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

**24. PROPITIATION by JAMES DENNEY**

*"He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the whole world."*

*1 John 2:2*

(Preached at the annual meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society, April, 1911.)

Within the last twelve months foreign missions have been more talked about in the Church than at any time I can remember. The appeals made in connexion with them have been frequent and importunate. The cause has been pleaded with every kind of argument. The actual condition of the non-Christian world has been presented to us with a fullness and distinctness once impossible: we have been shown in all its aspects what the life is which is waiting for the Gospel. In many parts of the globe the critical nature of the situation has been emphasized. Opportunities, we have been told, are passing - will within five years or ten years have passed - never to return. In the Far East, where great nations are awaking and coming to the consciousness of their powers, it is now or never for the Gospel. It is now or never in Africa, where every Moslem is a missionary and where Islam is advancing with giant strides. Missions have had much to do with the new movements in India and China, but what a frightful prospect it would open up if the vast populations of Asia should master the resources of Christian civilization and be left with none but pagan impulses to direct them. The urgency of the need and the vastness of the opportunity have alike been pressed on the Church, and we have not wanted those who in view of both have talked to us of missions as a "business proposition," and have told us how, as men of business, we must address ourselves to the organizing and financing of the business if it is to be made a business success. And what is the result of this unexampled activity in pleading the mission cause? So far as I can see, it is neither here nor there. An immense proportion of the people in our churches care little about the matter. There is no sensible increase either of contributions or of gifted men. There are no signs of expansion, elasticity, or fresh ardour.

Now why should this be? Some appeals, I can hardly doubt, are wrecked on the sober, not to say the sceptical common sense of those who hear them. Many people cannot help distrusting the diagnoses of vast situations like those presented in India and China. They do not believe that anybody can read them with authority, and when they are told of the consequences that will inevitably follow if something is not done within five years or ten years, they are not much impressed. They have a latent consciousness that all human affairs are in the hands of God, and that though He honours us to be His fellow-workers, it is a mistake to suppose that the vast movement depends, in the way implied in such appeals, upon us. Many people also have something in their minds which reacts against the idea that we can plan, organize, and carry out the evangelization of the world. They do not really believe that the thing is to be done that way. They get tired of military metaphors - about sending reinforcements here and occupying strategic points there. They cannot help remembering words of Jesus about the kingdom of God - words in which it is compared to a seed growing secretly, or to leaven hid in three measures of meal till the whole is leavened - and they cannot get over the feeling that these words must apply (in a way which many appeals overlook) to the coming of the kingdom of God even in India and China. Further, there is a sense of proportion in the human mind which is apt to protest when even a great cause is put out of focus. There are many people in our churches whose minds and hands are pretty full. They are in a situation which taxes all their faculties. Their families, their business, their rents and rates, their duties religious and political to the society in which they live, are real, insistent, and absorbing; and while they would not disclaim responsibility for foreign missions, they are impatient when their other responsibilities seem to be minimized in pleading the mission cause. They can make missions to the heathen a real but not a preponderating care. To ask them to make missions their primary concern seems to them almost as unreal as to ask them to learn Hindustani or Chinese. It is impossible, not because they care nothing for the Chinese or the Hindus, but because the bulk of their intellectual and moral energies is pre-engaged, and pre-engaged in what they consider imperative and entirely right ways.

I have said these things, which to some may appear chilling or out of place, only because I do not wish to be thought oblivious of them. But when all such allowances have been made, there ought to be more missionary interest in our churches than is actually found, and the fault lies in the last resort not in the nature of the appeals which are made for missions, but in the minds to which they are addressed. "Some people," I once heard a distinguished missionary say, "do not believe in missions. They have no right to believe in missions: they do not believe in Christ." This goes to the root of the matter. It is not interest in missions that we want in our churches at this moment, but interest in the Gospel. Apart from a new interest in the Gospel, a revival of evangelical faith in Christ as the Redeemer, I believe we shall look in vain for a response to missionary appeals. But there is something in the Gospel itself, something especially in that presentation of it which we have in the text, which immediately creates missionary interest, because it has no proper correlative but the universe. Again and again we have it echoed in St. John. "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." "Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood, out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation" "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world." It is as though one might conceive Christ in some character or aspect which limited His significance, but once He is seen in the character of a propitiation, as a lamb bearing and bearing away sin, all limitations are removed. The only correlative of such a Christ is the whole world, and nothing gives us such a wonderful impression of what Christ was to His immediate followers as that they actually saw in Him as He died upon the cross a goodness that outweighed not only their sin but all sin, and could say God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. This is the consciousness out of which the missionary impulse springs. This was what made Paul cry, "I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and the unwise". If there is little missionary interest in the churches, depend upon it, the reason is that there is little evangelic interest. The wonder of that redeeming revelation that made the first disciples Apostles has faded away, and we must revive it by standing where the Apostles stood, and seeing Christ in the awful and glorious light in which they saw Him, if new life is to enter into missionary work.

We are all familiar with the aversion to the ideas of sin and of propitiation. In a sense, they stand and fall together. If there is no sin, there can be no propitiation. The one is just as real as the other. I am not going to speak to those who question the reality of sin - who explain and extenuate what was once so-called, who resolve it into the inevitable result of heredity and environment, for whom individual is lost in corporate responsibility, and who have never had the experience of a living soul standing with a bad conscience in the presence of the living God. The whole Gospel is meant for sinners - not for men as such, but for sinful men: an elementary truth too often overlooked. It is meant for people to whom the bad conscience is a responsibility they cannot escape, a chain they cannot break, a doom - and what doom could be heavier - never to be anything else than what they are. It is to men who in one degree or other know what sin is, that the Gospel is addressed. It is to them Christ comes from God, and He comes in the character of a Redeemer. He does not regard sin nor treat it as unreal. On the contrary, it is more real to Him than it is to us. He enters more deeply than we can into all it means both for us and for God - He, Jesus Christ the Righteous. And because He does so, He is the propitiation for our sins.

When we think of the forgiveness of sins, there are only three things we can say. One is, that it is impossible. Things are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be: not even God can reverse them. As the late Mr. Rathbone Greg put it, God is the only being who cannot forgive. A man who is more or less indifferent to moral interests may be indulgent to his neighbour who is no better than himself; but how can indulgence be looked for from One who is the inflexible guardian of right? I am not going to argue against this. I believe it contains a recognition of the vital truth that God never condones sin. He never treats it as anything less or anything else than it is. If there should turn out, after all, to be such a thing as a Divine forgiveness of sins, we may be sure it will be such a forgiveness as carries the Divine condemnation and destruction of sin in the heart of it.

Another thing that may be said is, that forgiveness can be taken for granted. Of course God forgives. That is what God is for. His name was proclaimed to Moses, "The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." We can all presume upon that. I am not going to argue against this either. I believe it is an imperfect and in the last resort an impious way of recognizing the truth that salvation is of the Lord. "Tis from the mercy of our God that all our hopes begin," and they do begin. The initiative in salvation must lie with God, and He actually takes the initiative. We can and do depend upon that. But we must not presume upon it. Often we are referred to the Old Testament for illustrations of the experience of forgiveness which are not (it is said) conditioned by anything in the nature of propitiation, yet for depth and height and gladness have never been surpassed. It may not be possible for us to tell through what experiences God mediated to psalmists and prophets in ancient times the assurance of His pardoning love to Israel, but one thing is certain: none of them ever took it for granted. To all of them it came as the wonder of wonders, the unsurpassable, all but incredible, revelation of the goodness of God. Listen to Moses: "Oh, this people have sinned a great sin and have made them gods of gold; yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin - and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written." Is that the voice of a man who thinks that of course God must forgive? Or listen to the great prophet of the exile. He has caught the voice of God, "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins; return unto Me, for I have re deemed thee"; and how does he respond? "Sing, O ye heavens, for the Lord hath done it; shout, ye lower parts of the earth; break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein; for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel." I ask again, is that the voice of a man who thinks forgiveness may be assumed? Take one example more, from Micah. "Who is a god like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?" Does he take forgiveness for granted, or does not the amazing revelation and experience of it lift his God above all gods? No! whatever the way in which their experience of forgiveness came to Old Testament men, it came as a marvel in which God was incomparably revealed, as an inspiration to passionate praise, not as a common place which called for no comment.

We might say antecedently to experience either of these things - forgiveness is impossible, or forgiveness may be taken for granted - and we have allowed for the truth and falsehood of both; but what the New Testament says is that God Himself loved us, and sent His Son a propitiation for sins, and that in Him we have our redemption, through His blood, even the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace. There is something in this which we could never have anticipated. Forgiveness is not impossible, nor is it a matter of course; it is a miracle. As the New Testament holds it out to sinful men, it is the supreme achievement of God in Christ; His costliest, His unspeakable gift. To receive it is an experience as wonderful in its kind as to achieve it or to bestow it; there is a passion in being pardoned corresponding to the passion of Jesus when He gave His life a ransom for men. This is what is fundamental in the Christian religion, and it is this we must recover in it if we would revive its original expansive power.

Many people speak of the forgiveness of sins who have no idea of what forgiveness means in the New Testament, and no idea, either, of the ways in which the reality of sin is demonstrated there. The one condition of forgiveness which they understand is repentance on the part of the sinner - as though the reality of sin were exhausted in what it is to him. But its reality is not exhausted so, even if we assume, what is never the case, that the repentance is adequate to the offence. Sin is real in the universe, beyond the sinner's control. It is real to God; and before it can be forgiven by Him - or rather in the very act in which it is forgiven, as part of the very process of forgiving - His sense of its reality must be declared. This is what is done in the propitiation, and it is in proportion as we appreciate this that the Divine forgiveness appears an unspeakable gift. I believe the reason why we sometimes have difficulty with this connexion of ideas is that we are too familiar with forgiving ourselves, and too apt to assume that this is the same as being forgiven. Often in hearing or reading arguments against propitiation - especially those based on human analogies - I have wondered whether those who used them had ever had the experience of being truly forgiven for a real wrong by a fellow creature. Take the case of that relation in which human love is most intense, and at the same time most ethical - most remote from the elemental instinct with which even the dumb creatures cling to their young - the relation of husband and wife. A man may sin in this relation - I do not mean at all in the gross way of violating his marriage vow - but in a way that wounds his wife's love. He may do something by which he falls in her opinion, compels her to be ashamed of him instead of proud of him; he may forfeit the confidence she once had in him, and in proportion to the fineness and nobility of her nature hurt her more than he can comprehend. And what then? Possibly what happens in such a case is that there is no reconciliation, but that after a while the offender begins to forgive himself. He has been mortified, ashamed, and humiliated as well as his wife, and it is mainly of himself that he thinks. He sees no more that is to be made by indulging such feelings longer. He assumes that his wife as a reasonable being will at last let bygones be bygones; and in consideration of the fact that he admits he has behaved badly, he expects her to be willing to begin again, and to go on as if nothing had happened. This is what often takes place in human relations, and unhappily it is often the only analogy which experience supplies for interpreting our relation to God. But sometimes what takes place is quite different, far more wonderful, far more Divine. There is such an experience as a real reconciliation, in which the offender does not forgive himself but is forgiven. And what is the peculiarity of this experience, by which it is differentiated from the other? It is this: the centre of moral interest is transferred at once from the offender to the offended. The centre of the passion by which sin is overcome is seen to be not in the sinner, however deep and pure his repentance may be, but in the purer and diviner spirit which has borne his sin and is forgiving it. If this is a true analogy, can anyone think forgiveness is easy, a thing that needs no explanation, and to which the idea of propitiation is irrelevant or even abhorrent? I can believe that it is possible for love to forgive anything - for the love of a wife to pardon things in her husband that broke her pride, her hope, and her trust in him; but I can believe also, or rather I cannot but believe, that just in proportion to the purity and divineness of her nature, must that forgiveness come out of an agony in which it would not be amazing if she suddenly fell down dead. There is all this difference between forgiving oneself, which is so easy, so common, and so degrading; and being forgiven by a love which has borne our sins, which is so tragic, so subduing, so regenerating. Real forgiveness, forgiveness by another whom we have wronged, and in whom there is a love, which forgiveness reveals, able at once to bear the wrong and to inspire the penitence through which we can rise above it, is always tragic; and it is tragic on both sides - to him who has borne the sin which he forgives, and to him who stoops with a penitent heart to be forgiven. What the propitiation stands for is the divine side of this tragedy. It is tragic for God to forgive - a solemn and awful experience, if we may put it so, for Him; just as to be forgiven is tragic - a solemn and awful experience for us. This is the truth - and of its truth I have no more doubt than I have of my own existence - which underlies all the New Testament teaching about propitiation. To evade it, or to let it fall into the background, is not to drop a Jewish misconception which the Christian spirit has outgrown. It is to pluck the heart out of the Christian religion. It is to stifle praise in the birth, and cut devotion at the root.

The great distinction between the Old Testament and the New, in what they reveal about forgiveness, lies just here: the New Testament has a perception, which was as yet impossible to the Old, of the cost at which forgiveness comes to men. The Old Testament felt that it was wonderful, but the New Testament can say that it is as wonderful as the Passion of Jesus. He died for our sins. In Him we have our redemption through His blood. We are justified freely by God's grace - the Old Testament knew that; but in the New Testament they can add, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation, through faith, in His blood. That is the ultimate difference of the dispensations, the last and highest stage of revelation in the new. But on this ultimate difference others are dependent, and among these the conspicuous difference with which we are concerned to-day, that while the Old Testament religion was that of a nation, the New Testament religion is destined for the human race. Get to the heart of it and its universal scope cannot be missed. The propitiation is so absolute, so divine, that it draws everything within its range. If we feel what it is, we feel that it is not for our sins only, but also for the whole world.

The motives to mission work - in other words, to preaching the Gospel - can never be found in a command as such. We read the command of Jesus in the Gospel, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," and we know by experience that for multitudes it does not constitute a motive at all. They are quite well aware of it, but they quite easily ignore it. It only acts as a motive in those who have themselves been won by Christ, who realize what an unspeakable gift God has given us in His Son, and who feel spontaneously the impulse to impart it. There may be degrees in this realization, but it is most keen and vital - it operates most potently as a motive for preaching the Gospel - in those who have apprehended Christ in His character as a propitiation. In comparison with the Christianity which has this grasp on the heart of the New Testament revelation every other is anaemic; it is the passion of Jesus the Redeemer which alone evokes a responsive passion in sinful hearts. It is this which opens men's mouths in testimony meetings; it is this which raises up evangelists; it is this and nothing else which will send them for the name of Jesus to the uttermost parts of the earth. And if even the command of Jesus, simply as a command, is ineffective, much more so are what may be called the secondary motives to missions. Our science, our civilization, our administration of justice, our industry - all these may be valuable enough, and it might be very advantageous to introduce them into countries we could name; but the Christian Church does not exist to be the agent or the forerunner of external fashions of life which it has seen come into being and which it will probably see pass away. It lives for and by the things which are spiritual and eternal. In Jesus Christ the righteous, the propitiation for sins, it is the possessor of something inexpressibly good - something so good, and for which it feels so deeply indebted and so boundlessly grateful to God - that it cannot keep silence nor withhold it from any man. There are Gospels with which we would not go very far. They are so poor that we should hardly like to expose them to anyone, let alone to all the world. But if Christ the propitiation has been revealed to us as the power of God to save, then we have something in our hearts that lifts us above the need of commands and makes secondary motives unreal. The only motives worth considering in this region are the irresistible motives. We get nothing until we get men who say, "We cannot but speak. Necessity is laid upon us. We are debtors. Whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God; or whether we be sober, it is for your cause; for the love of Christ constraineth us. Having therefore obtained help of God I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great." I repeat, what we want is not missionaries, in the narrower sense, but evangelists - not a new interest in the non-Christian world, but a new interest in the Gospel - not men who want to preach to the heathen, but men who cannot but preach where they are. That is the stock from which alone the missionary force can be recruited - the men and women in whom all emotions and motives are swallowed up in the sense of what they owe to the Redeemer.

Let us pray and preach for the multiplication of such men, if we would help the mission cause. Redeemed and devoted lives will solve all our problems, and nothing less will touch them. The appeals which have been made so long in vain will not be vain when the old doxology breaks again irresistibly and spontaneously from the Church's lips - Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood, be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. That is the voice of those who know instinctively that Christ is the heir of the world. It is of Him and of His Church that they think when they sing that ancient Psalm of the kingdom and its King. "There shall be an handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon: and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth. His name shall endure for ever; His name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed." Amen.