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

**10. THE PERSISTENT INFLUENCE OF FIRST IDEAS by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."*

*John 16:12*

"Ye cannot bear them now." Your hands are infantile. Your baby fingers could not wrap themselves around the load. Your grasp and carrying power are immature. There are many mysteries waiting to be unveiled, but your untried eyes are unable to "bear the burning bliss." There are many truths all clamouring to be proclaimed, but your powers of apprehension are not equal to the strain. The burden must be suited to the hand. I must let in the light as your eyes are able to bear it. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now"

Here, then, is the principle involved in the text. Capacity must determine revelation. Mature doctrine must not be given to immature minds. An excessive burden will maim the muscle it was proposed to exercise. An ill-proportioned revelation will paralyse the very life it was intended to feed. That is the vital principle enshrined in my text. There must be some correspondence between the revelation and my powers of reception. I must be able to bear the truth revealed. Truth must wait upon life. She must watch for the growing hand, and to the increased grasp she must entrust her larger treasure. "What revelations shall I make to my children?" Well, what are they able to bear? What is their carrying power? What is the size of their hands? What is the scope of their apprehension? It requires a good deal of living for a little bit of knowing -- How much have they lived? It is here we must begin as the unveilers of the Christian revelation to the mind and hearts of the young. We must follow the example of the Master. It is not enough to teach the truth. It must be taught with discrimination. It must be adapted to aptitude. It must be proportioned to grasp. It must be doled out with wise restraint, and we must rigorously withhold everything which our children are as yet unable to bear. There is no novelty in this principle. It finds repeated emphasis throughout the New Testament Scriptures.

Here and there it is referred to under the figure of a diet, and from the figure one can easily infer the apostolic conception of the religious instruction of the young. Some are to be fed with milk, and not with strong meat. The food is to be adapted to the system, the doctrine to the years. We neglect that principle at our peril. Even on the purely physical plane, inattention to the diet of childhood may be the cause of a black stream of melancholy and depression running right through the years. Careless feeding in early years can impair the digestive organs for a lifetime. There is many a dyspeptic, pessimistic and pain-ridden, drowsily crawling about in the prime of his years, whose languor and partial paralysis may be traced to the indiscriminate feeding of his childhood. And there are moral and spiritual dyspeptics, with little or no healthy hunger, with no forceful, active powers to apprehend religious truth, with no sound spiritual digestion, whose pitiable incapacity was created in an unwise religious childhood. They were over-weighted with truths which they were unable to assimilate. Their spiritual susceptibilities were impaired. Their food became their burden. They were not able to bear it, being fed with strong meat when they ought to have been fed with milk. Young minds must be fed on simple food; their diet must be elemental. The truth we offer them must be alphabetic. We must observe the principle that all things are not fitting, that many things must be held in reserve until capacity is more matured. "These things I said not unto you at the beginning." What things? Why, the great appalling things, the midnight things, the things which would have stunned the disciples into benumbment, and paralysed them with fear: these the gentle Teacher said not unto them "at the beginning." He reserved them for a later lesson, when they could be introduced without any fear of injuring their timid and sensitive souls. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."

If this, then, is to be the principle of instruction, if we are to recognise the law of reserve in our declaration of truth, if the harder teachings must be kept for the maturer years and the simpler teachings for the younger years, it is of infinite importance that the simpler teachings be scrupulously true. Alongside the principle of reserve this second principle must be given an equal place, that nothing must be taught in childhood which will need to be unlearnt in manhood. Early religious teaching is not a makeshift. It is not a temporary garment which our children will be able to discard as easily as they discard their worn-out frocks. We walk in unspeakable error if we approach our little children on the understanding that we will give them a thought, a religious idea, a spiritual conception, which will last them until they are seventeen years of age, and which may then be laid aside for another. The most difficult of all things is to forsake a thought. To forsake a way is comparatively easy; but to take an idea which has possessed us for years and strip it from the mind, and throw it aside as an old-fashioned or worn-out rag, and leave it there behind us in the years, is a stupendous and appalling task. And all this is peculiarly true of ideas that are given to us in our earliest days. We cannot exaggerate the intensity of first impressions; they bite deep into the mind, and are almost ineffaceable. Our old people cannot recall the days that are near, but they have no difficulty in reviving the deep-cut impressions of a far-off youth. It is childhood that lives again in age. It is the earliest consciousness that reappears in the latest days of decline. The first impressions persist through the life. I find the symbol of the experience in those composite photographs with which we have of late become familiarised. One impression is photographed upon another, to which it is quite unlike, and then a third, altogether dissimilar, is photographed upon the previous product, and so on and so on, with increasing additions; but the first and original impression persists, remaining as a pervading influence, modifying all succeeding impressions, and asserting itself in the ultimate product. I say it is even so with life. The first impressions photographed upon the mind are not effaced by succeeding impressions. The first ideas are not obliterated by the ideas of a later day. First ideas remain, pervading and modifying the thought of the entire life, and persisting in our conduct even when they have been deposed by the judgment.

Take, for instance, our first thoughts about the darkness. Many of us gained an early impression -- alas! many of us were taught it -- that the darkness was the residence of things "uncanny," of bogeys and goblins, and I know not what, who would steal out and kidnap little children if they were not obedient and good. How rarely one meets a little child who is not afraid of the darkness! Well, we are now men and women. We have put away the childish thing. Have we? It has been discarded by the judgment; is it exiled from the life? Does it not persist in our demeanour to-day? Is the darkness even to-day just what it might have been had we never received that earliest thought? Is the nerve altogether free from that first idea?

If ideas are so persistent, if early ideas are so dominant and despotic, is it not needful to emphasise the principle that there must be nothing about the teaching we give to little children which we should not like them to carry with them through the years? There must be nothing which will need to be forsaken, for forsaken it can never be! Our teaching must assume the need of subsequent expansion; it must never assume the need of subsequent expulsion. We respect this principle in the impartation of common knowledge. In secular instruction we teach our child that twice one are two. That is elementary and alphabetic, but it is a statement which will remain good throughout his days. It will be as safe at three-score years and ten as it is at five. Whatever expansion it may receive, into whatever complication it may enter, whatever combinations it may share, it will never require expulsion. It should be even so in all instruction which we name religious. The alphabetic must not be the untrue. The simple must not be a makeshift. Every idea we impart to the minds of our children should be a seed, a germ which will expand with the expansion of the powers and the increase of the years. If the ideas are not seeds, seeds of eternal truth -- small, if you like, as grains of mustard-seed -- if they are not seeds, they are stones, infertile, burdensome stones, which in a few years will become "stones of stumbling," and "rocks of offence," over which our children will be in danger of falling into moral and spiritual confusion.

Now, of these simple, germinal teachings, the most vitally important are the conceptions of the being and character of God. The ideas we give the children concerning God must be ideas which their capacity can bear, and which will never need to be expelled. The revelations must be as milk-food, which will nourish and strengthen the powers of apprehension for the assimilation of stronger food in after years. The first idea of God strikes deep. You cannot give your child one conception of God to-day, and wipe it out again to-morrow. The first conception remains, and if it be false or unworthy it will persist as a disturbing and distorting and corrupting influence throughout the entire life. Where do our children obtain their first ideas of God? Sometimes from a picture. A glance can determine the colour of a life. My mind is even to-day haunted with unworthy representations of the Almighty which have hung in my chamber of imagery from the days of my childhood. I see Him now, a tearless cynical God, indifferently smiling upon a Dives who is writhing in terrible tongues of flame. I see Him now, in another picture, with the face of a cunning trickster, while Abraham stands with uplifted blade to slay his only son. Long ago my judgment condemned the image as false and sentenced it to exile. But through my childhood it persisted, and even to-day, when I turn to the old story, the false image steals back, and seeks to imprint its lines and colours upon my most matured thought. So subtle and so strenuous and so despotic is an early pictorial representation of the Eternal God. Where do our children obtain their earliest ideas of God? Sometimes from a hymn. I vividly remember that when I was quite a little mite we used to occasionally sing a hymn which bore the heading, "To be sung on the death of a scholar," and there were two lines of the hymn which used to make me shake with fear --

We do not know who next may fall

Beneath Thy chastening rod.

What did that mean to a child? I ask not what it meant to the matured apprehension of adults. What meant it to a little child? A God, with a rod, before whose blows little children stumbled and fell, and had to be carried away from their weeping mothers, and laid I knew not where! That was the child's God, and it filled me so full of fear that I had no room for love. The revelation was beyond my carrying power -- I had not strength to bear it! Let us jealously inspect every hymn which enshrines a conception of God, and let every picture which offers a caricature of the Eternal be consigned to swift destruction.

What, then, shall be our first and elementary teachings concerning God? What shall be the character of the earliest revelations? What are the children able to bear? Suppose it were permitted you to give your little child just one glimpse of the life of Jesus, and suppose that from that glimpse it were to be his fate to obtain his first conception of God, what aspect of the Saviour's life would you make your choice? Mark well your choice. Note its character and tone. You will find, I think, that you have chosen a very sunny picture, full of sweetness and light. And such ought to be the character of the earliest revelations. They should be brimming with soft and inviting sunshine. It may be needful at a later day to analyse the light, and reveal the darker elements of severity which share in the composition of the pure, white ray, but in the earliest day "suffer the little children" to just bask in the sunny baptism, with all the free and untroubled affection of young and fearless hearts. They can carry the sunshine, and not be heavy-ladened. Other things may wait. They can be given to the larger mind. But with the little ones let us "lead on softly," following the example of our Master the Christ. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."

But I think there is need that we not only give our children such elementary conceptions of the character of God as will never need to be unlearnt, but also some true, if alphabetic conceptions, as to the mode of His communion with us. It is not enough to teach our children what God is like; we must offer some true if elementary suggestions as to how He draws near to us. Even though we have saved them from an appalling and repellant misrepresentation of God, they may still be confounded and disturbed by ignorance as to how He visits and abides with us. The withholding of simplicities may be as burdensome as the imposition of an excessive revelation. I am persuaded that many of our children are spiritually starved and checked in their religious growth because we have left it to chance to make known to them how to discern the coming and presence of the Eternal God. They are craving for an explanation, and we too frequently offer them a heavy, burdensome, and meaningless phrase. For instance, they hear the teacher or the preacher make the frequent appeal in the prayer with which the service begins, "May we feel Thy presence in our midst to-day," and at the conclusion of the service they hear a familiar expression of praise, "We thank Thee that Thou hast made Thy presence felt among us." Have our children any inkling of the meaning of the words? Are not the phrases quite beyond their grasp, signs without significance, leaving the mind in absolute and perilous vacancy? We must not leave these things to chance. When we have taught the little lives what God is, I know of nothing more exceedingly precious than to teach them how to recognise God's touch. Cannot we give our children some tiny system of -- don't be afraid of the phrase -- elementary psychology, some simple ideas of the inner life, and of how the great Spirit moves about it in quickening and in hallowing influence. The teaching must be exceedingly elementary, but scrupulously true. It must be germinal truth, to which much may be added, but from which nothing shall need to be withdrawn. The problem is this, How can we teach our children to recognise the touch of the Lord, so that in public and in private services they may know Him, and be able to enter sympathetically into thanksgiving that His presence has been felt? Can this be taught, or have our children to linger on in a hardening mental vacancy until childhood has been left behind? I believe such teaching can be given, and if it can, then it is our privilege and duty to give it.

How much can we tell them? This much of psychology, at any rate, may be given to them. We may tell them that in the inner and unseen life of each there is something called thought, and something called feeling, and something called will, and that when the great and unseen God comes near to us He dwells especially round about these three, and that in these three we may recognise His presence and feel His touch. How may we know the touch of God in our thought? Here is a word of the Lord God: "My thoughts are not your thoughts." What are Thy thoughts like, good Lord? "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My thoughts higher than your thoughts." In God's thoughts there is no littleness, no meanness. God's thoughts are large. lofty, and spacious, and such does He purpose should be the thoughts of all men, big with the gracious bounteousness of an expansive heaven. When therefore the good Lord comes near to me, He visits my thought, and by this sign may I know His touch. If my poor little selfish thought, that just covers myself, like a petty tent, begins to widen and heighten until it spreads over my brethren like a canopy of heavenly benediction, the enlargement is a sure indication that the great Wonder-Worker has touched me, turning the little one into a thousand, and a contracted interest into a spacious vision. Cannot we teach our children this mode of recognising the presence of God? Cannot we tell them that when they engage in the worship of the sanctuary, or when they pray in the privacy of their own home, or when they are walking in the common way, in school or at play, and find a little thought giving place to a larger thought, a self-seeking thought yielding to a brother-seeking thought, it is the touch of the Lord God; and in the evening-time before they retire to rest they may take upon their lips the teacher's words, and say, "We thank Thee, Lord, that we have felt Thy touch to-day." The teaching would be elementary, but true, a revelation which the children would be able to bear.

How may we know the touch of God in our feeling? Let us begin here. Our God hates all bitterness, and His unfaltering purpose is to change the bitter into the sweet. When He obtains an entrance into human life He finds many pools of bitterness, and His immediate work is to make them sweet. We so easily turn sour. Envy is a bitter pool. Jealousy is a bitter pool. Malice is a bitter pool. Irritableness is a bitter pool. When therefore the good Lord comes near to me He visits these pools of feeling, and by this sign may I know His touch. When malice changes into good-will, when envy is transformed into unselfish rejoicing, when irritableness becomes a cordial patience, when the waters sweeten, and vulgar passion of any kind is refined into exquisite love, we may know that the great God is at work in the wells of our being, and by all these evidences may we recognise His touch. May not these elements be taught to our children, so that they may be saved from an impotent vagueness, and may be enabled to offer the prayer, "May Thy presence be felt among us," with an intelligent expectancy, which is itself the highest assurance of blessing.

How may we know the touch of God in our wills? Let this be our beginning. The great Lord reveals Himself as a "Spirit of power." When therefore He comes into human life, He goes to the will, so ready to shrink and to shirk when confronted by unwelcome tasks, and He recharges and reinforces it from the dynamic of His own presence, and transforms an impotent isolation into the might of an unconquerable fellowship. This is how we may know His touch, and this is the truth we can teach to our children. When the sense of weakness yields to the sense of power, and when in the presence of duty "I can't" gives place to "I can," and "I can" ripens into "I will," we may be assured it is the touch of the Lord. By these signs may our children be taught to recognise the presence of the Eternal, and for these may they devoutly kneel in the evening-time, and take these words upon their lips in praise, "We thank Thee, Lord, that we have felt Thy touch to-day."

I have thus ventured to elaborate my suggestion in some detail in order that I may make perfectly clear the lines along which I think our earliest teaching should proceed. We must teach not only what God is; we must teach that He draws near to us, and we must offer some explanation as to the modes of His approach. We must teach our children how to recognise the presence of the Eternal, that they may know the coming of the Son of God, and may "love His appearing."

These are not matters of unessential and transient import. They are primary, elemental, necessary, and once learnt they will never need to be unlearnt. They are seeds of truth which can be sown in the child-life with the confident hope of a bountiful harvest. They are alphabetic teachings which can be given to the immature mind as the beginnings of a knowledge high and broad and deep as heaven. Other things can wait. Larger things may be reserved for riper years. But these things, taught even to the youngest, will reveal the Lord God as a near and present reality, and make His communion with His children the companionship of a very blessed friend.

Here, then, my fellow-workers in the Lord, is the counsel I would leave with you. Give to your children only such revelations as they can bear. Apportion the weight to their carrying power. Keep back the doctrine which is at present immaterial and remote. Let the elements you teach be absolutely true, such as shall last, without need of withdrawal, throughout the years. Be prayerfully watchful in imparting the first conceptions of God, and teach the young minds how to discern the movements of His Spirit. Lead on gently. Let the height be increased with the increasing strength of the eyes, and some day, in the great unveiling, yours shall be the unspeakable joy of knowing that your little ones have grown so strong in vision as to be able to gaze upon the enveiled face of the King, upon the undimmed brightness of the Eternal Glory.