

## Christian Liberty.

Sermon Preached Before the Baptist Convention of the Maritime Provinces, August 22nd, in the Main St. Baptist Church, St. John N. B.

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Text, Gal. 5: 1 and 13. "With freedom did Christ set us free; stand fast, therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage. . . . Only use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh."

The Christian is a freeman. He has escaped from a bondage most grievous into a liberty most blessed. Upon the pages of the New Testament this is an outstanding conception. Our Lord began His ministry appropriating the great words of the prophet, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach glad tidings to the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, the opening of the prison to them that are bound," all through His ministry He was the great Emancipator, declaring unto men "If the Son shall make you free ye shall be free indeed." Taking this conception from the lips of their Lord, the apostles one and all gave it currency. Of the apostles, however, it was Paul who elaborated the conception with greatest fulness and instructiveness. So exuberant do his thought and feeling become as he dilated, in the eighth chapter of Romans, on "the glorious liberty of the children of God" that he seems to hear the whole creation groaning and travelling in pain to be delivered from the bondage of corruption, and to share this liberty. This subject of Christian Liberty, considered from certain important points of view, is the theme of the epistle to the Galatians. In this brief letter we have what has justly been styled the Magna Charta of the New Testament. We cannot, this morning, traverse the whole epistle, but must be content to consider two or three salient points furnished us by the fifth chapter.

I. Perhaps it will be well, first of all, to see what *liberty is wherewith Christ makes His people free.* I need hardly say that it is a spiritual liberty, quite independent of outward circumstances. Paul in chains exulted in it, Nero, on his throne, the master of the world, with thirty legions at his back, was the veriest slave. There are people in this city of St. John who are in bondage to poverty, to sickness, to every untoward circumstance, who yet glory in this liberty of which the apostle speaks, and there are other people who have wealth, and health, and power to command every social and material comfort, who are "in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity." It is a spiritual liberty of which the apostle speaks.

If you ask me more particularly what this liberty is which Christ gives to his people—I answer, it is the liberty of pardon. No man can be accounted a freeman whose conscience locks him up in the fear of death and retribution. But Christ's people are freed from fear. His first great gift to them is pardon, the sense that through the merit of His own sacrifice their condemnation and punishment are passed away forever. It is the liberty of access to God. No man can be accounted free who, hearing of God, has no conscious way of access to Him, but carries about with him a haunting sense of estrangement and separation. But Christ dispels this sense of estrangement from the hearts of His people, and puts the sense of reconciliation through His blood, and puts the spirit of sons within them, whereby they cry in conscious acceptance and fellowship, "Abba, Father." It is the liberty of mastery over sin. No man can be accounted free who, being willing to do what is good, is unable to execute his purposes; who, seeing the right way, and rising up to pursue it, finds himself blindfolded, bound hand and foot, and taken captive by his lusts and passions. But to the believer in Jesus the promise is made that sin shall not have dominion over him, yea and to the believer in Jesus there comes the experience of new divine resources, giving him mastery over his sins, and enabling him to say with Paul "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

It is the liberty of loving service. No man can be accounted free who in his service toils that he may propitiate God, or win the favor of a task-master. Service under such a motive is slavery. But Christ's people serve, not in order that they may be loved, but because they are loved; not by the constraint of external commandments, but by the joyous impulse of a new life. It is the liberty of a blessed and eternal progression. No man can be accounted free who, feeling within him the instincts and aspirations of immortality, has no guarantees which reach beyond time. He is oppressed with the limitation of his prospects as compared with his capabilities. Like a caged bird, he feels the pressure of instincts which testify of infinite heights and distances, yet sees no open way beyond his prison bars. But the Christian has the guarantee of the life to come, as well as of that which now is. His future is a vista running

up to glory. Christ will never leave him. Death will be a little thing. The grave cannot hold him. Heaven will be an eternal progression of blessedness, and finally, this liberty of the gospel is a liberty of which men become possessed, not by any self-effort, or on the ground of the smallest vestige of human merit; it is the gift of God, solely through the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ, to as many as believe in His name.

And now, I ask, what do we know of this liberty of gospel? Are we bondsmen or are we freemen? I rejoice to think that so many of you are freemen in Christ Jesus. I rejoice to think that if any of you are bondsmen this may be the day of your deliverance through Jesus Christ. II. But having thus considered what Christian liberty is, I ask you now to pass with me to the consideration of another phase of our subject, a phase less inviting, but not less important, viz: *The abuse of Christian Liberty.*

Liberty always has its perils. There are perils in the liberty you give your infant in its first independent efforts to walk; but the risks must be taken. There are perils in the liberty you give your boy as he passes out from the parental roof into this world so full of incarnate diabolism, to shift for himself; but for the sake of his future manhood again the risks must be taken. It was a great day when the emancipation of the southern slaves was proclaimed; but in the case of many of them, so ignorant and corrupt were they, that liberty meant for them only license, and the first outcome of their emancipation was a deeper degradation than ever their slavery had induced. Yet no one argues that their emancipation was not a blessing. In the revolutionary war the United States delivered themselves from the yoke of England, and won the right to found a free republic. But the external freedom then won, enlarged the opportunity for internal license and anarchy, and the battle for internal freedom was never waged more hotly in that country than it is being waged to-day. Liberty has its perils. It is easily perverted and abused. Christian liberty is no exception. Let us face the situation with all frankness.

1. Throughout the Christian ages there has been a line of thought and contention, sometimes issuing from anti-Christian sources, sometimes from men claiming the Christian name, which has maintained that the doctrine of Christian liberty as set forth by Paul most inevitably lead to abuse, and the impairment of moral standards. The historian Froude, in one of his essays describes a revival meeting at which he heard a hymn, which he quotes as a sample and proof of the immorality of evangelicalism. The hymn is the familiar one beginning

"Nothing either great or small,  
Nothing, sinner, no;  
Jesus died and paid it all  
Long, long ago.  
Till to Jesus, work you cling,  
By a saving faith,  
Doing is a deadly thing;  
Doing ends in death."

Misinterpreted, as inculcating indifference to practical righteousness, the hymn is open to condemnation; rightly interpreted, it is a clear echo of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith and is a sincere and poignant putting of the fundamental truth of the gospel. Yet Froude quotes it to prove the immorality of evangelicalism! A little while ago the New York Nation, a most reputable and influential journal, discussing the many breaches of morality made by professing Christian men, affirmed its view that these results were "the product of three centuries of preaching a vicarious atonement, and a gratuitous salvation by faith alone."

This contention that salvation by faith in Christ alone, apart from the works of the law, inevitably tends to moral laxity and license, we deny with the utmost emphasis. Such a contention can only proceed from a purely theoretical and partial knowledge of the doctrine of salvation by faith as set forth in the New Testament. 2. But while we deny this contention, it must be admitted that the facts of life have often illustrated the shocking abuse of the doctrine of Christian freedom. This abuse showed itself very early. There occurs in the epistle of Jude the statement that in his day "Certain men had crept in privily, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness." What does this mean? It means that certain men had stealthily crept into the Christian community who said "Salvation is by grace, through faith. It is not of works. If we do well, we add nothing to that meritorious work which is the ground of our salvation. If we do ill, grace has provided for our forgiveness. Our doings, indeed, are a matter of indifference, to yield to natural impulse cannot be so serious a thing." And so, under cover of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ—under cover of the doctrine of Christian liberty, these men were practising and encouraging the grossest sensuality. But these men were not Christians at all—they were, as Jude says, "ungodly men," denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. They were hypocrites, who had put on the garb of evangelical zeal, that they might have a cloak for their foul doings. And this type have had its line of successors wherever the gospel of God's grace has been preached. This is the type which Burns caricatures with such withering scorn, and which Tennyson in his "Satanstoe" limbo with such a merciless hand.

3. But passing by the contention of the theoretical opposer of salvation by grace, and the grim abuse of the doctrine by the unquestioned hypocrite, what about the abuse of Christian liberty by those whom we must believe are true Christians—is this possible? What do you say?

I can imagine a man of high doctrine, as soon as this

question is opened, slamming it to with a bang, and saying, "No, he who abuses his Christian freedom thereby proves himself no Christian." But such a dismissal of the question ignores very serious facts. It is evident Paul saw the danger of the abuse of the liberty of the gospel by Christians, and was deeply solicitous at that very point. "For ye, brethren, were called for freedom, only use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh." Thus he exhorts the Galatians. In the epistle to the Romans, the 6th chap., he deals at length with the subject. You will recall in this connection also Peter's words: "For so is the will of God that with well doing ye should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men; as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness." I say the New Testament assumes that in the experience of true Christians there is danger of their perverting the doctrines of grace, and of finding under them cover and excuse for their shortcomings and sins.

And now I appeal to you, if your experience has not revealed this danger? You believe that you have been saved by the grace of God, through faith in Christ, apart from the works of the law. You rejoice in the freedom wherewith Christ has made you free. Standing in that freedom, there has been set before you a thousand times the life that should be its outcome. Your actual attainments have fallen far below it, and as you have realized this, the grace of God has repeatedly humbled you, and rekindled your aspirations after holiness and the will of God. But has that been the uniform experience of your Christian lives? Let us be honest with ourselves. Have we not sometimes been made to see the disparity between our actual lives and the life, that should be, and the vision has awakened but little concern? We have listened to the most cogent arguments, and the most impassioned appeals in behalf of loftier standards, in behalf of Christ's Kingdom and a perishing world, and, listening, we have compromised with our lusts, we have nursed our selfishness, we have indulged our indolence, we have persevered in our indifference, we have played fast and loose with holiness and duty. And how have we been able to do this, we freemen in Christ Jesus? Have we not sometimes done it by a subtle perversion of the grace of God? We have not acknowledged this perversion to ourselves, but working in our hearts has been the subtle thought, that since salvation is all of grace, and our souls are already in Christ, it could not be a matter of such paramount importance whether we did this or did that. We have perverted the grace of God, and used our liberty for an occasion of the flesh. Tell me if it is not so? Ah! we have done it, every one of us, our churches have done it. In some of our churches it is the chronic condition; witness, on the one hand, the smug claim to be the enfranchised sons of God, and, on the other, the covetousness, the worldliness, the uncharity, the scant and reluctant gifts to the Lord's work. Aye! Christian liberty may be abused. Its abuse, however, is a deadly sin, a frightful anomaly in Christian life.

III. And now, having said so much about the abuse of Christian liberty, I must not close without a brief discussion of another topic, viz: How the liberty we have in Christ may be safeguarded from abuse. This is a topic of the greatest practical importance. In speaking to it, I shall confine myself to such observations as the context immediately suggests.

1. The first observation I have to make is in the way of a warning. Let us never seek to avoid the abuse of Christian liberty by denying or obscuring the fact of liberty. It is the same Paul who has pointed out the possibility of abuse, who vehemently exhorts the Galatians, "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free, and be not entangled again with a yoke of bondage." It is a fundamental weakness of the so-called New Theology that, while it has done good service in reviving the interest in Christian ethics, it so temporizes with the doctrine of justification by faith, that it entangles men again in the yoke of legalistic bondage, and frustrates the holiest issues. Dr. Dale once said with much truth that the great secret of Mr. Spurgeon's power was that he was always fully conscious of his own full justification before God. He might have added that that is the secret of peace and power and progress in any life. The liberty of the justified is susceptible of abuse, but the abuse of all abuses would be to dilute or deny the reality of justification by faith alone. Oh, no! the safeguards from abuse are not to be found in denial, but in the appreciation of Christian truth in its breadth and fullness.

2. For example, taking Paul as our instructor, one important safeguard of Christian liberty, is the full recognition on the part of Christ's freemen, that they are under moral law. From the way Paul had handled the question of legalism in the earlier chapters it would have been easy for the Galatians to have drawn a too far reaching inference, and to have said, "We have nothing further to do with moral law." Any such possible mistake the apostle will forestall, and in the context he enunciates an all comprehensive law which is binding upon them in relation to their fellow-men, viz: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

In like manner it is of the first importance that all Christians should recognize the binding force which moral law has upon them. They are not under the Mosaic law in its ceremonial prescriptions; they are not under the Ten Commandments in the particular form in which they are embodied in the Mosaic code, for if so then the Seventh-day Baptists would be right; but Christians are amenable to those eternal principles of morality which underlie the Ten Commandments, and which are the expression of God's own moral nature. Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of practical and personal righteousness. Our Lord summarizes the law of righteousness for His followers in these words: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbour as thyself." He expounds and applies this law in the sermon on the Mount, and in the moral inculcations which form the staple of so much of His teaching. It was His unchanging purpose

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