**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**08. STARTLING ABSENCES by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"He shall not strive, nor cry, neither shall any man hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench."*

*Matthew 12:19*

"Not strive," not "cry," not lift up His voice "in the streets," not break "the bruised reed," not quench "the smoking flax"! These are some of the rarest and finest features of a character that is altogether lovely. They are negative characteristics. Certain things are suppressed, and the suppression reveals a consummate moral and spiritual beauty. The character of the Christ is no less unique in its striking absences than in its majestic presences. Its valleys are as conspicuous as its mountains. Its most imposing manifestations are to be found in its restraints. Its most luminous revelations are ofttimes the children of silence. The Holy Ghost works in the way of a certain exclusion. His handiwork is differentiated from all others by its incomparable restraints. No strife, no crying, no lifting up of the voice in the streets, no hastiness! In the Spirit-filled life "the things which are not" are as marvellous and powerful as "the things which are." The very absences are forces which startle the dull, lethargic world, and awake it to the discernment of a glory as beautiful as it is strange. My brethren, we have to work through these striking absences. The world that lieth in wickedness oft appears to be very uninterested both in us and in our message. Perhaps we are too much like the world we are seeking to redeem to be able to wake the world to any wonder. The world must look at the professed Christian, and behold the absence of itself! There are certain things which must not be, and their absence must surprise the world into a great and eager inquisitiveness. We must not strive, nor cry, nor lift up our voice in the streets; we must not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax. These tendencies must be suppressed, and their suppression must be the work of the Holy Ghost.

Now mark the first of the suppressions in the life that is filled with the Holy Ghost. "He shall not strive." He will erect no altar to the goddess of discord. The treasure of the soul shall not be dribbled away in incessant squabble. The mind shall not waste its strength in petty and purposeless dispute. Life shall not be passed in an idle controversy. "He shall not strive." The spirit of wrangling shall be absent. He shall have a controversy with sin. He shall oppose the truth to all the lofty confrontings of error. Falsehood he shall withstand to the face. But he shall not wrangle. He may differ with many men: he shall strive or wrangle with none. For what is wrangling? Wrangling is the spirit which subordinates the triumph of truth to the triumph of self. When a man begins to wrangle, his sight has become self-centred; he has lost the vision of truth. He is seeking the throne for himself, and not for his God. He is fighting for a personal supremacy, and to gain it he will betray the very truth under whose banner he professes to serve. Wrangling creates an earth-born cloud which shuts out the heights and the depths and the breadths, obscuring the distant horizon and the lofty heaven, and leaving the soul no object of contemplation but its own impoverished self. When God ceases to be the goal of mental combatants, high controversy soon degenerates into small dispute. You never find the wrangling spirit in the main highways of the truth. You find him in some byway, some blind alley, some side issue, dwelling in petty inferences, nursing his own vanity, far away from the broad, moving, regnant life of redemptive truth. Wrangling always nourishes itself on side issues. It feeds upon trifles. The littleness of the controversy directly ministers to the vanity of the controversialist. He can grasp the problem. He can walk all round it. There is no side of darkening mystery which calls for the removal of the shoes and an approach of breathless reverence and awe. He calls it "only a little point," but he clings to it, and wrangles about it, that he may taste the sweets of a personal triumph. The wrangling in our Churches is never found in the "highway of the Lord." Over that highway, we are told, the unclean shall never pass, and the spirit of wrangling is essentially unclean. No, the wrangling in the Churches gathers round about a trifle, not about the white robes, the garments of salvation, but about the cut of an ecclesiastical vesture; not about the salvation of the world, but about the comparative claims of the home and the foreign field. I don't see how it is possible for men to wrangle about the deepest mysteries and purposes of the Christian faith. They may differ, and may engage in mutually helpful comparisons; but deep in the heart of a great mystery the very rarity of the air will suffocate the spirit of wrangling. How often it happens than when a meeting is beginning to waste itself and its strength in petty dispute, some speaker, of large and fruitful vision, rises, and, as we say, "lifts the whole subject to a higher plane," and on more lofty altitudes all frivolous bickering is stilled. Yes, the antidote to wrangling is sublimity. The rare atmosphere of the one makes the other impossible: the common gazing into great mysteries hushes little discords into peace.

So wrangling seeks the side issue. But Christ would not strive. He would not be diverted from the main issues of life and destiny. He observed a strict economy in His resources. He would not suffer His strength to leak away in frivolous dispute. He had not come to engage in strife. He had come that we might have life. He had not come to wrangle about legalities and trivialities, but to procure the world's redemption. From that main and dominant issue He would never permit Himself to be seduced. "I have a baptism to be baptized with"; on that appalling yet glorious way He steadfastly set His face -- He never turned aside to wrangle -- and His steadfastness was one of the gifts of the Spirit. Brethren, that is how the Spirit of the Lord will work in us. It will make us feel most at home in the heavenly places. It will make us feel out of place in small disputes. It will make the sublime our native air. It will make the super-natural natural unto us. Our feet shall stand in a large place. We shall contemplate vast issues. We shall live for big ends. We shall have no taste for the trifling. The close, foetid temper of wrangling will be made impossible by the strong pure wind that blows from the larger hills of love. "The servant of the Lord must not strive." "I will put My Spirit upon Him .... and He shall not strive."

"He shall not strive, nor cry." The Messiah shall not cry. His coming and His going shall not be a shriek. And what is that but to say that His life shall not be sensational? "He shall not cry." There shall be nothing "loud" about the Master; nothing glaring, nothing over-emphasised, nothing over-done. There shall be nothing of the screech, smiting the senses with startling impact; nothing of the loud shock, nothing sensational. "He shall not cry." How true that is of the life of the Lord! There is nothing of the shriek! What an absence of the sensational! What an economy of power! What restraint! How sensational he might have been! "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall give Me more than twelve legions of angels." "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth." Yea, verily, how sensational He might have been. And yet, so full was He of sweet restraint that the people seem to have been more surprised with His graciousness than with His power. He had not come to startle, but to win; to conciliate, not to coerce. "Come now and let us reason together" was the pervading tone of His ministry. And so He put restraint upon His power, but gave no limit to His grace. He was almost niggardly with miracles; He was prodigal with love. Such is the fruit of the Spirit! The man who is filled with the Spirit of God has no desire to make a sensation. "He shall not cry." The shriek is absent. His lightning commonly sheds itself abroad as sunbeams. His thunder commonly breaks itself up into the music of gracious speech. His life is not loud. All he asks is "room to deny Himself"; "content to fill a little space if God be glorified."

"He shall not strive, nor cry." Wrangling is absent. Loudness is absent. "Neither shall any man hear His voice in the streets." How true is that word concerning the Lord: "Neither shall any man hear His voice in the streets." Christ abhorred a mere street-religion. He loved the religion that prayed and glowed in the closet, and that radiated its influence out into the street. But a mere street-religion he hated. He told us more than once of men who love to "pray standing at the corner of the street that they may be seen of men," and He bade us be not like unto them. He could not do with a piety that advertised itself to gain public applause. No man, says my text, shall "hear His voice in the streets." If he went to pray, then the mid-night or the early dawn shall be a convenient season, and the desert or some remote height shall be an appropriate place. "Thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door pray to thy Father which is in secret." No man shall hear the Master in a self-advertising piety; no man shall hear His voice in the streets engaged in a notoriety hunt, which seeks its ends by the use of unctuous speech. He who is truly anointed with the Holy Ghost, when he does lift up his voice, shall do it not to advertise himself, but, I say with reverence, to advertise his God. Christ revealed the Father! Again and again He seemed to wrestle with the imperfections of human speech, to make it clear to us that He sought alone the honour and the glory of His Father's name. He was always drawing back the curtain. "The words that ye hear are not mine." "I speak not of Myself." "The Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works." Not to honour Himself, for then He said His honour would be nothing, but to honour His Father -- that was the end and purpose of speech and of work. Such is the fruit of the Spirit. "I will put My Spirit upon Him" ... . and no man "shall hear His voice in the street." When the Holy Spirit possesses a man, religion is not an affair of the street corner; it is not a medium of self-advertisement; it is not a means for gaining public applause. Life, filled with the Spirit, "vaunteth not itself," it hides under "the shadow of the Almighty," and it makes its boast in God.

"He shall not strive." Wrangling shall be absent. "He shall not cry." Loudness shall be absent. "Neither shall any man hear His voice in the street." Self-advertisement shall be absent. "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench." Then there is to be an absence of harshness, an absence of severe pitilessness, an absence of that spirit of savage recoil from those who have deceived us. You cut a reed from its root and, as is a very common custom in Syria to-day, you use it as a staff on which to lean. When the road leaves the plain, and begins to climb the hill, you place a weightier dependence upon your support, you lean more heavily upon your staff, and often it happens that the poor reed yields before the confiding pressure and fails you, becoming cracked and bruised. Now what can you do with a reed which has failed you, which has collapsed beneath your weight just when you needed its support? Why, complete the destruction. Break it impatiently into a dozen pieces and cast it aside as a worthless thing. And is not this a symbol of how we too commonly treat our brethren who have failed us? We counted upon their faithfulness. We trustingly leaned upon them in a moment of peculiar strain. We depended upon them in some high crisis of our affairs, and they failed us. They broke their word. They betrayed our trust. The staff became a bruised reed. How prone we are to deal harshly with them! How inclined we are to manifest towards them an indignation which has in it more of chagrin at our own disappointment than of zeal for the honour of our Lord! With what hasty impatience we cast off the treacherous brother, and throw him aside as an utterly worthless and hopeless thing! But that was not the Master's way. He would not "break the bruised reed." He was tenderly pitiful towards men who had failed. He would not "quench the smoking flax." When the oil in the lamp failed, and the genial and cheering flame became an offensive smoke, when religious devotion in some life was sadly changing into a cool formality, when a bright enthusiasm smouldered down into an interest that was only lukewarm, when fervour was turning into indifference, when He beheld symptoms of spiritual decline, He would not quench the smoking flax by an outpouring of suspicion or contempt. The Lord was ever pitiful with the faint-hearted, with those whose light was burning only dimly, and He ever sought, by a tender and reinforcing sympathy, to nurse them back again into a bright and passionate spiritual life. My brethren, don't you think this is a grace of which we have peculiar need to-day -- tenderness towards failures? Is it not the special equipment of the Christian ministry -- a disposition which seeks to heal those that are bruised, a disposition which seeks to restore those who, when a demand was made upon their resources, failed and collapsed before the strain? I think it is not without suggestion that in that radiant list of graces which the Apostle Paul has enumerated as the adornments of the Christian life, he gives the first place to the grace of pity. "Put ye on a heart of pity." Brethren, be it ours to startle and to win the world by the absence in our life of pitilessness and harshness and all selfish severity. Be it ours to win our spiritual conquests by a persistent and confiding hopefulness, not breaking the bruised reed, not quenching the smoking flax, but seeking the restoration of our brother by a willing and prodigal communication of ourselves in the spiritual treasures which have been given to us by God.