

The Faults of Christians

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Among my parishioners, at one time, there was a very industrious and respectable man, a mechanic, for whom I entertained a high esteem. I thought him a man of talents, and of much good feeling. He was about thirty years of age, was married, and his wife had recently become a child of God, as she believed, and had made a public profession of her faith in Christ. I had now the more hope of being useful to him, on account of his wife's experience of grace, and the uniformly happy state of her mind. He had also some other relatives who were members of my church, and were exemplary Christians. He was himself a constant and attentive hearer of the gospel every Sabbath day, and whenever I met him, (which was very often,) he was free to speak of religion, and confess his obligation and his anxiety to be a Christian. I had no small hope in his case. I had noticed the increasing depth of his seriousness. Besides, I knew him to be a personal friend to myself, very much attached to me, and on that account I had the more expectation of being able to influence his mind upon the subject, which now occupied, as he said, "all his thoughts."

After his wife had become a pious woman and a member of the church, he appeared to become more deeply impressed than ever before. The day on which she was baptized, and came for the first time to the Lord's table, was a most solemn day to him. He afterwards said to me, "when I saw my wife go forward before all the congregation to be baptized, I could, not hold up my head, I was forced into tears, and I solemnly resolved to put off my salvation no longer. And I mean to keep that resolution."

After this, I took some pains to see him several times, for the purpose of personal conversation. He was thoughtful, serious, prayerful; and, as I thought, was 'not far from the kingdom of heaven.' But as the weeks passed on, I was surprised and sorry to find, that his religious impressions appeared to have come to a stand. They did not vanish; I could not say they had diminished; but they evidently had not become more deep and influential. He used to say to me: "I am trying, and I hope I shall yet be a Christian." I cautioned him against delay, and against any reliance upon the mere fact, that he continued his attempts, while he did not flee to Christ.

In this manner several months passed on. He uniformly appeared solemn, often avowed his conviction of his lost condition as a sinner, acknowledged his need of a Saviour, and lamented the wickedness and hardness of his heart. But finding him, as I thought, very much stationary, I feared that his perceptions of Divine truth were not correct and clear, or that his impressions were only superficial or occasional. And therefore I aimed to deal the more plainly with him, and tried, in every way I could contrive, to bring the Gospel truths more clearly before his mind, and impress them more deeply upon his conscience and his heart. With the Law of God on the one hand, and the Gospel on the other, his conscience to condemn him and Christ to invite him, I hoped his heart would be brought to surrender in faith.

It was in one of these conversations, which I was accustomed to have with him, that he surprised me by expressing a thought, which I had never heard from him before. I had just asked him,—

“What hinders you, my dear sir, from being a Christian indeed, since all the grace of the gospel is so free, and since you are so sensible that you need it?” His answer was,—

“I think a great many more of us would be Christians, if professors of religion were different from what they are.”

“That may be,” said I; “but you know, one ‘shall give account of himself unto God.’ You are not accountable for professors of religion, and they are not accountable for your irreligion.”

“I know that,” said he. “But how can we believe in the reality of religion, when members of the church and the elders too are dishonest, will lie and cheat, and make hard bargains, a great deal worse than other people?”

“Have you any doubt of the reality of religion?”

“Oh, no, I believe in the reality of religion. I believe in a change of heart, as much as you do.”

“Then,” said I, “you can believe in the reality of religion, somehow or other. In that respect you have not been misled by our ‘dishonest elders and church members,’ who drive such ‘hard bargains, a great deal worse than other people.’ As to the accusation, that our elders and church-members are such dishonest and hard men; I deny it: the accusation is not true. There may be some bad men in the church. There was a Judas among Christ’s disciples. One of the chosen twelve was a thief. But that was no good reason why other people should reject Christ. The general character of our church-members is not such as you have mentioned. You ought not to condemn Matthew and the other disciples, because Judas was a villain.”

“Well,” said he (with some hesitation), “I know some church-members who are no better than other people, not a bit better than a great many of us who make no profession.”

“Perhaps you do. But what of that? Will their imperfections do you any good? Will their sins save you, or excuse you?”

“Why,”—(hesitatingly),—“they ought to set us a better example.”

“No doubt of that. And allow me to say, you ought to set them a better example. You are under as much obligation to set me a good example, as I am to set you a good example. You and I are under the same law. God commands you to be holy as He commands me. It is quite likely, that those church-members of whom you complain, would be better men, if it was not for such persons as you, persons who set them no holy example.”

“Well; I believe many members of the church are great stumbling-blocks; I know they are.”

Said I, “I believe many, who are not members of the church, are great stumbling-blocks; I know they are. You are one of them. You are a stumbling-block and a hindrance to many impenitent sinners, to your partner in business, to your neighbors, to your sisters, and other acquaintances. I am sorry for it, but so it is. If you would become a truly pious man, these persons would feel your influence constraining them to seek the Lord, and your example would be a stumbling-block to them no longer.”

“I make no profession of religion,” said he.

“That is the very thing,” I replied. “You stand aloof from religion entirely, as if you disbelieved in it; and your example just encourages others to neglect it as you do. You once told me yourself how greatly it affected you, when you saw your wife come out to be baptized in the presence of the great congregation. If you would set such an example, it would probably affect others.”

“My wife is a good woman; she lives as a Christian ought to live.”

“Then you have at least one good example.”

“If all professors of religion were like her, I should not find fault with them.”

“And if you were like her, other people would not find fault with you. Your example would commend religion.”

“Well; the example of a great many professors does not commend it to me.”

“Why do you look at the bad examples? Look nearer home. Look at your wife’s example. You are very unwise to let your thoughts dwell upon the faults of Christians at all; and when you do so, you hunt up a few professors of religion, who are not by any means a fair specimen of our church-members, and you take them as samples of all the rest. That is unfair. I am sorry you have run into this way of thinking. It will only lead you into error, and call all your attention from the eternal interests of your own soul. The fault of others cannot save you. I beg of you to think less about other people’s sins, and more about your own.”

“Well, I will. I know I have had my mind turned away from religion many a time, by thinking of the conduct of professors.”

A few days after this I met my friend in the street, and asked him if he thought he had gained the “one thing needful?” He replied,— “No, I don’t think I have. But I believe I am as good a man as a great many who took the sacrament yesterday in your church.”

“I am sorry to hear you talk of others again,” said I; “you promised me that you would think of your own sins, and let the sins of other people alone. And now the very first sentence you utter, is a reflection upon some who were at the Lord’s table yesterday. I am surprised at this. Your hard thoughts about other people will lead you, I am afraid, farther and farther off from religion.”

“Very likely,” said he, “but I can’t help it. The members of the church set such examples, that my mind is turned away from religion by them many a time.”

“Yes,” said I, “the old prophet knew how that was; ‘they eat up the sin of my people, and set their heart upon iniquity; they have left off to take heed to the Lord.’ You are one of that stamp. You seize upon ‘the sin of God’s people,’ as if it were bread to you; and then you forget to pray—you have ‘left off to take heed to the Lord.’ After you have eagerly fed yourself upon the ‘sin of God’s people’ for awhile, then you have no inclination ‘to take heed’ to anything God says to you. I advise you to eat some other sort of food. ‘The sin of God’s people’ is a bad breakfast. It is very indigestible. The wicked seize upon it as if it were bread to the hungry; and the worst of it all is, that after they have eaten such a breakfast they have no family prayer; they do not ‘take heed to the Lord.’ That is your case, precisely; you complain of Christians, instead of praying for yourself. You never pray, after finding fault with members of the church for half an hour.”

“How do you know I don’t pray?”

“I know by the text which I just quoted. You, eat up the sin of God’s people;’ and for that reason, I know that the other part of the text belongs to you. You ‘have left off to take heed to the Lord.’ Is it not so? Have you not left off, ceased to pray, since you began to find fault with Christians?”

“Yes, I own it. I am not going to deny it.”

Said I, “I am very sorry you take such a course. You yield to a temptation of the Devil. The best Christians are imperfect, very imperfect. They do not profess to be sinless. You may see their faults, but you cannot see their penitence, and tears, and agony of spirit, when in secret they mourn over their many imperfections, and beg forgiveness of God, and grace to be more faithful. If you felt so, if you had had done wrong in public through thoughtlessness or overcome by some temptation, and then in secret should mourn bitterly over your fault; would you think it generous, would you think your disposition well treated, or even had any kind of justice done to it, if your neighbor should be going around complaining of your faults, as if you were a bad man?”

“No, I should not think I deserved that.”

“Very well. These imperfect Christians have such secret mournings. And if you will go to them, and kindly tell them their faults, you will hear things from them which will alter your feelings about them; you will have a better

opinion of their hearts than you have now, and a more just opinion too. Did you ever mention to these people the things you complain of?” “No, I never did.”

“I think you ought to do it. Certainly you ought to do it, or cease to make complaints about them to others. Jesus Christ has taught us our duty in such a case. ‘If thy brother trespass against thee, go to him, and tell him his fault betwixt him and thee alone.’”

“That applies to Christians.”

“It applies to you. You ought to be a Christian. And your neglect of one duty cannot excuse your neglect of another. You must not plead one sin as an excuse for another. If one of your neighbors had a bad opinion of you, surely you would much rather he should come and tell you what he had against you, and hear your explanation, than that he should tell it to other people.”

“Yes, I should. But I have called nobody’s name.” “I know it; and I complain of that. Instead of pointing out the guilty individuals, you complain of Christians in general; and thus you make the innocent suffer with the guilty. You make religion suffer, (at least in your estimation,) by the faults of a few, who profess to be religious people. How would you like it, if I should speak of the men of your trade as you speak of Christians, and say, ‘Blacksmiths are villains, dishonest men?’” “I should want you to name the men.”

“And I want you to name the men. Come, tell me who they are, and what they have done; and I promise you I will have their conduct investigated. They shall be tried before the proper tribunal. You shall be a witness against them. And if they are found guilty, they shall be turned out of the church; and then they will be complained of by you no longer, and the good name of religion will no more be dishonored by them.”

“Oh, I can’t be a witness against anybody.”

“Why not? Can’t you tell the truth? Will you make religion suffer, rather than bring bad men to justice? Will you injure the good name of all of us, ‘church-members and elders too,’ as you say, instead of lending your assistance to purify the church from unworthy members? Will you let this thing go on, and let it hinder (as you say it does), a great many of you from being Christians?”

“It is not my business to bear witness against church-members.”

“Why do you do it, then? You have been doing it, every time I have met you, for the last three months. And though I have tried to persuade you to cease, you still keep on, bearing witness against ‘church-members and elders,’ every time I meet you.”

“Well, I don’t mean to injure anybody.”

“No, sir, I don’t think you do. The only one you injure is yourself. The general imputations which you so often fling out against professors of religion, are slanders. They are not true. You may think them true, but they are not true. I affirm them to be utterly unfounded and false. There may be indeed a few persons in the church, who are as bad as you declare them to be; but your general accusations are falsehoods. But suppose all you say, or even suspect, were true; suppose half of our church-members to be bad men; in the name of all that is common sense, I ask you, what has that to do with your religion? If half the money that is in circulation is counterfeit, does that make the good money in your pocket valueless? or will it lead you to refuse to take all money?”

“I don’t want to have counterfeit money?”

“And I don’t want you to have a counterfeit religion. The very fact, that you complain of counterfeit money, is full proof, that you believe there is such a thing as good money somewhere: and your complaint of counterfeit religion is full proof, that you believe there is such a thing as good religion.”

“Yes, I believe all that.”

“And you believe that you have not attained it.”

“I suppose I haven’t.”

“And are you striving to attain it, or are you as anxious and prayerful about it as you were a few weeks since?”

“No, I don’t think I am.”

“Will you answer me one more question? Has not your seriousness diminished, and your prayerfulness ceased, very much in proportion as you have had hard thoughts, and made hard speeches about the faults of Christians ?”

“I can’t say no to that question.”

“Then I wish you very seriously to consider, whether your fault-finding has not provoked God to withdraw from you the influences of the Holy Spirit! You do know, that your regard for religion and your attempts after salvation, have never been promoted by your complaining about Christian people. Thinking of their sins, you forget your own, as I have told you before. You foster in your own heart a spirit of self-righteousness, by your miserable and foolish way. I have warned you against it before, and I will now warn you again, if you will permit me. If you will go on in this way, God will leave you to your deceptions and your impenitence; you will live without religion, and you will die without it! I beseech you, therefore, as a friend, as a neighbor, as a minister, dismiss your thoughts about the faults of a few, (for they are only a few,) professors of religion, and seek from God the forgiveness of your own

sins, and the salvation you so much need.”

I left him. But he never sought me again. Fifteen years have since passed away, and he is still as far from God as ever. Often when I have met him, I have endeavored to draw him into some conversation upon religion; but he avoids the subject, and commonly shuns me.

The Holy Spirit would lead us to think much about our own sins. It is a dangerous thing for us to dwell upon the imperfections of others. There are many in our congregations, who ‘quench the Spirit,’ by complainings and hard speeches about communicants of the church. The natural effect of this is just to dispel conviction of sin. “I am as good as many who belong to the church.” If that declaration is true, it is utterly deceptive to the man that makes it. It leads him to think his sin and danger less than they are; it blinds his conscience. I never heard of any mortal, on the bed of death, apologizing for his irreligion by mentioning the faults of Christians.