy Spirit will never make you afraid.