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“And how can they hear without a preacher?”—ST. PAUL.

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THE RELIGION OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS A CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE.

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TEXT.—“If any man will do His will he shall know of the doctrine.”—John vii: 17.

A WEEK ago we occupied ourselves with the matter of personal surrender considered as means of entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Before going on from that point over the wider ground onto which this morning's text introduces us, I mention a little incident just come to me, that illustrates in so quiet and pleasant a way the truth which I urged last Sunday that I would like to spend a moment with it. I illustrated the matter of surrender by reference to the case of a man thirty-five or forty years of age, who was a member of my parish in the country, and who without a great deal of theology, with no love to God, and without much in the way of good works that he cared to boast of, saw clearly and felt keenly that the only step lying before him to be taken was to come exactly as he was, and in a manner of frank unreserve to submit himself to the entire known will of God, to do in all ways that which he felt it to be God's will to have him do, and become, as circumstances might suggest and divine power might enable, all which it might be God's will that he should become. The way was a narrow one, but its very narrowness made it distinct; and upon that narrow way he entered, and so laid the foundations of a strong and growing Christian life and mellowing experience. This, I said, was the case of a man thirty-five or forty years old. The incident which I referred to a moment ago as coming under my knowledge this past week was a similar one, only in this case the person in question was a boy of but fifteen

years. This, of course, will bring the matter a little closer to the younger members of our congregation. And the interest of some of you will be still further increased when I tell you that the boy is the son of the Mrs. Thompson, in Oregon, who, with only the encouragement of the ladies of this congregation to sustain her, inaugurated three years ago, and is now extending, a wonderful Christian Sunday school work through the hundred square miles of pure heathendom in the midst of which her home is. And let me still farther add that the little fellow whose experience I am going to refer to is the one whose letter to Mrs. Parkhurst was printed on one of our Sunday morning leaflets about a year ago. There was just enough misspelling in the letter to show that he had not yet been to school a great while, and all that intelligent and tender appreciation that marked him as a lad full of bright and sweet possibilities. I do not believe that I can do better now than to quote a few paragraphs from the letter which I have just received from his mother. Of course mothers always put the very best construction on what is done by their boys, yet even if in the present instance you discount considerably on the ground of maternal prejudice there will still be enough remaining, I think, to elicit your interested regard. She writes: “Last Sunday Roscoe (our fifteen year old boy), knelt at the altar in the little Methodist chapel in this place, and publicly consecrated his young life to the Master's service. It was a most impressive and solemn occas-

ion, and many who are considered as Gospel hardened were moved to tears as the boy stood there, erect and fearless, declaring his intention to follow in the steps of the Saviour and by God's grace to devote his entire life to His service. It was Roscoe's wish that he might make this public consecration. As he said, 'Mother, I want every one to know just how I stand, and then if they want to make fun of me or try any persecutions they can come right on. If I am going to follow Christ (and this is rather the most significant feature in the case, and my particular reason for referring to it), if I am going to follow Christ, I am going to follow Him all the way, and when I say follow, I mean keeping right on His steps wherever that may lead me.' "

It is that kind of crisis in a man's life or a boy's life that used to be called "experiencing religion." It is frequently remarked in our day that the new condition of things that prevails, and the wider and more intimate knowledge that is had of the meaning is no more intimate now than it was thirty or forty years ago, if as so much, and moreover that even if it were more intimate the amount of crisis would be the same that a man or boy would have to pass through when he left off serving himself and commenced with a whole heart to serve the Lord. By the expression, "experiencing religion," is not meant necessarily tears, remorse or any sort of ethical paroxysm. It means leaving off serving one master and beginning to serve a new Master, and when the one master means self and the new Master means the Lord, renouncing the first and espousing the second means a struggle, be it Roscoe Thompson, fifteen years old, or my old parishioner in the country, forty years old. If a person is old enough to have a will of his own, he does not make surrender of that will without realizing very definitely that something is taking place in him, although, of course, the older he is when it takes place the more wrenching will be the process and the more conscious he will be of the process.

Nor will the sharpness of the crisis

vary very materially with the amount of moral or even catechetical training to which one has been exposed. Both in the case of the man referred to a week ago, and in that of the boy related this morning, the influences that had operated, from infancy up, had been distinctly both moral and religious; but knowing is not doing, and however distinct the narrow path of surrender may have been made by all such moral and Scriptural teaching, yet making a path plain, and illuminating it all the way up and down with incandescent lights, does not take a man over the path nor make it any easier for him to take himself over. All of that was true of St. Paul to a startling degree. No man evidently had had a more thorough moral and Scriptural training than he, and, were we to follow the easy rambling gait that men commonly are taking upon these things we should have inferred from the carefulness with which in all his earlier years he had been Scripturally taught and disciplined that his entrance into the kingdom of heaven, when he came to it, would have been easy; that he would have slipped into it in a manner of unconsciousness, and that the severe crisis called "experiencing religion" was something that he would have been spared the inconvenience of. On the contrary, his conversion was an experience that knocked him all to pieces. Instead of being for the most part the same man that he was before, so that no one would have known that anything unusual had occurred unless he had told them or put on some sort of badge or other, he became a new man entirely with as much change in the temperature and products of his life as you would see change in the temperature and products of a continent in going from its northern latitudes down into the torrid zone. I need not amplify this. You know what kind of a man he had been before he surrendered and what kind of a man he was after, and that tremendous difference shows you something as to how much surrender means when it is a complete yielding that holds nothing in reserve. We are told of the early disciples made by our Lord on the shore of the Lake

of Gennesaret, that "they forsook all and followed him." They had at that date very little understanding of the Master, under whose leadership they put themselves, but the point that the reference emphasizes is, that when they attached themselves to Him there was a complete breaking away from such sovereignties as had previously governed them. "They forsook all and followed Him."

It was an experience then very sharp and convulsive. There was nothing about it that they were "imperfectly conscious" of. They always remembered when it occurred. That is one of the things that I like about some of the testimonies that I hear down at our Mission. No so great value attaches to what a man, supposed to be a new convert, says about himself the first week or month after what he calls his new life has begun in him. It may be hallucination, it may be mental intoxication that comes as reaction from another kind of intoxication that has been momentarily suspended. But when I hear down there a man who has been maintaining himself a score or even a dozen years, particularly when I know that during all that time without a break his life has been temperate and true, and that he has been a living embodiment of the power and grace of God, then when I hear him say that on such an evening, so many years, months and days ago he knelt down at one of the benches of our Mission or of some other Mission and gave himself wholly away, I feel myself carried back to the old days of Peter, Paul and the Publican, when discipleship meant turning one's back wholly on the sovereignty of the world and turning one's face wholly to the service of the Lord. And if we have any clear idea as to what discipleship means as it is exhibited and illustrated in the Gospel narratives I do not understand how any man or woman, older and younger, provided only the sovereignty of this world's lusts and ambitions has begun to assert itself over him, can conceive that any entrance into the kingdom of heaven is genuinely such that does not involve a sharp and probably a painful break-

ing free from the wordly dominion under which he had been previously held. I can have no purpose in making this thing appear harder than it is, but I am confident that the cause of Christ is suffering in the world because of a prevalent disposition to make entrance into Christ's service appear less and easier than it is.

It is a remarkable and suggestive fact that in all those periods of Christian history when the difficulties in the way of breaking with the requirements of government, as in the persecuting days of Nero, Domitian and Decius, have been greatest and most dangerous, just in those days the type of Christian loyalty has been most vigorous and productive. Under the conditions, such as then prevailed, it was likely to be more than a man's life was worth to range himself on the Lord's side, so that when he did so range himself it was, of course, the case that his break with the tyranny of the world and the flesh had been complete. In that the man became planted on new ground. In all his impulses and purposes he became a man distinct from the man he had been, and that very undividedness of heart made him glad to devote himself to the interests of the new cause, and because of his glad undividedness of heart made him able to promote those interests with large effect. That is why twelve men in the first century of Christianity were able to prepare the way for putting a Christian emperor on the throne of the Caesars at the beginning of the fourth century. Undividedness of heart is always the material of effect. A good deal of what is called genius is simply the power that comes with singleness of eye. If all or even a minority of those who are members of this Church had had the experience which Paul had of an absolute rejection of the world's authority and an absolute acceptance of the authority of Jesus Christ this one Church would be competent to shake the whole island and strike out lines of reverberation clear across the continent and around the world. I am not intending this as a rebuke to this Church, but it is a most important fact we have hold of

just now, and I am anxious that both those who call themselves Christians and those who do not should feel that fact in something of its reality and seriousness. I am on the distinct ground of Scripture here, and pursuing a line that is made luminous by 1,800 years of events. Conversion is a crisis, and the completeness of that crisis and the thoroughness with which it extends itself through the entire structure of a man's impulses, loyalties and purposes measures the value that attaches to any man's, conversion, and measures the value of the experience which the convert will attain, of the strength up into which he will grow and of the productiveness in which his life will issue. If I am laying what may appear to any an unusual and an undue emphasis on this matter of entrance into the kingdom of heaven and seem to be moving rather leisurely toward the consideration of pleasanter matters that lie farther along, I can only say that the security of every structure depends first of all upon the accuracy and solidity with which the stones are placed that lie at the bottom. A correct start is threequarters of the journey. A man cannot be a whole Christian until he has been a whole convert. In all things thoroughness is expensive, and yet in the end incompleteness costs still a good deal more. Playing at Christianity in the first steps means coquetting with it all the way through. Very few who ease the first strain by dividing the burden ever take up the balance of the load, or ever distinctly pass the threshold.

There is no such thing as safe construction till first there has been excavation down to the point of bed-rock. I would rather preach a sermon that would be the means of bringing one man or woman, boy or girl, to an attitude of complete submission to God than to preach a sermon that should be the means of bringing fifty people to an attitude of fractional submission. A whole thing is very different from four quarters put alongside of each other. The trouble with a man who only partly gives himself to the Lord is that the surrendered part keeps working upon

and coaxing back the part that is surrendered. If you have an apple with only the minutest speck of decay in it, that speck will spread till the whole apple is decayed. Decay spreads; soundness is not so likely to; when the Children of Isreal went into the Promised Land they were instructed to clean out the native population, man, woman and child. It was easier to make compromises with them than it was to exterminate them. Some of the heathen were allowed to stay. From the start, then, the nation became like a specked apple, and the speck spread till it was one solid mass of decay from core to skin. This is what we have just said about the individual, only on a large scale, a national scale. There is more danger in one unholy impulse cherished than there is security in one holy impulse cherished. In natures such as ours, at any rate, what is bad is more likely to spread than what is good is likely to spread. So that no convert can be counted as a permanency unless his conversion is entire, unless he not simply gives up this thing, that thing and the other thing to the Lord, but unless he gives up himself to the Lord, and that will carry everything with it.

This explains one peculiarity in our Lord's way of working while upon earth. He tried rather to see how few He could influence than how many, by which I mean that He shook off the crowds and picked for the individual. No man ever tried harder than He not to be popular. His ambition was not to mend a lot of people, but rather to spend His time in reconstructing a few. Revamping is a great deal easier and more popular than rebirth. A great many people come to church with the desire to be improved, but the number is much smaller of those who come to church in order to be made over and made new. The same tendency prevailed with the same energy in our Lord's time, and so he broke away from the throng and concentrated Himself upon a dozen. The stint He set for himself was to build up twelve apostles by first carrying down in them the process of excavation till a solid bot-

tom of entire surrender was reached, knowing that from such a bottom a building of personal fitness and power could be built up in each that would stand any storm of temptation or trial that a wicked world or cruel persecution could bring against it, and in eleven men out of the twelve he succeeded, and Christianity is a fact in the world to-day because 1,800 years ago Christ fastened himself upon a few, would not let go of that few for the sake of some glittering general effects upon the crowds around, and brought that few to the point of being absolutely emancipated from the dominion of the world and absolutely submitted to the mind and will of God.

It would certainly be pleasanter to preach a doctrine that is less exacting. It is delightful to say to people what they like to have said to them, and no man, if he be sincere, ever antagonizes the preferences of people or rebukes their superficialities without a deep sense of pain. But although, in a way, we like to have that said to us which drops into easy accord with our own likings, yet I know, and you know, that very often it is something quite different from that, really, that enters into the deep places of our souls and puts its strongest hold there. I might spend my half hour expatiating before you upon the native excellences of the human heart, its ingrained holiness, the confidence with which one can commit himself to the dominion of his own will and the congenial suggestions of his own tastes and tendencies and, you would, some of you, like it, but you wouldn't respect it. A man's own knowledge of himself gives the lie to a pulpit that com-

pliments the pew. We may in certain moods fret about the urgent things and the exacting things that are in the Gospel; but there is a truer sense in which we like them; we like them not because they are easy, but because they are hard, and because in being hard they touch us at the point where we keep our truest discernments and our profoundest appreciations. I am told that there are some who attend church here that are exceedingly worldly in their tastes and devotements and whose life is seemingly conducted in quite complete disregard of considerations that connect with religious obligations of the present or with the solemn contingencies of the great future; and yet, if we were to commence teaching from this pulpit that "religious obligations" are the conceit of diseased minds, and the "great future" an ogre invented to frighten superstitious souls into artificial propriety, these people that I have just mentioned would lose all interest in coming here. It is right to bend at the behest of the Lord God Almighty: it is hard, but it is right, and there is not a man, woman, boy or girl here but that knows it, and the impressiveness of the words I have spoken to you dates not from me but from the testimony of your own souls. We have said nothing yet about the quietness, confidence and power that have their sure root in the soul's surrender; that is a long, various and beautiful chapter, and we go no farther this morning than to close with the admonition of God's olden Word—"My son, give me thine heart."