

Maclaren on James 2

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FAITH WITHOUT WORKS

James 2:14-23.

JAMES thrice reiterates his point in this passage, and each repetition closes a branch of his argument. In verse 17 he draws the inference from his illustration of a worthy sympathy which does nothing; in verse 20 he deduces the same conclusion from the speech put into the mouth of an imaginary speaker; in verse 24 he draws it from the life of Abraham. We shall best get hold of the scope of these verse, by taking them three parts separately.

I. Now, most misconceptions of a writer's meaning are due to imperfect definition of terms.

James was no metaphysician, and he does not stop to put precisely what he means by 'faith.' Clearly he meant by it the full evangelical meaning of trust when he used it in the earlier part of the letter (James 1:3, 6; 2:1-5). As clearly he here means a mere intellectual belief of religious truth, a barren orthodoxy. If that undeniable explanation of his terminology is kept steadily in view, much of the difficulty which has been found in bringing his teaching into harmony with Paul's melts away at once. There is a distinct difference of tone and point of view between the two, but they entirely agree in the worthlessness of such a 'faith,' if faith it can be called. Probably Paul would not have called it so, but James accepts the 'saying' of the man whom he is confuting, and consents to call his purely intellectual-belief faith. And then he crushes it to atoms as hollow and worthless, in which process Paul would gladly have lent a hand.

We may observe that verse 14 begins with supposing the case of a mere lip 'faith,' while verse 17 widens its conclusion to include not only that, but any 'faith,' however real, which does not lead to works. The logic of the passage would, perhaps, hang better together if verse 14 had run 'if a man have faith'; but there is keen irony as well as truth in the suggestion that a faith which has no deeds often has abundant talk. The people who least live their creeds are not seldom the people who shout loudest about them. The paralysis which affects the arms does not, in these cases, interfere with the tongue. James had seen plenty of that kind of faith, both among Pharisees and Jewish Christians, and he had a holy horror of loose tongues (James 3:2-12). That kind of faith is not extinct yet, and we need to urge James's question quite as much as he did: 'Can that faith save?' Observe the emphasis on 'that' which the Revised Version rightly gives.

The homely illustration of the very tender sympathy which gushes inwards, and does nothing to clothe naked backs or fill empty stomachs, perhaps has a sting in it, Possibly the very orthodox Jewish Christians with whom James is contending were less willing to help poor brethren than were the Gentile Christians.

But, in any case, there is no denying the force of the parallel. Sympathy, like every other emotion, is meant to influence action. If it does not, what is the use of it? What is the good of getting up fire in the furnace, and making a mighty roaring of steam, if it all escapes at the waste-pipe, and drives no wheels? And what is the good of a 'faith' which only rushes out at the escape-pipe of talk?

It is 'dead in itself.' Romans 2:17-29 shows Paul's way of putting the same truth. Emotion and beliefs which do not shape conduct are worthless. Faith, if it have not works, is dead.

II. The same conclusion is arrived at by another road in verses 18-20.

James introduces an imaginary speaker, who replies to the man who says that he has faith. This new interlocutor 'says' his say too. But he is not objecting, as has been sometimes thought, to James, but to the first speaker, and he is expressing James's own thought, which the Apostle does not utter in his own person, perhaps because he would avoid the appearance of boasting of his own deeds. To take this speaker as opposing James brings hopeless confusion, What does the new speaker say? He takes up the first one's assertion of having 'faith'; he will not say that he himself has it, but he challenges the other man to show his, if he can, by any other way than by exhibiting the fruits of faith, while he himself is prepared and content to be tested by the same test. That is to say, talk does not prove the possession of faith; the only possible demonstration that one has it is deeds, which are its fruits. If a man has (true) faith, it will mould his conduct. If he has nothing to produce but his bare assertion, then he cannot show it at all; and if no evidence of its existence is forthcoming, it does not exist.

Motion is the test of life. A 'faith' which does nothing, which moves no limb, is a corpse. On the other hand, if grapes grow ruddy and sweet in their clusters, there must be a vine on which they grow, though its stem and root may be unseen. 'What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh.' True faith will be fruitful. Is not this Paul's doctrine too? Does not he speak of 'faith that worketh by love?' Is it not his principle, too, that faith is the source of conduct, the active principle of the Christian life, and that if there are no results of it in the life, there is none of it in the heart?

But the second speaker has a sharp dart of irony in his quiver (verse 13). 'You plume yourself on your monotheistic creed, do you, and you think that that is enough to make you a child of God's? Well, that is good, as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. You have companions in it, for the demons believe it still more thoroughly than you do; and, what is more, it produces more effect on them than on you. You do nothing in consequence of your belief; they shudder, at any rate — a grim result, but one showing that their belief goes deeper than yours. The arrow gains in point and keenness if we observe that James quotes the very words which are contained in the great profession of monotheism which was recited morning and evening by every Jew (Deuteronomy 6:4, etc.). James seems, in verse 20, to speak again in his own name, and to reassert his main thought as enforced by this second argument.

III. He has been arguing from the very nature of faith, and the relation between it and conduct.

Now he turns to history and appeals to Abraham's case. In these verses he goes over the same ground as Paul does in Romans 5., and there is a distinct verbal contradiction between verse 24 here and Romans 3:28; but it is only verbal. Are the two apostles writing in ignorance of each other's words, or does the one refer to the other, and, if so, which is the earlier? These are interesting questions, to deal with which satisfactorily would more than exhaust our space.

No doubt the case of Abraham was a commonplace in rabbinical teaching, and both Paul and James had been accustomed to hear his history commented upon and tortured in all sorts of connections. The mere reference to the patriarch is no proof of either writer having known of the other; but the manner of it raises a presumption in that direction, and if either is referring to the other, it is easier to understand Paul if he is alluding to James, than James as alluding to Paul.

Their apparent disagreement is only apparent. For what are the 'works' to which James ascribes justifying power? Verse 22 distinctly answers the question. They are acts which spring from faith, and which in turn, as being its fruits, 'perfect' it, as a tree is perfect when it has manifested its maturity by bearing. Surely Paul's doctrine is absolutely identical with this. He too held that, on the one hand, faith creates work, and on the other, works perfect faith. The works which Paul declares are valueless, and which he calls 'the works of the law,' are not those which James asserts 'justify.' The faith which James brands as worthless is not that which Paul proclaims as the condition of justifying; the one is a mere assent to a creed, the other is a living trust in a living Person.

James points to the sacrifice of Isaac as 'justifying' Abraham, and has in mind the divine eulogium, 'Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me,' but he distinctly traces that transcendent act of an unquestioning devotion to the 'faith' which wrought with it, and was perfected by it. He quotes the earlier divine declaration (Genesis 15:6) as 'fulfilled' at that later time, By which very expression is implied, not only that the root of the sacrifice was faith, but that the words were true in a yet higher sense and completer degree, when that sacrifice had 'perfected' the patriarch's faith.

The ultimate conclusion in verse 24 has to be read in the light of these considerations, and then it appears plainly that there is no contradiction in fact between the two apostles. 'The argument... has no bearing on St. Paul's doctrine, its purport being, in the words of John Bunyan, to insist that "at the day of doom men shall be judged according to their fruit." It will not be said then, Did you believe? but, Were you doers or talkers only?' (Mayor, Epistle of St.. James, LXXXVIII).

No doubt, the two men look at the truth from a somewhat different standpoint. The one is intensely practical, the other goes deeper. The one fixes his eye on the fruits, the other digs down to the root. To the one the flow of the river is the more prominent; to the

other, the fountain from which it rises, But they supplement, and do not contradict, each other. A shrewd old Scotsman once criticised an elaborate 'Harmony' of the Gospels, by the remark that the author had 'spent a heap of pains in making four men agree that had never cast [fallen] out.' We may say the same of many laborious reconciliations of James, the urgent preacher of Christian righteousness, and Paul, the earnest proclaimer that 'a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.'

GOD'S FRIENDS

He was called the Friend of God. — James 2:23.

When and by whom was he so called? There are two passages in the Old Testament in which an analogous designation is applied to the patriarch, but probably the name was one in current use amongst the people, and expressed in a summary fashion the impression that had been made by the history of Abraham's life. A sweet fate to have that as the brief record of a character, and to be known throughout the ages by such an epitaph. As many of us are aware, this name, 'the Friend,' has displaced the proper name, Abraham, on the Lips of all Mohammedan people to this day; and the city of Hebron, where his corpse lies, is commonly known simply as 'the Friend.'

'My object in this sermon is a very simple one. I merely wish to bring out two or three of the salient elements and characteristics of friendship as exercised on the human level, and to use these as a standard and test of our religion and relation to God.

But I may just notice, for a moment, how beautiful and blessed a thought it is which underlies this and similar representations of Scripture — viz., that the bond which unites us to God is the very same as that which most sweetly and strongly ties men to one another, and that, after all, religion is nothing more or less than the transference to Him of the emotions which make all the sweetness of human life and society.

Now, I shall try to bring out two or three points which are included in that name, 'the Friend of God,' and to ask ourselves if they apply to our relations to Him.

I. First, friends trust and love one another.

Mutual confidence is the mortar which binds the stones in society together, into a building. It makes the difference between the herding together of beasts and the association of men. No community could keep together for an hour without mutual confidence, even in regard of the least intimate relationships of life. But it is the very life-blood of friendship. You cannot say, 'A.B. is my friend, but I do not trust him.' If suspicion creeps in, like the foul malaria of tropical swamps, it kills all friendship. Therefore 'he was called the Friend of God' is by James deduced from the fact that 'he believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness.' You cannot make a friend of a man that you do not know where to have. There may be some vague reverence of, or abject reluctant submission to, 'the unknown God,' the something outside of ourselves that perhaps makes for righteousness; but for any vivid, warm throb of friendship there must be, first, a clear knowledge, and then a living grappling of that knowledge to my very heart, by my faith. Unless I trust God I cannot be a friend of God's. If you and I are His friends we trust Him, and He will trust us. For this friendship is not one-sided, and the name, though it may be ambiguous as to whether it means one whom I love or one who loves me, really includes both persons to the compact; and there are analogous, if not identical, emotions in each. So that, if I trust God, I may be sure that God trusts me, and, in His confidence, leaves a great deal to me; and so ennobles and glorifies me by His reliance upon me.

But whilst we know that this belief in God was the very nerve and centre of Abraham's whole character, and was the reason why he was called the friend of God, we must also remember that, as James insists upon here, it was no mere idle assent, no mere intellectual conviction that God could not tell lies, which was dignified by the name of belief, but that it was, as James insists upon in the context, a trust which proved itself to be valid, because it was continually operative in the life. 'Faith without works is dead.' 'And Abraham, our father, was he not justified by works?'

And so the Epistle to the Hebrews, if you will remember, traces up to his faith all the chief points in his life. 'By faith he went out from the land where he dwelt; by faith he dwelt in tabernacles,' in the promised land, believing that it should be his and his seed's; 'by faith' he offered up his son on the altar.

Thus we come to this, that the heavenly and the earthly friend, like friends on the low levels of humanity, love each other because they trust each other, I have said that the words 'My friend' may either mean one whom I love or one who loves me, but that the two things are in the present connection inseparable. Only let us remember where the sweet reciprocation and interchange of love begins. 'We love Him because He first loved us.' 'When we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.' And so we have to turn to that heavenly Friend, and feel that as life itself, so the love which is the life of life, has its beginning in Him, and that never would our hearts have turned themselves from their alienation, unless there had poured down upon them the attractive outflow of His great love. It was an old fancy that, wherever a tree was struck by lightning, all its tremulous foliage turned in the direction from which the bolt had come. When the merciful flash of God's great love strikes a heart, then all its tendrils turn to the

source of the life-giving light, and we love back again, in sweet reverberation to the primal and original love. Dear brethren, I lay upon your heart and mine this thought, that friends trust and love each other. Do we trust and love our God?

II. Friends have frank, familiar intercourse with one another.

Let us turn to the illuminative example in our text, and remember God's frankness with Abraham. 'Shall I hide from Abraham the thing that I will do?' Let us cap that—as we can, marvellous and great as the utterance is — by another one, 'I call you not servants, but friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I declare unto you.' So much for God's frankness. What about Abraham's frankness with God? Remember how he remonstrated with Him; how he complained to Him of His dealings; how he persisted with importunity, which would have been presumptuous but for the friendship which underlay it, and warranted the bold words. And let us take the simple lesson that if we are friends and lovers of God, we shall delight in intercourse with Him. It is a strange kind of religion that does not care to be with God, that would rather think about anything else than about Him, that is all unused to quiet, solitary conversation and communion with Him, but it is the religion of, I wonder, how many of us to-day. He would be a strange friend that never crossed your threshold if you could help it; that was evidently uncomfortable in your presence, and ill at ease till he got away from you, and that when he came was struck dumb, and had not a word to say for himself, and did not know or feel that he and you had any interests or subjects in common. Is that not a good deal like the religion of hosts of professing Christians? 'He was called the friend of God,' and he never, all his days, if he could help it, thought about Him or went near Him!

If we are friends of God, we shall have no secrets from Him. There are very few of those who are dearest to us to whom we could venture to lay bare all the depths of our hearts. There are black things down in the cellars that we do not like to show to any of our friends. We receive them upstairs, in the rooms for company. But you should take God all through

the house. And if there is the trust and the love that I have been speaking about, we shall not be afraid to spread out all our foulness, and our meanness, and our unworthy thoughts of, and acts towards, Him, before His 'pure eyes and perfect judgment,' and say, 'Nobody but my best friend could look at such a dunghheap, but I spread it before Thee. Look at it, and Thou wilt cleanse it; look at it, and it will melt away. Look at it, and in the knowledge that Thou knowest, my knowledge of it will be less of a torment, and my bosom will be cleansed of its perilous stuff.'

Tell God all, if you mean to be a friend of His. And do not be afraid to tell Him your harsh thoughts of Him, and your complaints of Him. He never resents anything that a man who loves Him says about Him, if he says it to Him. What He resents — if I might use the word — is our huddling up grudges and murmurings and questionings in our own hearts, and saying never a word to the friend against whom they offend. Out with it all, brethren! Complaints, regrets, questionings, petitions, hot wishes, take them all to Him; and be sure that instead of their breaking, they will, if spoken, cement the friendship which is disturbed by secrecy on our parts.

If we are God's lovers, He will have no secrets from us. 'The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will show them His covenant.' There is a strange wisdom and insight, sometimes amounting even to prophetic anticipation, which creeps into a simple heart that is knit closely to God. But whether the result of our friendship with Him be such communication of such kinds of insight or no, we may be sure of this, that, if we trust Him, and love Him, and are frank with Him, He will in so far be frank with us, that He will impart unto us Himself, and in the knowledge of His love we shall find all the knowledge that we need.

III. Friends delight to meet each other's wishes.

Let us go back to our story again. The humble, earthly friend of God did as God bade him, substantially all his life, from the day when he made the 'Great Refusal,' and left behind him home and kindred and all, until the day when he went up the sides of Moriah to offer there his son. Abraham met God's wishes because Abraham trusted and loved God.

And what about the Divine Friend? Did He not meet Abraham's wishes? You remember that wonderful scene, which presents, in such vivid and dramatic form, the everlasting truth that the man who bows his will to God, bows God's will to his, when he pleaded for Sodom, and won his case by persistence and importunity of lowly prayer. And these historical notices on both sides are for us the vehicles of the permanent truth that, if we are God's lovers and friends, we shall find nothing sweeter than bowing to His will and executing His commandments. As I dare say I have often said to you, the very mark and signature of love is that it delights to divine and fulfil the desires of the beloved, and that it moulds the will of each of the parties into conformity with the will of the other.

Ah, dear brethren I what a commentary our religion is. upon such thoughts! To how many of us is the very notion of religion that of a prohibition of things that we would much like to do, and of commands to do things that we had much rather not do? All the slavery of abject submission, of reluctant service, is clean swept away, when we understand that friendship and love find their supreme delight in discovering and in executing the will of the beloved. And surely if you and I are the friends of God, the cold words, 'duty,' 'must,' 'should,' will be struck out of our vocabulary and will be replaced by 'delight,' 'cannot but,' 'will.' For friends find the very life — I was going to say the voice-of their friendship in mutual obedience.

And God, the heavenly Friend, will do what we wish. In that very connection did Jesus Christ put the two thoughts of friendship with

Him and His executing His disciple's behests; saying in one breath, 'Ye are My friends if ye do whatsoever I command you,' and in the next, 'Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.' This conformity of will, so that there is but one will in, the two hearts, which is the very consummation and superlative degree of human friendship and love, applies as truly to the friendship between man and God.

IV. Friends give gifts to each other.

Let us go back to our story. What did Abraham give God? 'Forasmuch as he hath not withheld his only son from Me, I know that he fears Me.' And what does God give to His friends? 'He that spared not His own Son, but freely delivered Him up to the death for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?' Abraham's gift of his son to God was but a feeble shadow of God's gift of His Son to men. And if the surrender on the part of the human friend was the infallible token of his love, surely the surrender on the part of the heavenly Friend is no less the infallible sign of His love to all the world. Generalise these thoughts and they come to this.

If we are God's lovers God will give us Himself, in so far as we can receive Him; and all other gifts in so far as they are good and needful. If we are God's friends and lovers we shall give Him, in glad surrender, our whole selves. And, remember, if you feel that you have separate interests from Him, if you keep things and do not let Him say, 'These are mine'; if you grudge sacrifice, and will not hear of self-surrender, and are living lives centred in, ruled by, devoted to, self, you have little reason to call yourself a Christian. 'Ye are My friends if ye' — not only 'do whatsoever I command you,' but 'if you give yourself to Me.' Yield yourselves to God, and in the giving of yourselves to Him, you will get back yourselves glorified and blessed by the gift. There is no friendship if self shuts out the friend from participation in what is the other's. As long as 'mine' lies on this side of a high wall, and 'thine' on the other, there is but little friendship. Down with the wall, and say about everything 'Ours'; and then you have a right to say 'I am the friend of God.'

V. Lastly, and but a word. Friends stand up for each other.

'I am thy shield; fear not, Abraham,' said God, when His friend was in danger from the vengeance of the Eastern kings whom he had defeated; and all through life the same strong arm was cast around him. Abraham, on his part, had to stand up for God amidst his heathen neighbours.

If we are God's 'friends and lovers He will take up our cause. Be sure that if God be for us, it matters not who is against us. If we are God's friends and lovers we have to take up His cause. What would you think of a man who, in going away to a far-off country, said to some friend, 'I wish you would look after so and so for me as long as I am gone'; and the friend would say 'Yes!' and never give a thought nor lift a finger to discharge the obligation? God trusts His reputation to you Christian people; He has interests in this world that you have to look after. You have to defend Him as really as He has to defend you. And it is the dreadful contradiction of religious people's profession of religion that they often care so little, and do so little to promote the cause, to defend the name, to adorn the reputation, and to further what I may venture to call the interests, of their heavenly Friend in the world.

Dear brother, looking at these things, can you venture to say that you are a friend of God? If you cannot, what are you? Our relations to men admit of our dividing them into three — friends, enemies, nothings. We may love, we may hate, we may be absolutely indifferent and ignorant. I am afraid the

three states cannot be transferred exactly to our relations to God. If not His friend, what are you? Have you only a far-off, bowing acquaintance with Him? Well, then, that is because you have neglected, if you have not spurned, His offered friendship. And, oh! how much you have lost! No human heart is a millionth part so sweet, and so capable of satisfying you as God's. All friendship here has its limits, its changes, its end. God's is boundless, immutable, eternal All things are the friends of God's friend; and all things are arrayed against him who rejects God's friendship.

I beseech you, let Him woo you to love Him; and yield your hearts to Him. 'If when we were "enemies," we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son,' much more, being friends, all the fulness of His love and the sweetness of His heart will be poured upon us through the living Christ.

A WATCH ON THE DOOR OF THE LIPS

James 3:1-15

'THERE is a recurrence to earlier teaching in James 1:19, 26, which latter verse suggests the figure of the bridle. James has drunk deep into Old Testament teaching as to the solemn worth of speech, and into Christ's declaration that by their words men will be justified or condemned.

No doubt, Eastern peoples are looser tongued than we Westerns are; but modern life, with its great development of cities and its swarm of newspapers and the like, has heightened the power of spoken and printed words, and made James's exhortations even

more necessary. His teaching here gathers round several images- the bridle, the fire, the untamed creature, the double fountain. We deal with these in order.

I. No doubt, in the infant Church, with its flexible organisation, there were often scenes very strange to our eyes, such as Paul hints at in 1 Corinthians 14:26-33, where many voices of would-be teachers contended for a hearing. James would check that unwholesome eagerness by the thought that teachers who do not practice what they preach will receive a heavier judgment than those who did not set up to be instructors. He humbly classes himself with the teachers. The 'for' of verse 2 introduces a reason for the advice in verse 1 — since it is hard to avoid falls, and harder in respect to speech than action, it is a dangerous ambition to be a teacher.

That thought leads on to the series of considerations as to the government of the tongue. He who can completely keep it under command is a 'perfect' man, because the difficulty of doing so is so great that the attainment of it is a test of perfection. James is like the Hebrew prophets, in that he does not so much argue as illustrate. His natural speech is imagery, and here he pours out a stream of it. The horse's bridle and the ship's rudder may be taken together as both illustrating the two points that the tongue guides the body, and that it is intended that the man should guide the tongue. These two ideas are fused together here. The bridle is put into the mouth, and what acts on the mouth influences the direction of the horse's course. The rudder is but a little bit of wood, hut its motion turns the great ship, even when driven by wild winds. 'So the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things,' which boasting is not false, for the whole point of the passage is that that little member has large power.

Is it true, as James says, that it governs our actions as the bridle does the horse, Or the rudder the ship? No doubt, many sins go straight from the inner chambers of the heart's desires out into the world of action without going round by the way of speech; but still, if we think of the immense power of our own words and of others in setting our activities in motion, of the dreadful harvest of sin which has of ten sprung from one tempting word, of the ineffaceable traces of pollution which some vile book leaves in memory and heart, of the good and evil which have been wrought by spoken or printed words, and that never more truly than to-day, when a flood of talk all but drowns the world, we shall not think James exaggerating in the awful weight he gives to speech as the mother of action.

His other point is that this guiding power needs guidance. A firm yet gentle hand touches the rein, and the sensitive mouth yields to the light pressure. The steerman's hand pushes or draws the tiller an inch from or towards him, and the huge vessel yaws accordingly. Speech is often loose. Most men set less careful watch on the door of their lips than of their actions; but it would be wiser to watch the inner gate, which leads from thought to speech, than the outer one, which leads from speech to act. Idle words, rash words, unconsidered words, free-flowing words, make up much of our conversation. 'His tongue ran away with him' is too often true. It is hard but possible, and it is needful, to guide the helm, to keep a tight hand on the reins.

II. The next figure is that of the fire, suggested by the illustration of the small spark which sets a great forest ablaze. Drop a match or a spark from a locomotive or a pipe in the prairie grass, and we know what comes. The illustration was begun to carry on the contrast between the small member and its great results; but James catches fire, and goes off after the new suggestion, 'The tongue is a fire.'

Our space forbids discussing the interpretation of the difficult verse 6, but the general bearing of it is clean It reiterates under a fresh figure the thought of the preceding verses as to the power of the tongue to set the whole body in motion. Only the imagery is more lurid, and suggests more fatal issues from an unhallowed tongue's influence. It 'defileth the whole body.' Foul speech, heard in schools or places of business, read in filthy books, heard in theatres, has polluted many a young life, and kindled fires which have destroyed a man, body and soul. Speech is like the axle which, when it gets heated, sets the wheel on fire. And what comes of the train then? And what set the axle ablaze? The sulphurous flames from the pit of Gehenna. No man who knows life, especially among young boys and young men, will think that James has lost the government of his tongue in speaking thus.

III. Next comes the figure of the untamable wild beast.

e need not pin James down to literal accuracy any more than to scientific classification in his zoology. His general statement is true enough for his purpose, for man has long ago tamed, and still continues to use as tamed, a crowd of animals of most diverse sorts, fierce and meek, noxious and harmless.

But, says James, in apparent contradiction to himself, there is one creature that resists all such efforts. Then what .is the sense of your solemn exhortations, James, if 'the tongue can no man tame'? In that case he who is able to bridle it must be more than a perfect man. Yes, James believed that, though he says little about it. He would have us put emphasis on 'no man.' Man's impossibilities are Christ's actualities. So we have here to fall back on James's earlier word, 'If any of you lack,... let him ask of God, ... and it shall be given him.' The position of 'man' in the Greek is emphatic, and suggests that the thought of divine help is present to the Apostle.

He adds a characterisation of the tongue, which fits in with his image of an untamable brute: 'It is a restless evil,' like some caged

but unsubdued wild animal, ever pacing uneasily up and down its den; 'full of deadly poison,' like some captured rattlesnake. The venom spurted out by a calumnious tongue is more deadly than any snake poison. Blasphemous words, or obscene words, shot into the blood by one swift dart of the fangs, may corrupt its whole current, and there is no Pasteur to expel the virus.

IV. The last image, that of the fountain, is adduced to illustrate the strange inconsistencies of men, as manifested in their speech. Words of prayer and words of cursing come from the same lips. No doubt these hot tempered, and sometimes ferociously religious, Jewish Christians, to whom James speaks, had some among them whose portraits James is drawing here. 'Away with such a fellow from the earth!' is a strange sequel to 'Blessed be he, the God of our fathers.' But the combination has often been heard since. To Deums and anathemas have succeeded one another in strange union, and religious controversy has not always been conducted with perfect regard to James's precepts.

Of course when the Apostle gibbets the grotesque inconsistency of such a union, he is not to be taken as allowing cursing, if it only keeps clear of 'blessing God.' Since the latter is the primary duty of all, and the highest exercise of the great gift of speech, anything inconsistent with it is absolutely forbidden, and to show the inconsistency is to condemn the act.

Further, the assertion that 'salt water cannot yield sweet' implies that the 'cursing' destroys the reality of the verbal 'blessing God.' If a man says both, the imprecation is his genuine voice, and the other is mere wind.

The fountain is deeper than the tongue. From the heart are the issues of life. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh, and clear, pure waters will not well out thence unless the heart has been cleansed by Christ entering into it. Only when that tree of life is cast into the waters are they made sweet. When Christ governs us, we can govern our hearts and our lips, and through these our whole bodies and all their activities.

James 3:12 Figs and Olive Berries by C H Spurgeon

James 3:12 Figs and Olive Berries

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"Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries" — James 3:12.

There is only one answer to the question; of course, the fig tree can do nothing of the kind. It would be quite contrary to its nature, and hence the apostle argues that Christians ought, to act according to their nature. If we are indeed the children of God, we should act as his children, and always act as his children. We are not consistent if at one time we speak as heirs of heaven should speak, and at another time speak as the heirs of wrath speak. James truly tells us that a fountain cannot, at the same time pour forth sweet water and bitter, salt water and fresh; and be therefore rightly argues that from the same mouth there must not proceed blessing and cursing, there must be consistency of conduct in those who are the Lord's.

I am going, in the first place, to take the question of our text out of its literal connection; and in the second place to come closer to it; and perhaps in the third place to come closer still.

I. So, first, "can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?" No; and It Is Very Undesirable That It Should; there is no need for it to do so, and there would be no gain if it should do so.

I am, of course, taking the question altogether apart from its connection.

A fig tree is better employed in bearing figs than it would be in bearing olives. The olive tree is meant to bear olives, and the fig tree to bear figs, and it, would not be any advantage if it were to leave off bearing figs, and begin bearing olives, or if it alternately bore figs and olives.

Now, beloved friends, all of us that are as trees of the Lord's right-hand planting are bringing forth fruit, to his praise and glory. If we are carrying out his great purpose concerning us, we are producing the peaceable fruits of righteousness, the fruit of the Spirit, fruit, unto holiness; but, this fruit does not always take the same shape in every one of us. We cannot all do the same work; and even

when our work is similar, we have various ways of doing it. I cannot do your work, my brother or sister, and you cannot do mine, and the two of us together cannot do a third person's work. There is a certain tree that produces a particular kind of fruit, and a certain plant on which a special sort of seed is found; but no tree produces all kinds of fruit, and no plant bears all sorts of seeds. So is it in the Church of God; all true believers are members of the mystical body of Christ, but all the members have not the same office. It would be very foolish if any one member of the body were to attempt to perform the work of all the organs of the body; or, indeed, of any one beside its own. The best thing is for the eye to see, and let the ear to the hearing; for the ear to hear, and let, the mouth do the speaking; for the feet to carry the body wherever the brain directs, and for the hands to perform their own special handicraft, and not to usurp the office of the organs of locomotion.

But why is it that the fig tree cannot bear olive berries, and that one Christian cannot do all kinds of work? I answer, first, because the variety is itself charming. If anybody had the power to destroy all the fruit trees in the world, and then to make a tree, that would bear all the fruits at once, what a pity it would be! It is much better to have three trees to bear figs, olives, and grapes than to have one tree bearing figs on one bough, olives on another, and grapes on a third. It might seem a fine thing to have Christians who could do everything, — men who could preach and pray and sing, who could be entrusted with great wealth and great talents, who could lead the Church and who could at the same time control the world, but that is not. God's plan for any of his children. There is a beautiful variety in the Church of God; one exercises this gift, and another exercises that; one is entrusted with one form of grace, and another is entrusted with equal grace but in quite a different form. It would be no improvement if all flowers were of one color, or if all precious stones were of equal brilliance or if all stars gave exactly the same amount of light. Variety is a great part of beauty, and God delights to have it so.

We have here, in the next place, a display of divine sovereignty. It is God's will that makes yon bird that looks the sun in the face into an eagle, and that other that sits moodily on the ivy-mantled tower into an owl. It is he who makes one of his creatures into an archangel and another into an aphid crawling on a rose-leaf. None may ask him why he acts thus, for he has the right to do as he pleases; and, as Elihu said to Job, "He giveth not account of any of his matters;" or, as Paul put it to the Romans, "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor? It is quite certain that there are great differences among men; in the very size and shape of our bodies, and in the natural conformation of our minds, we are not all alike; let us say what we may, there are differences of capacity which are with us from our birth, even as God intended that there should be. He is in this matter, as in everything else, both Lord and King; so what folly and sin it is for us to quarrel with him, about our condition, or to attempt to arraign him before our judgment seat! If God makes some other brother to be like the fruitful tree that bears olive berries, shall I be jealous of him if my fruit is of another kind? Shall I not rather be thankful to resemble the tree that bears figs? And if we two see another brother whose fruit is like the grapes of Eshcol, shall we envy him because we cannot bring forth such welcome clusters? Oh, no but let us all three bless the Lord for the sweetness of the figs, the fatness of the olives, and the lusciousness of the grapes that he enables us severally to produce to his praise and glory.

Further, these diversities of gifts should excite in us humility. What if the olive does bear its rich purple berries? It cannot bear sweet figs; and sweet as the figs are, they cannot supply the oil which gives a relish to the peasants bread, feeds the lamp which lights his cottage in the evening hours, and furnishes the medicine which heals him when he is sick or wounded. When the Lord entrusts thee with talents, my brother, thou art naturally inclined to be proud; but when thou hearest of another whom the Lord has honored far more, do not quarrel either with the Lord or with thy brother, but rejoice that there is someone whose Master thinks he may be trusted to a very high degree, and remember that the responsibilities of thine own position are quite sufficient for thee. I am often amazed at the stupidity of certain, Christians. They will not do what they can do, and they want to do what they cannot do. They are not satisfied with walking, so they take up David's cry, "Oh that I had wings like a dove!" The Lord knew that they would not make a proper use of wings so he did not give them any. No doubt they think, if they had wings, they would fly away, and be at rest; but I question whether they would be able to rest if they flew away from their right place and the work God has committed to their charge. Many a man is a first-rate Sunday school teacher; but that does not satisfy his ambition, he must be a preacher. When he gets into the pulpit, the only part of his discourse that is appreciated by his hearers is the end of it; yet, he says that he must preach. Many a good worker has been spoilt through imbibing the notion that he must do something for which God has not fitted him. There is a humbling truth, that we cannot do some things which others can do well, just as the fig tree cannot bear olive berries though the olive tree growing close beside it is laden with the precious oily berries.

This fact ought also to promote in us brotherly admiration. It is one of the most beautiful exhibitions of a Christian spirit when a Christian man admires the gifts and graces; of others more than he admires his own; when, instead of thinking of anything in which he excels others, he delights in those things in which they excel him. We ought to emulate the spirit, of that, noble Roman who, when he was beaten at an election, said he was glad that his country had so many better men than himself. It is not always easy to feel, "I am happy in knowing of a brother who is so much more brilliant than I am, for the world sadly needs far more light than I can give." It is not always easy to play the least important instrument in the band, and to rejoice that somebody else can beat the big drum, or blow the silver cornet; yet that ought to be our feeling. You remember how prettily Bunyan speaks of Christiana and Mercy admiring each other after they had been in the bath: They could not see that glory each one on herself which they could see in

each other. Now, therefore, they began to esteem each other better than themselves. 'For you are fairer than I am, said one; and you are more comely than I am,' said another." So should Christians see and admire the work of the Spirit in other Christians, and should bless God that there are such gracious men and women in the world; while those who are thus admired should, in their turn, see greater excellence in others than they see in themselves.

And once more, this variety of gifts and graces helps to foster fellowship. I often feel, when I am conversing with some of the poorest and feeblest members of this church, that, I am greatly profited by what they say to me. They usually speak very kindly concerning the comfort they receive from my preaching, and my advice I am able to give them, when they come to see me; but I am certain that I derive benefit from them. It is impossible for two Christian men or women who are in a right state of heart, to converse with one another about the things of God without both of them being thereby spiritually enriched. As different countries have different products, and one nation sends its produce to supply the needs of another nation, and thus, by mutual exchange, commerce is created and each nation's wealth is increased, so is it in spiritual things. You with your olive berries, and this brother with his figs, and that other brother with his clusters of grapes will interchange your various fruits, and all of you will benefit by the transaction. It is a great blessing for a bold and confident believer to have a talk with a trembling, desponding Christian, and the poor timid soul will be strengthened by coming into contact with the more fully-established saint. The man who has a very sweet disposition is apt to develop a sugariness which is most nauseating, so it will do him good to meet with a Christian who is very straightforward and outspoken; while that brother, by associating with the more gentle spirit, may be kept from becoming too rough and coarse. I need not multiply instances of this helpful fellowship beyond just reminding you of how often, in God's mercy, a Christian husband and wife are the counterpart and complement of one another, so that what is lacking in one of them is supplied by the other, and vice versa; and thus they both become the better, the holier, the happier, and the more useful in the service of their Lord.

II. Now, in the second place, I am going to take the text more nearly in the way in which it was used by the apostle. "Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?"

No; It Would Be Altogether Contrary To Its Nature.

It would be a monstrosity, a thing to be wondered at, and stared at as unnatural and absurd if a fig tree started bearing olive berries and it is just as unnatural for a Christian to live in sin. Can he so live as to bear the fruits of iniquity instead of the fruits of righteousness? God forbid that it should be so! If the fig tree should ever bring forth olive berries, we might have good reason to question whether it was a fig tree, for a tree is known by its fruits; so, when one who professes to be a Christian lives as worldings live, there is grave reason to fear that he is a worldling notwithstanding his profession. If we are to know him by his fruits, which is our Lord's infallible test, how can we imagine that he is a partaker of the divine life when he acts as he does. Inconsistency of life casts a very serious doubt upon many who call themselves the children of God. No wonder they are themselves often the subjects of doubts and fears, as they ought to be; for, if they judge themselves by their fruits, they may well question whether they have ever been born again. Those who are new creatures in Christ Jesus seek to live as he lived so far as it is possible for them to do so.

Besides, if a man for a while brings forth the fruits of righteousness, and then bears the fruits of iniquity, he casts a slur upon all his former goodness. Suppose I saw a fig tree bearing olive berries, and its owner assured me that it bore figs last year, I should say, "Well, I should not think the figs were worth much to judge from the look of those olives." So, when a man is in a passion, and makes use, of very strong language, perhaps even cursing and swearing as Peter did, one naturally asks, "Can that man ever have been a Christian?" "Well," says someone who knows him, "he used to speak very kindly and lovingly, and seemed to be a sincere Christian." That may have been the case with him, but it is a poor sort of Christianity that can even occasionally produce such iniquity. May God save all of us from bearing two kinds of fruit in this unnatural and dishonoring fashion! Suppose the whole Church of God should act thus, and at one time be eminent for holiness and at another time be notorious for sin, what would be the consequence? Suppose, for instance, that certain people were very particular about their attendance at public worship, and yet were known to frequent the theater, would it not be a strange state of things? Should we judge them to be Christians or worldings? If a man is sometimes a sinner and sometimes a saint, we should need to have an almanack to tell us which he was likely to be, or a tide-table to let us know whether, like the tides of the sea, he was ebbing or flowing. Think, too, what the consequences would be to such a man if he were to die, or if the Lord were to come just when he was bearing the fruits of unrighteousness. I am only imagining, a monstrous case, such a case as must not be ours. O my dear friends, let it never be so with you, if God be God, serve him and follow him; or if the devil be God, serve him; but to try to serve God and the devil at the same time, is to attempt a compromise that God abhors, and which even Satan is not mean enough to approve. Even his disciples laugh to scorn those inconsistent professors who seek to serve God and mammon, and to walk at the same time in the narrow way that leadeth unto life and in the broad road that leads to destruction. The other day, I saw a man trying to walk on both sides of the street at once; of course, he was drunk; and whenever I see a man trying, spiritually, to do the same sort of thing, — attempting to serve God and to serve the devil too, — I know that he is intoxicated, or infatuated, under a fatal delusion, or he would never imagine that such a

combination could be possible. Oil and water will not mix, nor light and darkness, nor saintliness and worldliness; you must have one or the other, you cannot have both at once; so “choose ye this day whom ye will serve,” Christ or Belial, you cannot serve both, for “no servant can serve two masters.” The true Church of Christ is “fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners;” but an inconsistent church, a double-dealing church, a wordly church, (what an anomaly!) a church that holds with the hare and runs with the hounds, a church that makes a great profession but has little or nothing worth having in possession, such a church is the scorn of the world, a mere blown-up football for men and devils to kick wherever they will. An unholy man or woman who pretends to be a Christian, is a stench in the nostrils of the thrice-holy God, and a by-word and reproach among those who make no pretense of being the Lord’s. How can you rebuke sin in others while you are living in it yourself? How can you preach the Christ whom you dishonor in your daily life? How can you reprove worldliness when you are yourself worldly? We speak with contempt of Satan rebuking sin, and of the pot calling the kettle black, so, if in any degree any of us have been guilty of this great crime against, God, may we; now sincerely repent of our sin, and may the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit preserve us from such evil walking for all time to come!

III. Now, thirdly, — and this is the point upon which I want most strongly to insist, — It Is Impossible For A Fig Tree To Bear Olive Berries, and it is impossible for an unconverted man to produce the fruits of righteousness, that is a task which is altogether beyond his power.

The real text of this last division of my sermon is this, —

“Ye Must Be Born Again.”

Unless you are regenerated, born from above by a new and heavenly birth, you are not Christians, whatever you may be called, and you cannot, produce the fruit which is acceptable to God any more than a fig tree can produce olive berries.

Let us suppose that we are in the South of France, and that we are standing by a fine fig tree. We want to make it bring forth olives and we will, for the sake of my argument, imagine that it is quite willing to do so, how shall we go to work?

Well, first, let us label the fig tree “Olive.” Get a label, write the word “olive” on it, and hang it on the fig tree. We have done that, entered its name on the list of olive trees, and when the next olive season comes round, we will bring our basket, and gather the olives. At the appointed time, we do come, but what do we find? I cannot see an olive on the tree; there are fig leaves, and figs, but nothing else. Ah! but we called it an olive; yes, but calling it an olive did not change its nature, for it is a fig tree still; and calling a person a child of God will never make that person really to be a child of God. I remember reading of someone being taught to speak of “my baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven;” and if I recollect, rightly, that expression is often used by those who do not show any sign of having been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and adopted into the family of God. It is just a case of hanging a label on them; their nature remains the same as it was when they were born, and by nature they are children of wrath. Persons are said to be Christians because “they were born in a Christian country.” I have often heard and read that England is a Christian country, but I have never seen any evidence of the truth of that abatement, though there are some Christians in England, as there are some in India, China, Africa, and other countries which no one regards as Christian. Yet according to some people, all Englishman are Christians, though some of them never enter a place of worship, and others are drunk every night in the week, and many do not even believe in the existence of God. To call a horse an angel will not make him an angel, and to call a man a Christian will not make him a Christian. You may label, and enroll, and number the unsaved as much as you like, but you will not make even one of them a Christian by that process any more than putting the name “olive” on a fig tree will change its nature, and make it produce olive berries.

As re-naming the fig tree is no use, let us try to trim it to the shape of an olive tree. That will not be an easy task, for the two trees bear very slight resemblance to one another; still, we will see what we can do with axe, and knife, and shears, to make the fig tree look like an olive. When we come again, at the proper season, to gather the olive berries, how many shall we find? Not one, though we search diligently from the trunk to the topmost bough. If we have not ruined the tree by our cutting and shaping, we may find figs on it, but we shall gather no olives there. So we may be very careful in trying to shape our children’s lives and characters, we may teach them to be truthful, honest, upright, amiable, heroic, and so on, and we may succeed so far that some of them may even look like young Christians; but if the grace of God has not made them to be new creatures in Christ Jesus, all our training, and trimming, and shaping, and directing will leave them unsaved, and we shall search then in vain to find in them “the fruit of the Spirit.” There is far more needed than anything we can do; there must, be a deeper, more enduring work than making them look and act like Christians, there must be a divine work in the heart, a complete change of nature which can only be wrought by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit.

In our next attempt to get olives from the fig tree, we will treat the fig tree as if it were an olive tree. When at Mentone, I have often noticed the men in the olive gardens digging a trench all round the trees, and filling it with old rags; and, somehow, the trees seem to draw suitable nutriment out of that strange sort of manure. Very well then, let us treat our fig tree in the same fashion, and dig

about it, and dung it with all the old rags we can find. We do so, and wait patiently for the result, and then we discover that we have wasted all those precious bales of rags which might have made the olive trees bring forth an abundant crop, for there is not a berry on the fig tree, and probably even fewer figs than it would have produced if we had given it the nourishment suited to its nature. So you may take your young people, and treat them as if they were Christians, and do all that you can to nourish the divine life that has not yet entered their souls; but all your efforts will be in vain, for you cannot give them new natures, you cannot make the children, of Adam into the children of God. You will do far more lasting good by entreating the Lord to accomplish the great work of grace which is altogether beyond your power, and by teaching each unsaved one, old or young, to pray David's prayer, "Create in, me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

Here is our fig tree without a single olive berry on it; now let us surround it with olive trees, and see what a change that will make in it. The tree is very lonely where it is, so we will see what helpful associations will do for it. It will be another difficult task for us, but we will not shirk it, for we are determined to transplant it right into the middle of an olive garden; and we will tie it up to a fruitful olive tree, and then, when it has no other trees near it, surely it must bear olives. But will it? Oh, no when the time of figs arrives, it will bear figs unless we have destroyed its fruit-bearing power by disturbing it; but there will be no olives on it except those that fall among its branches when the tree by its side is beaten to yield up its thousands of purple, oily berries. So, here, is an, unconverted man right in the midst of Christian people. He is not very comfortable, for he feels that he is out of his element; he would be much more at home in a public house or at a music hall, or at home reading a novel or the newspaper; yet here he is surrounded by Christians. Possibly, like the fig tree tied to an olive tree, the man is united to a godly wife, yet it is not enough to make him a Christian. He has a gracious, loving daughter; she has persuaded him to come with her to-night in the hope that he may get a blessing here, as I most sincerely hope he may. But, my dear friend, let me tell you that it is not sufficient for you to have a Christian wife, or Christian children, or Christian parents, unless there is a work of grace within your own heart, unless your very nature is changed by the Holy Spirit, so that you are made a new creature in Christ Jesus, all these hallowed relationships and associations will only increase your condemnation. I must repeat to you Paul's message to the Philippian jailor, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved;" and very likely then it will be possible to add in your case as in his, "and thy house." God grant that it may be so!

Now suppose we take that fig tree to the top of a hill, like the Mount of Olives, and plant it there; it is a fig tree still, and it brings forth nothing but figs. Ay, and if the Lord were to take an unconverted man up to heaven, just as he is, he would remain unconverted even there. Unless and until he was born again, the mere change of place, even from earth to heaven, would not make him acceptable to God. He would be like that man without the wedding garment; and the King would say to his servants, "Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Perhaps someone asks, "But, sir, what is it to be born again?" Well, it is not a mere outward change of life, it is not simply a giving up of certain sins, and a desire to possess certain virtues. It is as great a work as if you were to be annihilated, — to pass absolutely out of existence—and God were to make a new man in your place. Everyone who is in Christ Jesus is a new creation; old things have passed away, and all things have become new.

"But Can such a change as that be wrought?" asks an anxious enquirer; "it would be a glorious thing for me if it could be wrought in me." Yes, my friend, it can be done by the almighty Spirit; and if you are ever to be found in the presence of God in glory, this change must be wrought in you. I am speaking to some of you who have been very moral and admirable from your youth up yet you have never experienced a saving change of heart, so to you I must repeat those solemn words of the Lord Jesus, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

"Well," says some self-satisfied person, "I feel quite good enough already." Ah! that is the very strongest possible proof that you are not good enough. Do you remember the people, in our Lord's lifetime on earth, who thought they were good enough, and do you recollect what Jesus said concerning their righteousness? If I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven," and that is what he says to you who think you are good enough. The man who has been born again confesses with sorrow and shame that he has no goodness of his own, and he ascribes all that is good in, him to the almighty grace of God alone. With Toplady, he sings, —

"Because thy sovereign love

Was bent the worst to save;

Jesus who reigns enthroned above,

The free salvation gave."

"Ah!" says another friend, "but if that is true, it makes my case so hopeless." That is just what I want you to feel, so that you may look right away from yourself, and look alone unto Jesus. You cannot regenerate yourself any more than that which is not in existence can create itself. It must be a work that is accomplished by omnipotence, and therefore no power less than that which is

divine can accomplish it. So you are obliged to own your absolute dependence upon the grace of God. If he leaves you to yourself, you will be most certainly lost; and he is not bound by anything but the love of his own heart to interpose to rescue you. Therefore if, in his infinite sovereignty, as King of mercy and of grace, he deigns to smile upon you, and to create you anew in Christ Jesus, you will have reason to praise and bless him for ever and ever, will you not? That, is the point to which I want to bring you, so that you will admit that, if you are ever saved, it will be all of God's grace and all God's work from first to last.

"Oh, that I had this new birth!" cries one. That very wish, if it be the sincere desire and prayer of your heart may be the first evidence that you have already been born again, even as the Lord's testimony concerning Saul of Tarsus, "Behold, he prayeth," proved that he had already uttered the first cry of a newborn child of God. Remember that text, which the Lord blessed to my conversion so many years ago, "Look unto me, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else," and do as I did then, look and live. Look this very instant, by faith, to Jesus hanging on the cross of Calvary, for —

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One;

There is life at this moment for thee:

Then look, sinner, — look unto him, and be saved, —

Unto him who was nailed to the tree."

If thou wilt, do this, that faith-look of thine will be the evidence that this new life is already pulsating within thee; and as this life is everlasting life, thou hast received that life which neither devils nor men can ever take away from thee. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life," and no man ever truly believed on Jesus, and yet remained unregenerate. Faith in Christ is one of the first signs and tokens of the new life within the soul. If I find on thee even one olive berry, I know that it has the oil of grace within it; and that is proof positive that thou art one of the good olive trees in the garden of the Lord. If I found figs on thee, I should know that thou wast a fig tree; but if I find only one little olive berry, I know that the hidden life that can produce one berry can produce bushels of the same sort, and even larger and richer ones, to the praise and glory of the great Owner of the olive garden in which thou hast been planted by his own right hand. The little feeble faith that thou hast already exercised is the gift of God; and under the gracious nurture of his ever-blessed Spirit, it will grow until thou art, like Abraham, "strong in faith, giving glory to God." May the Lord enable thee to have done with thyself, and to have begun with himself! The end of the creature is the beginning of the Creator. When you own that you cannot save yourself, and trust him to save you, he will do it. Cast yourself upon him this very moment, and then, by an act of almighty grace, the fig tree shall be changed into a fruitful olive tree, and your fruit shall be unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.

James 4:8 A Command and a Promise **By C H Spurgeon**

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**A SERMON PUBLISHED ON THURSDAY, AUGUST 25TH, 1910,
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"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." — James 4:8

Notice the sentences immediately preceding our text: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." Wherever we are, we must come into contact with the unseen powers either for good or evil. Go where we may, we cannot shut ourselves away from them. If we could take the wings of the morning, and fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, spiritual beings would still be all around us there. Doubtless there are many invisible spirits, good or evil, in our midst at this moment; and when we go forth to our homes, or tomorrow go to our business or other duties, they will still attend us, the evil spirits seeking to lead our souls astray, and the holy angels carrying out their sacred commission, "to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation."

These spiritual beings are divided into two bands. One band is under the leadership of that great fallen spirit, — great, though fallen, — who, by his masterly genius, has secured control over multitudes of other spirits, who do his bidding and yield to his will with unquestioning obedience. You also may surrender yourself to him if you will; he is the god of this world, the prince of the power of the air; and you may, if you will, be his slave, you may be girded with his chains, you may serve in his servitude, and you may

earn the wage which he will pay you at the last, for "the wages of sin is death." But, surely, the admonition of the practical apostle James is a wise one, and we shall do well to take heed to it, and revolt from our old master. Let us break his bonds asunder, and cast, away his cords from us, in the name of Jesus, let us resist the devil, and he will flee from us. Jesus has a far greater host of spirits under his leadership than Satan has; and, at his command, they shall keep us in all our ways, and bear us up in their hands, lest we dash our feet against a stone. His legions are far mightier than those of the black prince of darkness, and their services shall all be at our disposal, whenever we need them, as soon as we have renounced all allegiance to our former tyrant lord.

Now, having noted the connection of our text, I am going to apply it to three classes of persons; first, to the believer, secondly, to the backslider; and then, last of all, to the unconverted.

I. First, then, we have here, A Message To The Believer: Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."

In Scripture, drawing nigh has various meanings. First, it means, draw nigh to God in worship, in prayer and in praise. When the hen sees a hawk in the air hovering over her brood, she gives a peculiar warning cluck, calling her little ones to come to her, while at the same moment she herself draws nigh to them. In a far higher fashion, the voice of God calls you to him, warning you of the danger that lurks all round you; and while you run to hide from peril beneath the shadow of his wings, he on his part runs to meet you as the forgiving father ran to meet his prodigal son. You draw nigh to him in the fearfulness and feebleness of your supplication, and he draws nigh to you in the faithfulness and almightiness of his everlasting love. I am afraid that we often pray as if our God were at a distance from us; this can never be prevailing prayer. I do not despise that prayer which is like shooting an arrow up to the throne of God, but I love better still the prayer that grips the Angel of the covenant, the prayer that stands foot to foot with him, and wrestles with him until the breaking of the day, and even then cries, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." If you can draw nigh to your Lord in prayer like that, he will certainly draw nigh to you, and you will be like a prince who has power to; prevail with God and with men.

Let me encourage you, dear friends, who have been backward in your private prayer, or who have cried to him as though he were a long way off. "Draw nigh to him." There are no bounds set around this mount of grace as there were around mount Sinai. You may climb up to the place called Calvary, and clasp to your bosom the Christ who there died upon the accursed tree, for he is your Brother, your Friend, your Savior, your All-in-all, if you are truly trusting him. So to you I say, as Paul wrote to the Hebrews, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."

Come near to him, and you shall soon have an answer to your prayers.

It is the same with praise; and I am afraid that, often, we do not really draw nigh to God when we are professing to praise him. I know that, sometimes, when we are singing God's praises in our great assemblies here, we are drawn very near to the gates of heaven. At such times, I have felt as though I were swimming in an ocean of sacred delight. It should be so with every act of worship; it should all draw us nearer to our God. There are times when we feel more closely drawn to him in the closet of private prayer than in the public services of the sanctuary; but, still, there is a special blessing attending united prayer and praise which is not to be realized elsewhere. I remember reading of a Jew who would not open a business in a certain town because there was no synagogue in it; and I wish that Christians would always be as careful to settle down, if possible, in a place where they would not lack religious privileges, for prayer and praise, like the two wheels of the chariot which carried Jacob down to Joseph, bring us near to our beloved Lord and Master, and he, at the same time, comes to meet us, and draws nigh to us.

But I find that, in Scripture, the term "Draw nigh to God" is often used in the sense of asking counsel of God. Thus the Israelites, when they were in perplexity or difficulty, consulted the priest, and he, wearing the ephod, and the breastplate with the mysterious Urim, and Thummim, was able to interpret the will of God as it had been revealed to him; and now, though no sacred ephod or breastplate is worn by mortal man, though the ancient oracles are dumb, and though no earthly prophet speaks infallibly according to the will of God, you may still draw near to God himself, in the flame of Jesus Christ his Son, and seek the guidance of his ever-blessed Spirit. I hope you will do so at every step; of your life, for what step; is there; that is not important? Those that seem to us to be of the least significance may be the very ones that will the soonest lead us into mischief. But there are certain periods in our history when it is absolutely necessary that we should say to ourselves, "Let us consult the Lord about this matter." Many of you would never have been in the trouble in which you now are if you had but waited upon God before you took a certain course which has brought you nothing but sorrow. We heedlessly run before the fiery-cloudy pillar moves and when we find that we have rushed into the waste howling wilderness, we lay the blame for our own folly at the door of God's providence. Let it not be so with any of you, dear friends; let every morning's plans be spread out before the Lord to see whether they meet with his approval, and let every evening's joys and sorrows be brought to him that he may show you how to glorify him in all that happens to you. Solomon truly said, "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool," and David just as truly said, "but he that trusteth in the lord, mercy shall compass him about." You need never lack divine guidance, for you can have it by asking for it.

God is willing to guide you if you will only seek his guidance. See to it, then, that you practice the text in the sense of asking counsel of God: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."

There is a third meaning to the phrase "Draw nigh to God;" it is used in the sense, of enjoying communion with God. There are some here who do not understand what I mean by communion with God; they are completely puzzled by the very simple language of the apostle John, "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." There are hundreds and thousands of people, constantly attending church or chapel, who do not know the meaning of the word communion." If you were to ask them what they understand by it, they would probably say that it means eating a piece of bread and drinking a little wine at the Lord's supper. And more than that, if they were to ask me to explain to them what true spiritual communion with God means, I should probably fail to make them comprehend it; yet you who, by grace, have been enabled to drink of these cooling streams, know well what that communion means. Some of you, who have been the most deeply taught of the Spirit, could sing through the whole Song of Solomon, and see, your Beloved in it all, while to others it is only an Eastern love-song which is to them quite incomprehensible. You know Christ, not only by faith, but by a sort of second sense which makes him very real to you. You have drawn near to Christ, and talked with him; and he has drawn near to you, and talked with you, and he has been nearer to you and dearer to you than any earthly friend has ever been. Oh, what joy believers know when they realize Christ's presence, when his left hand is under their heads, and his right hand doth embrace them! Talk of heaven, — such communion is heaven begun below. When heaven's gates are opened wide, and the celestial sunshine comes streaming through, it falls upon the eyes that have been illuminated by the Holy Ghost; that is true spiritual communion, and the glorified spirits above do but know that bliss to the full in knowing God, and rejoicing in the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps, my dear brother, you have been reading Rutherford's letters, and you have said to yourself. "Alas! I cannot hope to enjoy such communion with Christ as Rutherford enjoyed." But why should you not? Read our text again: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." You, my draw sister, may have read the life of Madame Guyon, and you have said, "What an angel in human form that woman must have been!" But if you draw nigh to God, you may have as much love to Christ as she had, and you may enjoy as much fellowship with Christ as she had, for "he will draw nigh to you." You have envied Mary because she sat at Jesu's feet, or you have wished that you had been John, to lean your head upon your Master's bosom: well, you may do both these things in a spiritual sense, and that is better than the carnal. "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." To you, even to you, the very feeblest of those who resist the devil, will God draw nigh if you draw nigh to him.

I think, however, that there is another meaning in our text, and that is, "draw nigh to God" in the general strain and tenor of your life. We all know that the sun, the great center of the solar system has several planets revolving around him, some of them comparatively near, others at a greater distance, and some still more remote; and Jesus Christ, the great Sun of righteousness; has his people revolving around him as the planets circle round the sun. Some of them are very near the great central Luminary; others are far away, at a vast distance from him, and others are neither very near nor very far off, but somewhere between the two. There are some believers who are like the planet Mercury. You do not often see that fast-revolving planet, because it keeps so near the sun that it is usually lost in his bright rays. So is it with some Christians; the world knows little of them, they make no noise as they move along in their appointed orbit, and they keep so near to Christ that they seem, to be absorbed into his radiance. Their thoughts are so much occupied with Christ, their heart's affection is so fully given to him that they do not talk much about earthly things; their great desire is to live in close and hallowed fellowship with their Lord. There are others who are like the planets that are far away from the sun, yet some rays of light and heat reach even them; and those believers who are living at a distance from Christ have some of the divine light and heat within them, but oh, so little compared with what they might have! Oh, that you, who are so far off from God, would leave your distant orbits, and draw nigh to him, for then he also would draw nigh to you!

You know, dear friends, that there is almost as much difference between some Christians and others as there is between Christians and worldlings; — I said almost, for there is not quite the same difference, though there is nearly the same. There are heights of lofty consecration and of intimate communion with, Christ, to which some believers have attained, but, of which others have not yet even dreamed. There is an inner circle of fellowship into which only a few privileged saints have ever entered, these are the elect out of the elect, who have been distinguished above all the rest of Christ's disciples by the loftier grace which has been their peculiar characteristic. Oh, that we had many more such Christians indeed in all our churches! There are a few of them scattered about Christendom, like grains of salt, but we want many more of them; — men who, like Moses, have their faces made to shine with a supernatural brightness because they have dwelt with God upon the mount of secret communion; — men who are not afraid to die because they have looked without alarm into the face of God, through Jesus Christ their Lord, — and men who have learnt how to live as becometh the gospel of Christ, and there is no higher life than that. Brethren and sisters in Christ "draw nigh to God:" press towards the highest degree of godliness that it is possible for you to obtain, seek to have the closest communion with Christ that mortals can ever know while here on earth. Do not be content to be in the outer courts, the lobbies, the ante-chambers of religion; strive to gain admission to the very holy of holies itself, for that is where your Lord would fain have you to be. You know that there is a sort of border-land where many professors live, where a man is thought to be a Christian, but all the while he is not half a Christian. He is counted amongst the saved, yet he lives on the very borders of damnation; and if at the last he is saved, we shall

sorrowfully have to add, "yet so as by fire." In some respects he is a righteous man, as Lot was, yet, like Lot, he dwells in Sodom. He is in some ways a good man, as Noah was; yet, like him, he falls into shameful sin. Oh, that we could all rise above this wretched condition, and live continually so close to Christ that men would take knowledge of us that we had been with Jesus, and had caught something of his spirit, and had been so changed by grace that we were far more like him than we now are!

There I leave my text with the believer. I would fain draw you nigh to God, beloved, by my words, if I could; but I know that he must himself draw you by his grace if the drawing is to be effectual. So let this be your prayer and resolve this very moment, "Draw us, and we will run after thee."

II. Now, in the second place, we have in our text An Entreaty To The Backslider: Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you." I must speak but briefly upon this point, but I want to be as earnest as I am brief.

So, backslider, you have come in here to-night; a friend, who is up from the country, persuaded you to accompany him, or you would probably not have been here, for you have almost given up going to a place of worship, and you think there is no hope for you. Friend, do you know what your doom will be if you continue as you are now? Have you ever read the story of Judas? Do you know what became of Demas, and Simon Magus, and Alexander the coppersmith, and others who turned aside from the faith in the days of the apostles? Remember those terrible yet inspired words, "If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries." It would have been better for you never to have had any knowledge of the truth shall to have known it, and then sinned wilfully against it, and so, after all, to be a castaway. If you are a true child of God, though a wanderer from his ways, you will be brought back to him, and I pray that you may be brought back to him this very hour; but if you are an apostate, a backslider in heart, you will be filled with your own ways. Having filled up the measure of your iniquity, You will be driven from God's presence into the place of woe where hope and mercy never can come.

Yet listen to me, backslider; this terrible sentence has not yet been pronounced upon you. The voice of God still cries unto you, "Draw nigh unto me." Whither art thou flying, my brother?

Art thou seeking to escape from God's righteous judgments? That is impossible, for his thunderbolts will soon overtake thee, and seal thine eternal doom. Run not away from him, but draw nigh to him; cast down thy weapons of rebellion, and fall prostrate before him, seeking the forgiveness which he is willing and waiting to bestow upon thee. Let me take thee by the hand, and try to encourage them to come near to the Lord this very moment. Do you ask, "How can I come near to him?" Come; just as you came to him at the first. Perhaps you reply, "But I never really came to him aright." Then come to him aright just now. I came to him as a sinner, and he gave me a hearty welcome, and he will receive you just as graciously if you only come to him with wholehearted repentance for your sin, and true faith in Jesus Christ as your only Savior.

But here is one who did run well, yet she has been hindered. Backsliding woman, remember that thy God is married unto thee, and that he bids thee return unto him. Backsliding man, thou hast turned aside from thy God, yet he loves thee still, and cries out to thee, "Return, return, return." The Lord still says, as he did in Jeremiah's day, "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." Oh, that you would reply even as they did, Behold, we come unto thee; for thou, art the Lord our God"! I am sure that you are not happy in your present condition; on the contrary, you are as sad and miserable as you can possibly be. This very house of prayer reminds you of your former privileges and joys, of the days when you delighted in God, and felt that you were indeed on your way to heaven. You cannot be content to live in the far country among the swine that are no fit companions for you; leave the husks to the pigs, they can never satisfy your hunger. Come back to thy Father, poor prodigal! Though thy clothes are in rags, though thou art steeped in filth, though thou hast sinned most grievously, come back to thy Father, and he will receive thee with open arms and open heart I will not act towards thee as the elder brother did to the prodigal, but I will welcome thee as a brother if thou art indeed a brother; and if thou art not a brother, thou art a sinner, and this is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," even the very chief. So, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." Put thy soul's affairs into his hands, ask him to be thine Advocate, to plead thy cause before the King; He never yet lost a case that was entrusted to him, and he will not lose yours.

III. I have almost anticipated the last division of my discourse, but, I must close by giving from my text An Invitation To The Unconverted: Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you

The great gospel rings out again, and the same note sounds to the sinner as to the saint; not that there is any implication in this text that the sinner can draw nigh to God by his own unaided power, or that he comes first, and God comes next, or that there is any natural willingness in the sinner to come to God. The text seems to me to show the difference between the law and the gospel. God said even to Moses, the chosen leader of his ancient people, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place

whereon thou standest is holy ground." But under the gospel God says to the sinner, "Draw nigh hither; 'tis true that this is holy ground, but it is sprinkled with blood, the blood of my only-begotten and well-beloved son and if the blood is also sprinkled upon thee, thou mayest draw nigh, and thou canst not come too nigh, so come and welcome, sinner, come." If it were a question of merit, or of justification by the works of the law, the sinner might well try to fly from the avenging hand of divine justice; but on the ground of divine love, and pity, and mercy, and free and sovereign grace, the sinner may draw nigh to God though he has nothing to recommend him, he may come just as he is, and God in mercy will draw nigh to him. Should there be here a swearer, a drunkard, or one who has committed the foulest of sins, the text says to him in the sense in which I have explained it, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." Sinner, if thou repentest of thy sin, and trustest in Jesus as thy Savior God will not spurn thee, and drive thee from him, but he will draw nigh to thee as thou dost draw nigh to him.

Then, next, the text shows the sinner what God means to do for him. He means to draw the sinner nigh to himself, and then himself to draw nigh to the sinner. This is done in two ways; it is done first, by what Jesus did for us when he rent the veil that separated us from God; and it is done, next, by what the Holy Spirit does in us when he rends the veil that hides God from us. There are, or were, these two veils, — the veil that concealed the visible manifestation of God from men, which was rent asunder at the moment of Christ's death, — and the veil that is over our own hearts, which conceals God from us until the Holy Spirit takes us away, and we see God in Christ Jesus reconciled to us by the death of his Son. I fear that there are some even in this congregation who are living just as if there were no God at all. If there really were no God, you would probably not be any different from what you now are. God is not in all your thoughts or if you ever do think of him, You say, with the fool of whom the psalmist tells us, "No God; no God for me; I want no God: and, so far as I am concerned, there is no God." Well then, if you are ever to be saved, you will have to be brought nigh to God by a power altogether outside yourself, you will have to be made to feel that God is One whom you must love, you will be reconciled to him by the death of his Son, and your heart will be filled with love to Christ through the gracious influences of the Holy Spirit.

The text further shows what God will lead the sinner to do for himself. Ungodly man, if thou art ever to be saved, thou must draw nigh to God in prayer. Go to him at this moment, just where thou art sitting, and confess all thy sin to him; there is no need for thee to utter a word that any of us can hear, for God can read the language of thy heart. Then thou must draw nigh to Christ by faith. Just as that poor woman in the crowd touched the hem of his garment, and was immediately made whole, so must thou, by faith, get into contact with Christ. Trust in him as thy one and only Savior, and he will certainly save thee; and this shall be the grand result of it all, thou wilt draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to thee. Oh, that thou wouldst now cry unto him, "God be merciful to me a sinner." That will be drawing nigh to God in penitence and contrition and supplication, and he will draw nigh to thee in gracious acceptance and blessing; and then one day, he will call thee to draw nigh to him in heaven itself, to sit at his table in glory, to feast with him in his kingdom. Then shalt thou, even thou, wear a crown, and wave a palm, and for ever adore that matchless grace which first drew thee nigh to him, and shall draw nigh to thee.

If there is one here who will go home to pray, "Draw me nigh, O God!" or better still, if there is one anywhere in this vast throng, whose heart is praying, "Lord, save me; draw me with the cords of a man, (even the man Christ Jesus, the Friend of sinful man,) with the bands of love; O God, draw nigh to me, for I would fain draw nigh to thee;" — if there is one here whose eye has in it the tear of penitence, I point that one to Jesus hanging on the cross, and say, —

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One;

There is life at this moment for thee;

Then look, sinner,-look unto him, and be saved, —

Unto him who was nailed to the tree."

Remember that the Son of God, the Lord of life and glory, suffered indescribable shame and ignominy, and at last, death itself, for sinners for every sinner who trusts in his great atoning sacrifice. If thou art trusting in him, that is proof positive that he cried for thee, died in thy room and place and stead, died that thou shouldst, never die, for he bore all the punishment that thy sin deserved, so there is none left for thee to bear. He drank to the last dregs the cup of wrath that was thy due, so there is not one drop left for thee to drink. He suffered all that could ever have been thy portion even in hell itself, for being infinite, there was no limit to his agonies; and now, for thee, there is no hell, no torment, no condemnation. Thou mayest know assuredly whether Christ did die for thee or not; dost thou trust him? Wilt thou trust him now? Wilt thou say,-

"Just as I am,-and waiting not

To rid my soul of one dark blot,

To thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,

O Lamb of God, I come”?

If thou hast said that from thy heart, thou art now a saved soul, and thou mayest go to thy home rejoicing in the Lord, for thy sins, which were many, are all forgiven, and thou art on thy way to heaven. God grant that it may be so, for Jesus Christ's sake!