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

**25. THE VOICE OF JESUS by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."*

*Matthew 11:28-30*

There is a benediction in the very sound of these words, of which few that have heard them are quite unconscious, and it becomes the more striking when we observe the setting in which they are placed by the evangelist. Up to the preceding chapter, the story of Jesus' life as a teacher and healer seems to have been one of unbroken success; the multitudes thronged around Him, and the work so grew upon His hands that He was obliged to share it with the Twelve, and to send them out to preach and heal in His name. But with the eleventh chapter a turning point is reached, and now almost every incident in the life of Jesus, over a considerable period, might be headed Offence. In the opening of the chapter His forerunner John is presented to us as in doubt about His Messiahship. "Art thou He that should come, or are we to look for another?" Then we see Jesus comparing His contemporaries - the generation which would not listen either to Himself or His forerunner - to wilful children, who would not play at any kind of game their companions proposed; neither a wedding nor a funeral would please them; they would not be in earnest with God whether He came in the austerity of the Baptist or the geniality of the Son of Man. In what immediately follows we hear Him pronounce woes on the cities which had seen all His mighty works and yet had not repented, and face the disconcerting fact that all the better classes, as we should say now, were against Him. The wise and prudent could see nothing in His message. Yet while thus repelled on every hand Jesus is not shaken inwardly. His trust in the Father and in His guidance remains: "Even so Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight". His confidence that He is empowered for His work, and can do for men all that they need to have done, remains: "All things have been delivered unto Me by My Father ... no man knoweth the Father save the Son, and He to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him". And above all, His love remains. It is against this background of offence and disappointment that He stretches out His hands again and cries: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

**1.** The people addressed were in the first instance those whose religion had become a burden to them. It is remarkable, indeed, that this is one of the chief connexions in which the terms "burden" and "yoke" are employed in the New Testament. "They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne upon men's shoulders": so said Jesus of the religious teachers of His day. "Ye are putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear": so said Peter at a later day to their successors in the Christian Church. Religion had become for multitudes an affair of endless commandments and prohibitions; its statutes - and it was all statutes - were numbered by hundreds; they were to be obeyed because there they were, the traditions of the elders. As Jesus looked round Him, He saw men crushed, bent and tottering under this traditional and statutory religion - weary with their efforts to do justice to it, yet never getting one step nearer God, nor finding rest and liberty within. It is to such He cries, "Come unto Me. I have the secret of what you are looking for. I can initiate you into the true religion, the obedience which is not imposed but inspired; and there you will find rest for your souls."

Are there not still those whose burden is that of a degenerate religion? True religion, the life of God in the soul of man, is not a burden, but the very reverse. It is not something that we carry; it is properly something which sustains us. But how many people there are whose religion is their chief trouble. Carlyle speaks mockingly of governments for which religion only exists in the shape of the religious question or the religious difficulty. But it is not only governments of which we may say this. There are plenty of men and women who get nothing out of their religion; it troubles, perplexes, oppresses them; it is something they do not know what to do with. And the reason of this is always the same. Human traditions have gathered round the religion and become identified with it: it means a great mass of things that we are to believe, because others have believed them, or that we are to continue to do because others have done them. But times change, and minds change, and these traditions become an ever more intolerable burden, We do not know how to adjust the traditional beliefs to other things which we know to be true. We cannot feel that there is anything morally effective in the traditional modes of behaviour - anything to which conscience consents spontaneously, and which tells upon the world as real goodness would. The whole thing becomes a burden and a perplexity - a mass of questions we do not know how to answer, of conventional ways of being good and of doing good from which we cannot help fearing that the virtue has departed. We are weakened, depressed, overborne by our religion, not uplifted and inspired. What are we to say to souls in such a case? Jesus says, "Come unto me". What you need is not religion - in the shape that time and human traditions have given to it - but Christ. It is not other people's pieties, or creeds, or sacred customs, but Christ. God does not wish us to have the religion of our ancestors, but to have religion of our own, and such religion is kindled in our souls when we drop religion as it is imposed by men, and come to Him. This is no doctrine of mere rebellion or religious anarchy; there is no fear of rebellion or anarchy when we put on the yoke of Jesus.

But how do we come to Jesus? There is no general answer to this question; the peculiarity and the beauty of coming to a person is that every one may do it in a way of his own. It is not like learning a catechism, or mastering a science, where there is the same routine for every one; it is like forming a friend-ship, or falling in love. Every life crosses that of Jesus at its own angle, and in all true religion there is an original experience, something which is our very own. No one can tell how slight it may be to begin with. Even in human relations we may owe all the happiness of which we are capable, or all the misery - all the best we can rise to, or all the worst to which we can sink - to what seem very insignificant things; to a look, an attitude, a gesture, the tone of a voice, a word so trifling that no one was aware of it but ourselves. There is the same incalculable incommensurable element in all real contact of the soul with Jesus. The one certainty in every case is that we come to Jesus in some kind of obedience, in an act rather than a belief, or in a belief which has no adequate expression except in act. Take My yoke upon you. No intellectual difficulties are ever supposed in the Gospel, for there are no intellectual requirements. But there is always something to do, or to bear. What it is, we must find out for ourselves in Jesus' presence; but as we do it, the true religion will rise up within us, assured, emancipating, full of a deep peace and joy. Though the idea of a yoke is irksome, Jesus says, "My yoke is easy". This is not because His standard is lower than that of conventional religion; on the contrary, there is none so high. But in His company it is the heights which attract. "My feet always move quicker of themselves when I catch sight of the hills." As he breathes His own spirit into us, obedience is not a crushing burden that we bear; it is the uprising in us of gratitude and devotion in which our souls find rest.

**2.** If a degenerate religion is the burden of some, that of others is that they have no religion at all. Their life is empty and futile; the one word of Scripture they thoroughly understand is "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity". Life is a burden to them because there is nothing in it. It has no chief end, no satisfying result, no fruit that abides. Day by day it goes on, and year by year, always heavier and heavier as its emptiness is realized. How many people there are who are burdened by this vain life which has no inner law, no necessity and no freedom of its own. How many there are who with a sense of slavery do what other people do, and sometimes wish they had never been born. Perhaps they are recruited in part from those who have rebelled against conventional religion, but have not got past the stage of mere rebellion. But more commonly they represent what is another great tradition in human life - the tradition of self-will. Promising as it seems at first, all experience goes to show that there is nothing so fatiguing and oppressive. It never gives rest to the soul.

Me this unchartered freedom tires;

I feel the weight of chance desires:

My hopes no more must change their name:

I long for a repose that ever is the same.

Or in a wilder strain: -

He made a feast, drank fierce and fast,

And crowned his hair with flowers;

No easier nor no quicker passed

The impracticable hours.

Has Jesus anything to say to those who are sighing under this burden? Yes, even to those who have lived this empty, disappointing life, and who are crushed beneath its futility, He cries, ''Come unto me." Empty and worthless as it is, this life may still be redeemed; nay, it may be filled unto all the fullness of God. "Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me". Do one single thing which Jesus commands; do rather one single thing which His example inspires - for the yoke is one which He bears rather than imposes - and you will be let into the secret. Mark Pattison said that one of the things which impressed him in his work as a teacher was the smallness of the seed from which a complete intellectual life might spring. Once get the living mind into contact with living reality, and no matter how insignificant the point of contact might appear, a process was set up which would not cease till the mind had gathered all things into itself. It is the same in the spiritual world. The emptiest life only needs to establish communication with Jesus by putting on His yoke to be launched on a career of boundless satisfaction and peace.

**3.** There is a burden commoner still than that of a degenerate religion or an empty life - the burden of a bad conscience. There is no weight so crushing as that of the invisible chain which binds a man to his past, and makes it impossible for him to be anything but what he is. Can Jesus do anything for this burden? Can He lift the load of guilt with its crushing and disabling memories, and give relief to the soul?

There is nothing about which we can be more positive than this. The Gospels are full of illustrations of it, and they are confirmed by the whole history of the Church. Think of the woman in Simon's house, who washed His feet with tears and wiped them with the hair of her head, and to whom He said, "Thy sins are forgiven thee; go in peace". Think of Peter, when the Lord turned and looked upon him, as he denied Him with oaths and curses. Think of the paralytic borne of four, on whom He wrought the comprehensive miracle of redemption: "Courage, child, thy sins are forgiven thee; arise, take up thy bed and walk". In cases like these we see the burden falling, the chain breaking, peace welling up through the deepest penitence, joy and hope dawning in souls that had been sunk in despair. And it is such souls as much as any that are appealed to in the words of Jesus, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest".

What the man who is burdened with a bad conscience needs is the assurance that there is a love in God deeper and stronger than sin. Not a love which is indifferent to sin or makes light of it. Not a love to which the bad conscience, which is so tragically real to man, and so fatally powerful in his life, is a mere misapprehension to be ignored or brushed aside as in significant. No, but a love to which sin, and its condemnation in conscience, and its deadly power, are all that they are to man, and more; a love which sees sin, which feels it, which is wounded by it, which condemns and repels it with an annihilating condemnation: yet holds fast to man through it all with Divine power to redeem, and to give final deliverance from it. This is what the man needs who is weighed down and broken and made impotent by a bad conscience, and this is what he finds when he comes to Jesus. The doctrine of the atonement is the doctrine of the cost at which such a wondrous revelation of love is made to sinful men: it is intended to make intelligible the method and the cost of forgiveness. We do not need to be astonished if what are called the intellectual difficulties of the Gospel culminate here, and if there is no doctrine which men are so prompt to criticize and to repudiate. In the nature of the case, if we try to construct a doctrine of forgiveness at all, it must be a difficult doctrine; it has to focus in itself many great and superficially inconsistent ideas. All the attributes of God must be active in it, His inviolable holiness and His infinite love. All the aspects of human nature must have justice done them in it; its deep corruption and its capacity for redemption. Not merely the relation of the sinner to God and to the moral order of the world has to be considered, but the solidarity of the sinner on one side and of Christ on the other with the whole human race. When we try to apprehend all these things at once - and these are by no means all that have to be considered - who will venture to say that He has done to all the justice to which they are entitled? Who will be astonished if the doctrine of atonement has sometimes been superficially and in adequately handled, if it has been misunderstood and misrepresented, if it has been preached in forms which rather challenged the criticism of the conscience than satisfied its deepest needs? But why trouble about the doctrine? Surely what conscience cries out for is not the explanation of forgiveness, but the experience of it; and for this we must come to Christ. The experience does not rest on the doctrine, but the doctrine on the experience. No doctrine can make us certain in our very souls that there is a love of God against which even our sin is powerless, but it is to give us that very certainty that Jesus cries, "Come unto Me". We cannot get it in the Catechism. We cannot get it through any doctrine of the work of Christ. We can only get it in His company, because the thing itself, the love which bears sin and which holds fast to man through it, is manifest in all its power and in tensity in Him alone.

And if here again we ask how it is that He imparts this certainty to those who come to Him - how He creates in sinful souls the assurance of a pardoning and restoring love in God which gives the victory over sin - we can only say again that the ways are too manifold and too wonderful to trace. Sometimes the assurance is born within us as we hear Him proclaim forgiveness to the paralytic or to that passionate penitent who wet His feet with tears. Sometimes it dawns upon us as we see Him receive sinners and eat with them. Is not that a very sacrament of pardon, that fellowship of the sinless one with the sinful, in which they are made to feel what their sin is, and yet are not driven away, but have access to the Holy One? Is not that, as it were, forgiveness incarnate, a pledge of it that no one can misunderstand? Sometimes again the certainty shines out for us from the gracious parables of Jesus - from the story of the two debtors who had nothing to pay, but obtained a free discharge; or more movingly from the story of the prodigal son, whose father saw him a long way off, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. We know, as Jesus speaks, who that father is, or rather whom he stands for; the pardoning love which welcomes the penitent prodigal is that of the heavenly Father welcoming His lost children home. And there are still more wonderful things than these in the Gospels which bring the Divine love near to us in Jesus. With what solemn yet reviving power the words sometimes fall upon the heart, "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many!" To give His life a ransom for many: here we have something connected with sin, and not dis-proportioned to it - something deeper, more wonderful, more powerful than sin - something that when we see in it the key to the whole life of Jesus makes such a pardoning love as our sins require credible, real, present, overpowering. And as we read on in the story everything illumines and confirms it. Who can doubt that there is forgiveness with God when He hears Jesus say at the Supper, "This is My blood of the covenant, shed for many, unto remission of sins"? or when He sees Him, as He passes through the council hall, turn and look upon Peter? or as He listens to His last prayer for others, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"? or to His last promise to the dying thief, "To-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise"? Above all, who can doubt it when He comes back from death, and, standing in the midst of the very men who had all forsaken Him and fled, says, "Peace be unto you"? No one can take in all this and be in doubt as to whether there is forgiveness with God. We know, if we have come to Jesus, that there is forgiveness - not forgiveness lightly won or lightly to be assumed, not forgiveness easily to be understood or explained; but forgiveness with all the reality and passion in it of His life and death, forgiveness as mysterious and profound as all that is most tragic in the experience of Jesus, forgiveness that has plumbed the depths of sin and is able to save to the uttermost. We may never be able to explain it to the full, or to fashion it into a clear and consistent doctrine - indeed we never shall be able; it is beyond all hope of telling wonderful. But we can have the clearest and surest experience of it, nevertheless, and that is better than any doctrine. Bring the burden of your bad conscience to Jesus, Open your heart to Him. Submit to His discipline. Keep in His company, listen to His words, learn what He is, come under the power of His life and death and resurrection, and He will give you that assurance and experience of a Divine forgiveness which will revive and recreate your soul.

**4.** Finally, the invitation of Jesus is addressed to those whose burden is of a less definite description - the burden of life itself with its apparently inevitable cares. Life is a conflict, and we have no choice but to face it; but how many there are who are wearied in it with responsibilities which are too heavy for them to bear. Men feel this even when they are successful: they are wearied with the greatness of their way. They feel it when they fail, and when greater effort is demanded of them while their strength is becoming less. Yet in both cases alike it may easily be that there is some false conception of life in the mind - some convention assumed to be authoritative - which in the presence of Jesus would lose its power. Many of our burdens are in this way of our own making. We measure life by an unreal standard. The things we are so keen about are not, after all, the things that matter. The victories and defeats that so elate or so depress us, and in any case so absorb and exhaust us, ought not to touch so deeply the spirit of man. Winners or losers in the conflict, we have all alike something to be ashamed of, and it comes home to us as the word of Jesus falls up on our ears, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour, and I will give you rest". Jesus knows the secret of life and teaches it. He gives rest by showing us what true life is, and enabling us to enter into it by taking His yoke upon us. It does not consist in the abundance of the things which we possess, though to increase their possessions seems to be the most universal desire of living men. It does not consist in the distinctions we strive for - in the attainment of commercial or social or intellectual or political ambitions. To all these things Jesus was indifferent, yet He had the life which is life indeed. He had it through all the conflicts of earth, and through all its excitements; he had it through temptation, disappointment, Suffering, poverty, death itself. That true life consists in the knowledge of God as Father, in the conviction of His fatherly love, in the consciousness that we are called to be His children, in the liberty of obedience to His will. All this Jesus can teach; He can initiate us into it by His word and life and spirit. He Himself is meek and lowly in heart, clean of earth's ambitions and its strifes; and as we enter into His school, putting on His yoke and learning of Him, His own peace comes to us, the peace of God which passes understanding, and keeps our thoughts and hearts in Him.

It is not possible to say on this text what should be said, or even what one would like to say. All our thoughts and words about it are far beneath its unspeakable grace and truth. Let us listen to it again, as from the lips of our Saviour, ere we close. "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."