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## THE POWER OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER.

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"Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles; that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." 1 Pet. 2:12.

"For so is the will of God, that with well doing, ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." 1 Pet. 2:15.

"Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." 1 Pet. 5:3.

I wish to speak to you this morning, brethren, on The Power of Christian Character. Observe that I emphasize Christian. A good character, in the ordinary sense as understood by the world, is a valuable possession, the reputation for which at least all men appreciate and desire, but a Christian character is a rarer possession and is of priceless value to the Church and the world. This is the character which the Christian should cultivate by reason of his relation to Christ and under the tuition of the Word and Spirit of God. It is the result of the process of sanctification which begins with conversion and continues to the end, until the Christian is made like unto his Lord.

I have selected three passages suggesting different aspects of the subject, and indicating successive steps in the discussion. Taken together, I think you will see how they represent the tremendous significance and weight of Christian character in the work of the kingdom of God on earth. They are like splendid jewels strung upon a golden thread, the thread representing Christian character, and the jewels representing such special manifestations of it as are denoted in these three passages. The unity of the subject will appear as we proceed with the discussion.

At the time of the writing of this epistle, the disciples of Christ, scattered abroad throughout the various provinces of Asia Minor, to whom the epistle is addressed, were being subjected to much suffering through misrepresentation and persecution. The apostle Peter is endeavoring to encourage them, and in doing this he dwells upon the kind of life they should live. A holy Christian character would be their best defense and their most effective weapon in the terrible warfare in which they were engaged. As he viewed various aspects of the struggle and the interests of the work which they were endeavoring to do, their character as Christians seemed to him to be always on trial.

### I.

Observe first the evangelistic power of Christian character. This thought is suggested by the first passage. The apostle exhorts his readers to purity and integrity of life among the Gentiles, that "they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." Of course this doctrine is not peculiar to Peter. It is beautifully expressed in that famous passage from our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." It also appears in those well known words of the apostle Paul in the epistle to the Philippians: "Do all things without murmurings and disputings; that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life."

Christian character exerts its evangelistic power—that is, its power which makes for the evangelization of the world—in two ways: first in the edification of the saints, and second, in the conversion of sinners.

The influence of a pure and holy character upon one's fellow-Christians is incalculable. It means so much for one Christian to see another Christian waging a successful warfare against evil. Are you not depressed by the weak and faltering brother

who is continually falling before temptation and about whose spiritual life there is always an element of doubt, while you are encouraged by the strong and vigorous one who sets his face like flint against sin and bravely presses on in the conflict whatever the odds against him? The man of genuine Christian character is a demonstration to you that the thing can be done. The ideality of a holy life is realized in him. It no longer seems to be an impossibility to gain the mastery over the naturally evil dispositions of the flesh, and you are encouraged to press on "in the good fight of faith and to lay hold on eternal life." Such a character is also an encouragement to those believers who are burdened with sorrow. If a brother laden with heavy sorrows like your own, bears them bravely and lightly, and comes trudging by you with a song and a smile, you are encouraged to take a new grip upon your own, and continue your march undismayed by their weight and by the length of the way before you. But some professing Christians instead of bearing their own burdens cheerfully and helping others, deliberately unload as much as possible upon every one they meet. Instead of lightening the sorrows of others, they distribute their own among their friends. Of course the best of people sometimes need and crave Christian sympathy and ought to have it, but it is not the Christian spirit of which I am speaking today for one to scatter his troubles wherever he goes and make his friends dread to meet him. On the contrary, it is to bear your own burdens cheerfully and remember that "each heart knows its own bitterness." This same character is a stimulus to service in others. The idler in the vineyard is a disadvantage, but the faithful worker is a great blessing. The first is a hinderer, but the second is a helper. We all belong to one class or the other; we are either hinderers or helpers. We either contribute to the advance of the kingdom of God, or we retard its progress. The faithful and fruitful disciple not only does his own portion of the work, but by his example he incites others to greater exertions.

Many an humble Christian with few gifts of the striking kind, but who has maintained a holy walk and conversation among his fellows, has borne his own troubles with patience

and fortitude, and has been zealous in good works, has been truly an evangelistic power in the world because of the beneficial influence which he has exerted upon his fellow disciples. But such an influence does not stop there. It is a most powerful active agency for bringing men to Christ. Those who see your good works are led to glorify God in the day of visitation. It was said of Barnabas that "he was a good man and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith; and much people was added unto the Lord." Paul speaks of the disciples of Christ as "epistles written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God," "known and read of all men." The people of the world as a rule receive their impression of the Christian religion from their contact with and knowledge of Christian people. They may not read the word of God, but they do read the lives of those who believe it and claim to live by it. They may not attend church themselves, but they give strict attention to the daily conduct of those who are members of the church; and what Christians are, they have reason to believe, they are made to be by the moulding influence of the religion which they profess. Our Lord teaches the same lesson as the apostle Paul, when he says in one of his parables, "The good seed are the children of the kingdom." In other words, when the word of God which is the good seed of truth, is planted in the hearts of men and bears fruit in their lives, it becomes a most effective means for the propagation of the kingdom. There is a very true sense in which the sincere Christian of holy and consecrated life and purpose is the word of God incarnate. The Christian is truth vitalized, arrayed in flesh and blood, in tangible visible form. He appeals to the unbeliever in a stronger way than trust in the abstract. There is no influence in this world equal to that of saintly men and women for rebuking sin and for subduing rebellious souls. The world after all lays great store by its good people, and there is nothing that so shocks its moral sense and shakes its faith in God and truth as the discovery of moral delinquency in some one upon whom it has been accustomed to look as a paragon of excellence.

The obligation resting upon every Christian is to be a good man or a good woman. If you are a Christian, that means that

you are to be an evangelistic force in the world, and you can not become such a force without consecration. You are "chosen of God in Christ to be holy and without blame before him in love." You are to be "blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world." You are to keep the light of God's love and spirit within you burning like the keeper of a light-house upon some dangerous coast. The light in the light-house does not go after men who are struggling amid the dark and rolling billows of the deep, but it shines, and by its shining it warns men of danger and it directs them how to go. Let the light within you so shine that men may glorify God. You may not be able to teach them how to get rich, or to become great and powerful, and that matters not; but what a wonderful thing it is to teach men to glorify God in the day of his visitation! God help us all to do that for his own sake!

## II.

Observe next the apologetic power of Christian character. This thought is suggested by the second passage. "For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men."

Much adverse criticism of the church of Christ and of Christian people arises from ignorance. This was a notorious fact in the early church. Dreadful stories were circulated about the faith and life of the apostles and more humble disciples, based upon ignorance. They were accused of worshipping an ass's head and of indulging in the grossest forms of immorality. These stories were rife among the heathen and few were at any pains to inform themselves in regard to the facts. Men thought they were justified in saying anything against the Christians, and the apostle may have reference to these things when he speaks of "putting to silence the ignorance of foolish men." It was in consequence of the gross ignorance of the people in regard to the Christians and the prejudices prevailing among the people against them, that Nero ventured to accuse them of burning

the city of Rome, thus shifting the crime from his own shoulders; and then proceeded to organize and carry into execution one of the most inhuman of persecutions against them that history gives any account of. How could these calumnies be answered? The people did not trouble themselves to look for the facts. They were at least willing to believe the charges were true unless the Christians could disprove them. What should then be done? Peter's suggestion was, Let the answer to these accusations be the high character and conduct of the Christians themselves. This, he said was "The will of God, that by well doing, you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men."

This is the best answer to all carping criticism of religion. It comes from many sources, and sometimes from philosophers and scholars of great renown, but most of it, now as in the olden time, may be called "the ignorance of foolish men." It is not the will of God that Christian people should spend much time in defensive argument. They are rather to translate the faith of Christ and the truth of his word into practical life, and let the answer to criticism be an ocular demonstration. Let the world judge of the Gospel of Christ by what it does. Are Christians made better by their creed? Are people who study the Scriptures and claim to practice them, improved in disposition and conduct or not? "By their fruits ye shall know them." "A good tree bringeth forth good fruit." "Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles? The Master is willing that his disciples should be judged in this way. He urges that it must be done. What is the good of a theory that can not be put into practice? What is the advantage of an argument ever so convincing to reason if the tree of the Gospel fails to produce the right kind of fruit? Men have often argued themselves into the belief that under certain conditions they would be able to fly through the air; but still the practicability of aerial navigation is in process of demonstration. The world will not listen seriously to an argument against the Gospel, if the believers in it are "blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom they shine as lights in the world." If the Gospel makes men purer and happier, more patient and contented

with their lot, more loving and self-sacrificing, with higher aims and aspirations; if it removes the fear of death and sustains them with an unflinching hope of immortal peace and rest; if it leads them to regard God as their Father to whose righteous rule they are submissive in all things; if in short it does what it claims to do; then the criticisms of the world are comparatively harmless. They fall to the ground of their own weight and the cause is uninjured.

The church has furnished many apologists for the gospel who have written great volumes in defense of its truth, and many of these books are valuable. They show what can be said in the courts of human reason in advocacy of revealed truth. Sacred learning is greatly enriched by them. But after all, the best apologists for Christ's Gospel are the Christians themselves. It is not Christian argument, powerful as that has been, but Christian character that has perpetuated the life of the church through two millenniums of mighty conflict with sin and error. It is not because the Gospel can be proved to be true by reason that it still lives, but because it has entered into the lives of multitudes of men and women and has transformed them. It still lives and will continue to live in the characters of those who accept it as "the power of God unto the salvation of every one that believeth." A holy and consecrated life, devoted to the glory of God is the one unanswerable argument to all the objections of unbelief to the Gospel.

### III.

But next I would have you observe the authoritative power of Christian character. This is suggested by the third passage and conducts us somewhat into a different region. It is addressed to the elders of the church and Peter includes himself among them with the remark, "I am also an elder." He exhorts the elders, including both teaching and ruling elders, to "feed the flock of God \* \* \* taking the oversight thereof \* \* \* not as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." We have spoken of the power of Christian character in building up the kingdom both in the edification of saints and in the conversion of sinners, and of its power in

the defense of the truth. We have now to speak of its power in the order and discipline of the church.

The authority for the control of a church is lodged in the Session. That is the ruling body, and all questions of discipline must be referred to it.

The exercise of authority of all kinds calls for much wisdom, especially in church affairs. It is often attended with friction and creates serious disturbance. People will not readily submit to discipline on questions of morals. In civil and military affairs they will much more cheerfully recognize authority than in the realm of morals, with which the church has to deal. Sometimes authority is not exercised enough, and at other times too much. Some times it is done injudiciously and other times arbitrarily. It is evident that the church sessions had to contend with all of these difficulties in the early church, and doubtless the authority vested in them was sometimes abused. These points were in the apostle's mind when he uttered the words of the text, and he urges the elders not to lord it over God's heritage, but be ensamples to the flock.

He thus suggests a wise method to be used in the exercise of authority—let them exercise the authority of character. No man will dispute the genuine authority of character. If the elders were examples to the flock in all godliness and honesty, in the practice of all the graces of the Spirit, then no man would question their authority. That is to say, if their authority was exercised through force of character, it would be generally recognized. If they were examples to the flock in holiness and righteousness, their conduct would be a reproof to sin and an encouragement to godliness, and no man could take exception to such authority as that would indicate.

I hope I make myself understood as to the authority of character. General Robert E. Lee's character clothed him with authority which when exercised even in the mildest manner, those who served under him found it almost impossible to resist. We instinctively feel that men of pure and noble character have a right to speak, and even when they do not speak the world waits upon their actions. What such a man does in certain circumstances sometimes gives the cue to a whole



community or indeed a whole country. Our Lord when upon earth had no ecclesiastical authority, he held no office either in Church or State, he was the poorest of the poor, yet his character and manner must have produced a most profound impression upon those who came in contact with him and heard his teaching. At the close of the Sermon on the Mount the evangelist Matthew makes a very significant remark. He says: "The people were astonished at his doctrine; for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Now the scribes were really clothed with ecclesiastical authority as teachers, they sat in Moses' seat and taught the people the law, and yet the people readily detected the difference between the formal and technical authority exercised by them as they taught from their high seats in the synagogue, and the real divine authority of Jesus as he sat upon the mountain side under the open canopy of heaven and taught them all the words of this life. Theirs was the authority of law, his was the authority of character.

Any Christian, not merely those who hold office in the church—any Christian may and should possess this wonderful authority of character. If you live near to God you walk among men clothed in the royal robes of a king. They recognize your right to speak upon high moral themes and they recognize your example as commanding imitation. In the good man you have the law of God incarnated, the law which there as elsewhere demands obedience.

Observe then when we take a moment's survey of the whole subject what a tremendous force Christian character is in the dissemination of the truth among men, in the defense of it against the attacks of criticism and unbelief, and in the order of discipline in the church! It is the most effective sermon either for the confirmation and comfort of believers or for the conversion of sinners; it is the most unanswerable argument in support of "the faith once delivered to the saints." And it is the most highly respected and irresistible form in which authority can manifest itself. Of all the possessions that be within the reach of human possibility in this life there is nothing to be compared to the value and power of Christian character.