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

**21. THE ONE RIGHT THING TO DO by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."*

*Romans 4:3*

*"He believed in the Lord; and he counted it to Him for righteousness."*

*Genesis 15:6*

The interest of Abraham's life in the Bible begins when God speaks to him, and when Abraham believes what God said. How God spoke to Abraham, or how He speaks to anyone, we may never be able fully to explain; but if there is a God at all, it is not assuming much to assume that He is able to communicate with His creatures, to assure them of His presence, of His interest in them, of His will on their behalf. We know that in point of fact He can do this. He can impress us with such a sense of obligation as can only be understood as the will of God; He can inspire us with such sublime and solemn hopes as can only be understood as promises of God. Now what the text tells us is that when God has done this - when He has spoken and we have heard His word - there is only one right thing for us to do: to believe Him. It is not right to dispute God's command, or to criticize His promise, or to try to enter into any kind of negotiations with Him about either. His word is absolute and unconditional because it is Divine. It is not right to put anything else into the scale against it, as if, perhaps, it might be outweighed. The only right thing to do, the only right attitude for the soul to take, is to recognize that in the word which God has spoken, whatever it may be, we are in contact with the final reality in the universe, and to invest our whole life and being in that. When we do so, God counts it to us for righteousness, and it is righteousness. There is nothing in God's counting artificial or unreal. It may be a righteousness of grace - if the word of God is a word of grace it will be so - but it is real righteousness nevertheless. The man is not only reckoned righteous, he is truly right with God, for whom the word that God has spoken is the last reality in life.

The word that God spoke to Abraham was characteristically a word of promise. It is put in various forms at different periods of his life. "I will make of thee a great nation." "Unto thy seed will I give this land." "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars if thou be able to tell them: so shall thy seed be." If we put this in general terms we may say that Abraham had a Divine future held out to him in the word of God. When we are told that he believed God, it means that that Divine future had a reality for him in comparison with which everything else lost both reality and value. He could count all things loss for its sake. He left his country and his kindred for it; he renounced for it the tempting openings which he saw around him, and every future which he might have carved out for himself. We must not forget that the life of Abraham was rich in natural possibilities. He might have had a future in Ur of the Chaldees had he chosen to remain there, and to disbelieve the voice which said, "Get thee out to a land that I will show thee, and I will make of thee a great nation". No doubt a man of his power and enterprise would have had a career if he had chosen to settle in Sodom or in Egypt, and to renounce the visionary prospect of inheriting Canaan. He could have founded a family and even a powerful line of princes, if he had been content with Ishmael, as he was much inclined to be - O that Ishmael might live before thee! - and had given up looking for the child of promise. But if in face of the word of God he had declined upon any of these alternatives, God could not have counted it to him for righteousness. On the contrary, he would have been all wrong with God. The other things, of course, had a reality of their own which he did not dispute. A home in Haran, or in Egypt, or in the plain of Jordan - a life like that of the Babylonians, or of the Canaanites and Perizzites whom he saw around him in Palestine - military ambitions like those of Chedorlaomer and the allied kings: all these probably meant as much to Abraham as to anyone. But he had had something revealed to him with which in reality and value none of them could compete: the future held out in the promise of God. To believe in this, though it meant to count unreal all that was most real to other men, was the only right thing to do; and as Abraham lived out his long life still believing, still counting God's promise the final reality, it made and kept him right with God. He stood before God justified.by his faith, a man with whom God was well pleased, the friend of God.

Everyone must have noticed how much there is in the New Testament about Abraham and his faith. The reason is that for those who wrote the New Testament Abraham is the type of true piety. He is the ideal of religion, we might almost say the pattern Christian, and apostolic Christianity finds its own attitude to God anticipated or reflected in him. All the New Testament writers who wish to prove anything about true religion say, "Look at Abraham". Paul does it in this passage, and then again in the epistle to the Galatians. James does it in the well-known discussion of faith and works in which he is often supposed to be controverting Paul. The writer to the Hebrews does it in sublime and memorable words which will recur to everyone. The reason of this is that in true religion there is one thing which never changes - the attitude of the soul to God; and that right attitude of the soul to God, on which religion depends for its very existence, is perfectly illustrated in Abraham. God may make Himself known more fully in one generation than in another; His word may be more articulate, more explicit in its command, more spiritual and far-reaching in its promise; but the one thing which it requires under all circumstances is that which it found in Abraham - to be treated as the last and absolute reality in life. So to treat it is to take our place among the children of Abraham; it is to believe God in the sense of this text, the sense which makes and keeps us right with Him.

The one condition on which this text has any interest for us is that God should have spoken to us also, and by doing so made an appeal for faith. It is the assumption of true religion in all its stages that He has spoken. In the old Scots Confession of Faith drawn up at the Reformation, one of the most interesting chapters is headed, "Of the revelation of the promise". The original form of the promise, according to the Confession, is preserved in the third chapter of Genesis: the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head. It is the primary form of faith to believe that good will eventually triumph over evil, nay that man himself, by the help of God, will destroy the works of the devil. But the promise, the Confession proceeds to tell us, was repeated and made more clear from time to time, till at last it has been made perfectly clear to us in "the joyfull daie of Christ Jesus". This is the point on which our interest has to be concentrated. We may not know how God spoke to Abraham, nor how Abraham was so sure that it was God who spoke, but we know that Christ is God's word to us. What does it mean? What revelation of God comes in it calling for our faith? It means that the last reality in the world, the final truth of God, is redeeming love, a love that bears sin in the agony and passion of the garden and the cross, and holds fast to men through it all. What does it promise? What is the Divine future which is held out to us in it? It promises that we shall be sons of God, transfigured with the holiness and glory of the only-begotten from the Father. The Apostles were not afraid to believe this, or if they were, the gracious revelation triumphed over their fears and enabled them not only to believe it for a moment, but to live by their faith. What stupendous things they say in faith, and with what simplicity! "We shall be like Him," says St. John. "We shall wear the image of the heavenly," says St. Paul. This is the true confession of Christian faith, the height to which the heart can rise in men who have heard the voice of God in Jesus, and taken in all that it means, And do we not know in our hearts that these are the men who are right with God? If we ask what His word requires, must we not say that it requires to be believed? The one right thing to do in presence of the revelation and appeal of God in Christ is to stake our life upon it for good and all. This was what Abraham did when he believed God, and this is always what faith means in the Bible. Without it, it is impossible to please God; but where He finds it, He asks for nothing more. He counts His faith to the believer for righteousness; and in very truth the man who so believes is right with God. God and that man are pledged to each other without reserve, and if it is a sinful man it is a redeeming God, and the future is sure. "We shall be like Him."

But all men, as St. Paul says in a solemn sentence elsewhere, have not faith. They have not all staked their life on the revelation of God in Christ. Redeeming love is not for all the last reality in the universe, for which everything else is counted loss. Many live in worlds of their own which are by comparison unreal. Some are happy, others miserable; but none are right with God.

There are men who live, it may be said, on the level of nature rather than of the Divine revelation, and who are tolerably content with it. God promised a Divine future to Abraham, and many a man in Abraham's place would never have given it a second thought. It was shadowy enough anyhow, and Abraham had already in his possession things which were comparatively valuable and real. He had a fair worldly position, and it was capable of improvement. He was rich in slaves and cattle, in silver and gold. He had the respect of the society amid which he moved, and no doubt knew its worth. Why should he give up all or any of this for the doubtful future offered to him by God? Something like this is in the minds of many people who do not take the Gospel seriously. Their life as it is, without the word and promise of God in Christ, is real enough, and yields considerable satisfaction. Their business is real, and the interest they have in it engages their thoughts sufficiently. Their family life is real, and the affections are their own reward. Their intellectual interests are real; they find a true enlargement and refinement of their natures in literature, science, and art. Even their politics may be real, not to say absorbing. But if it be true that into this world of human life with all its interests and rewards God has come, revealing and promising something which transcends them all, does not that make a difference? If God has really spoken to us in Christ, if He has shown us in Christ what He not only wishes us to be, but what it is in His purpose and power to make us, is it possible for any man, however honourable and satisfying his life may be, to be right with God, and yet not to take His word to us in Christ seriously? Is it possible at the same time to be right with God and to ignore Him? I say it is not possible. God is present, no doubt, in all the world, in that whole order of things in which human life with all its interests goes on. We live and move and have our being in Him; and He is present, so far, in many a life which is unconscious of what it owes Him. But He offers us in Christ far more than this presence of which we may be unconscious; He offers us a redeeming and transfiguring presence to be consciously made ours through faith. He offers to lift our being, in spite of what we have made it, to the plane and power which we have seen in Christ. Can we ever be anything but wrong with God as long as we ignore this, and prefer to the Divine future held out in Christ - a future which abides for ever - the fast vanishing present, however satisfying, for the moment, it may be? Can we ever be anything but wrong with God as long as we ignore the fact that everything else we have is infinitely outweighed in worth by Christ, while Christ is nevertheless regarded by us with indifference? And can life be worth having unless at bottom we are right with God?

Sometimes this life on the level of nature hardens through content into complacency and self-sufficiency, and the revelation of God in Christ is encountered by its worst enemy, the most absolute antagonist of faith, Pharisaism. What Pharisaism means at bottom is that man is independent of God, and can even make God his debtor. The Pharisee comes before God clothed in a righteousness of his own, a character and life for which he is prepared to take the responsibility himself, and virtually challenges God's approbation. But how can a man assume such an attitude to God? If the final revelation of God is made, as the New Testament shows, at the cross of Jesus, is not such an attitude once for all impossible? Can a man stand in the presence of that Passion, can he realize what God's eternal love has done and is doing and will ever do for the redemption of our fallen race, and think himself right with God though he ignores it all and takes the whole responsibility of his life alone? You may think that there is no Pharisaism like this in the world, but do not be too sure. I believe there are many people, even in the Church, to whom the idea of becoming indebted to Christ is profoundly disagreeable; and because it is, they evade the final revelation of God in His crucified and risen Son, and without shaping their thoughts very definitely hold by the Pharisaic conviction that somehow or other they will be able to answer for themselves. They do not take the word of God in Christ seriously. They do not believe it, as Abraham did when God spoke to him. The final reality is not for them what it is for God, and hence they can never be right with Him. When they read their Bibles everything is out of focus, and naturally they cease to read what they cannot understand. But it was a Pharisee of the Pharisees who saw more clearly than any of the Apostles that in faith boasting is excluded; and even the Pharisee will become right with God if he stands by the cross of Jesus till the power of that Divine passion descends into his heart and reveals itself to him as the first and last reality in the world.

But there is another world still in which we may live, not despising faith like the Pharisee, nor ignoring it like the unreflecting man who takes life as he finds it, but dismayed by it as too hard, or incredulous of it, as too good. When the meaning of the word of God in Christ begins to break upon our souls, we may well be overwhelmed by its greatness; it holds out a Divine future, no doubt, but who can believe it is a future meant for us? Christ is in the world, the living word and promise of God; and as we look at Him, we hear God's voice assure us that we shall be like Him. This is the Gospel. Only God could inspire a hope so wonderful; but when we think of it, is it not too wonderful? is it not quite incredible? We like Him? We conformed to the image of God's Son? We know in part what we are. We are sorrowfully acquainted with passions that degrade us in our own eyes; our imaginations have been haunted with unholy things; shall we be like Him? We have fits of vicious or sullen temper when we stab with wicked words even those whom we love; is it really meant that these shall cease, and that we shall be clothed in the meekness and gentleness of Jesus? We are selfish, grasping, unwilling to part with money or to take trouble for others; is it really meant that for us it will be more blessed to give than to receive? We are inconstant and half-hearted in all our efforts to be good; we run well, perhaps, for a little, but cannot run with patience a long or trying race; is it the very truth of God that this weakness will be overcome, and that we shall endure to the end, and by endurance win our souls? Yes, that is the Divine truth; that is the word and promise of God in Christ, in whom the eternal redeeming love of the Father has been revealed as the ultimate reality in the universe. But how easy it is and how common for apathy and despair to assert themselves against it. Men say to themselves, "It is no use talking: I can never be anything but what I am. God cannot make me pure. He cannot make me free. He cannot make me glad. He cannot put a new song in my mouth. He cannot make the eighth chapter of Romans the natural expression of my experience. It only needs to be imagined to be pronounced impossible." It is indeed no use talking; but the word of God in Christ, on which everything here turns, is not talking; it is the revelation of the ultimate reality and power in the world. The God who is revealed there is spoken of in this very chapter of Romans as one who calls things that are not as though they were: not meaning that He speaks of them as existing though they do not exist, but that while as yet they have no existence He speaks of them in that creative voice which called the worlds into being and has not lost its power. We do not believe in God at all unless we believe in One whose word can work this wonder; and when we reflect that the redeeming love revealed in Christ has omnipotence at its command, dare we doubt what we are called to do? What do we believe is the final reality? What is going to survive and reign when everything else has passed away? Is it the flesh, the bad conscience, the impotent will, the worm that dies not and the fire that is not quenched? Are we to stake our life on these, or on the redeeming love of God which has come to us in His Son, and on the new creature to be created by it in God's likeness? Do we believe in what we are as the ultimate reality, or is not the eternal love of God which appeals to us in Christ more real, and able to change us into His image? It is only this last belief which does justice to God, and makes us right with Him. It is this only which He can count to us as righteousness. It is this which is the faith by which men are justified and saved. This text is one of many which suggest to us two characteristics of the true religion much insisted on in Scripture - its simplicity, and the absoluteness of its requirement When God speaks, He demands to be taken at His word; no more than this, but also no less. His word is not proposed as a basis of negotiation or discussion; it can neither be abridged nor supplemented. To apply this to the Christian stage of revelation: redeeming love, displayed in the crucified Christ, is the sum of God's word to the world; and all that that word demands from those who would be right with God is the final and unconditional abandonment of the soul to the redeeming love itself. I do not believe that anyone ever got a real sight of Christ and of God's redeeming love in Him without becoming- conscious that there is something in it which with all its graciousness is peremptory and inexorable. There is that in the Gospel with which no one is allowed to argue. All we can do is to believe, in the sense of the text, or to disbelieve; to give it in our life the place of the final reality to which everything else must give way, or to refuse it that place. Many people are not clear about this. They would like to talk the word of God over. It raises in their minds various questions they would willingly discuss. It has aspects of interest and of difficulty which call for consideration: and so on. Perhaps there are some who confusedly shield themselves against the responsibilities of faith and un belief by such thoughts. All that such thoughts prove, however, is that those who cherish them have never yet realized that what we are dealing with in the Gospel is God. When God speaks in Christ He reveals His gracious will without qualification, and without qualification we have to believe in it, or to refuse our belief, and so to decide once for all the controversy between ourselves and Him. God has not come into the world in Christ - Christ has not hung upon the cross bearing the sin of the world - to be talked about, but to become the supreme reality in the life of men, or to be excluded from that place. To believe is to fall in unconditionally with the purpose of God. It is to fix our eyes on Christ and say, There is the supreme and final reality in the universe for me; there is that which for me is more real than all the world has to offer; yes, more real than the terrible reality of sin which till now has dwarfed and annulled every other reality in my life; there is that to which I must and will and do cling in spite of all appearances, in spite of my unworthiness, in spite of everything in my nature which questions or resents it. This is faith; it is believing God, and when we so believe Him, He counts it to us for righteousness. He cannot ask from us anything more or less or other than faith. It is the one thing which does justice alike to Him and to us. It is not a part of Christianity, but the whole of it. It has the hope and power of all moral attainment in it, and it only needs to have its perfect work to make God's unspeakable promise good.