

FROM THE INHERITANCE OF OUR FATHERS

Series 35, No. 5

CONVICTION OF SIN

Robert M. M'Cheyne



ROBERT MURRAY M'CHEYNE

Living for just twenty-nine years, Robert M'Cheyne (1813–43) was regarded as one of the most saintly and able young ministers of his day. He began teaching himself the Greek alphabet when he was just four years old and went on to become an exemplary student at Edinburgh University and Edinburgh Divinity Hall.

After being licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Annan in 1835, M'Cheyne became an assistant pastor and was ordained the next year to a new charge at Dundee, a largely industrial parish that did not help his delicate health. With a heart for evangelism, he was grieved by the spiritual deadness in many of the Scottish parishes and even considered giving up his charge if the church would set him apart as an evangelist.

In 1838, M'Cheyne was advised to take a lengthy break from his parish work because of his poor health. During this time, he travelled to Israel, stimulating much interest in Jewish missions and leading to pioneer work among Jews in parts of Europe. M'Cheyne then returned to Dundee, where his ministry was remarkably fruitful until he passed away on March 25, 1842, at the age of twenty-nine.

Conviction of Sin

And when he [the Comforter] is come, he will reprove the world of sin.

—JOHN 16:8

When friends are about to part from one another, they are far kinder than ever they have been before. It was so with Jesus. He was going to part from His disciples, and never till now did His heart flow out toward them in so many streams of heavenly tenderness. Sorrow had filled their heart and therefore divine compassion filled His heart. "I tell you the truth, it is expedient for you that I go away."

Surely it was expedient for Himself that He should go away. He had lived a life of weariness and painfulness, not having where to lay His head, and surely it was pleasant in His eyes that He was

about to enter into His rest. He had lived in obscurity and poverty—He gave His back to the smiters and His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; and now, surely, He might well look forward with joy to His return to that glory which He had with the Father before ever the world was, when all the angels of God worshipped Him. And yet He does not say, It is expedient for Me that I go away. Surely that would have been comfort enough to His disciples. But no; He says, “It is expedient for you.” He forgets Himself altogether, and thinks only of His little flock which He was leaving behind Him. “It is expedient for you that I go away.” O most generous of Saviors! He looked not on His own things, but on the things of others also. He knew that it is far more blessed to give than it is to receive.

The gift of the Spirit is the great argument by which He here persuades them that His going away would be expedient

for them. Now, it is intriguing to remark that He had promised them the Spirit before, in the beginning of His discourse. In John 14:16–18, He says, “I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.” And again: “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (v. 26). In that passage He promises the Spirit for their own peculiar comfort and joy. He promises Him as a treasure which they, and they only, could receive: “For the world cannot receive him, because it neither sees nor knows him;” and yet, He

said, "he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." But in the passage before us, the promise is quite different. He promises the Spirit here not for themselves, but for the world—not as a peculiar treasure, to be locked up in their own bosoms, which they might brood over with a selfish joy, but as a blessed power to work, through their preaching, on the wicked world around them—not as a well springing up within their own bosoms unto everlasting life, but as rivers of living water flowing through them to water this dry and perishing world. He does not say, When He is come He will fill your hearts with peace and joy to overflowing; but, "When he is come, he will convince the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." But a little before He had told them that the world would hate and persecute them: "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you

out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19). This was but poor comfort, when that very world was to be the field of their labors. But now He shows them what a blessed gift the Spirit would be; for He would work, through their preaching, upon the very hearts that hated and persecuted them: "He shall convince the world of sin." This has always been the case. In Acts 2, we are told that when the Spirit came on the apostles the crowd mocked them, saying, "These men are full of new wine"; and yet, when Peter preached, the Spirit wrought through his preaching on the hearts of these very scoffers. They were pricked in their hearts, and cried, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" and the same day three thousand souls were converted. Again, the jailor at Philippi was evidently a hard, cruel man towards the apostles, for he thrust them into the inner prison and made their feet fast in the stocks; and

yet the Spirit opens his hard heart and he is brought to Christ by the very apostles whom he hated.

Just so is it, brethren, to this day. The world does not love the true ministers of Christ any better than they did. The world is the same world it was in Christ's day. That word has never yet been crossed out of the Bible: "Whosoever will live godly in the world, must suffer persecution." We expect, as Paul did, to be hated by many who listen to us. We are quite sure, as Paul was, that the more abundantly we love you, most of you will love us the less; and yet, brethren, none of these things move us. Though cast down, we are not in despair, for we know that the Spirit is sent to convince the world. We do not fear but some of you who are counting us an enemy, because we tell you the truth, may even this day, in the midst of all your hatred and cold indifference, be convinced

of sin by the Spirit, and made to cry out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Conviction of Sin: The Spirit's First Work

1. *Who convinces of sin.* "He shall convince the world of sin, because they believe not in me." It is curious to remark that wherever the Holy Ghost is spoken of in the Bible, He is spoken of in terms of gentleness and love. We often read of the wrath of God the Father, as in Romans 1: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." And we often read of the wrath of God the Son: "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way"; or, "Revealed from heaven taking vengeance." But we nowhere read of the wrath of God the Holy Ghost. He is compared to a dove, the gentlest of all creatures. He is warm and gentle as the breath: "Jesus breathed on them, and said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." He is gentle as the falling

dew: "I will be as the dew unto Israel." He is soft and gentle as oil, for he is called "the oil of gladness." The fine oil wherewith the high priest was anointed was a type of the Spirit. He is gentle and refreshing as the springing well: "The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life." He is called "the Spirit of grace and of supplications." He is nowhere called the Spirit of wrath. He is called the "Holy Ghost, which is the Comforter." Nowhere is He called the Avenger. We are told that He groans within the heart of a believer, "helping his infirmities" so that He greatly helps the believer in prayer. We are told also of the love of the Spirit—nowhere of the wrath of the Spirit. We are told of His being grieved—"Grieve not the Holy Spirit"—and of His being resisted: "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." We hear of His being quenched: "Quench not the Spirit." But these are all marks of gentleness and

love. Nowhere will you find one mark of anger or of vengeance attributed to Him; and yet, brethren, when this blessed Spirit begins His work of love, mark how He begins—He convinces of sin. Even He, all-wise, almighty, all-gentle, and loving though He be, cannot persuade a poor sinful heart to embrace the Savior without first opening up his wounds and convincing him that he is lost.

Now, brethren, I ask of you, should not the faithful minister of Christ just do the very same? If the Spirit, whose very breath is all gentleness and love, whom Jesus has sent into the world to bring men to eternal life—if He begins His work in every soul that is to be saved by convincing of sin, why should you blame the minister of Christ if he begins in the very same way? Why should you say that we are harsh, cruel, and severe, when we begin to deal with your souls by convincing you of sin? “Am I become your enemy, because I tell

you the truth?" When the surgeon comes to cure a corrupted wound—when he tears off the vile bandages which unskillful hands had wrapped around it, when he lays open the deepest recesses of your wound, and shows you all its venom and its virulence—do you call him cruel? May not his hands be all the time the hands of gentleness and love? Or, when a house is all on fire, when the flames are bursting out from every window, when some courageous man ventures to alarm the sleeping inmates, bursts through the barred door, tears aside the close-drawn curtains, and shakes the sleeper, bids him awake and flee—a moment longer, and you may be lost—do you call him cruel? Or do you say this messenger of mercy spoke too loud, too plain? No. "Skin for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life." Why, then, brethren, will you blame the minister of Christ when he begins by convincing you of sin? Think you that the

wound of sin is less venomous or deadly than a wound in the flesh? Think you the flames of hell are less hard to bear than the flames of earth? The very Spirit of love begins by convincing you of sin; and are we less the messengers of love because we begin by doing the same thing? Oh, then, do not say that we are become your enemy because we tell you the truth!

2. *What is this conviction of sin?* I would begin to show this by showing you what it is not. First, it is not the mere smiting of the natural conscience. Although man be utterly fallen, yet God has left natural conscience behind in every heart to speak for Him. Some men, by continual sinning, sear even the conscience as with a hot iron so that it becomes dead and past feeling; but most men have so much natural conscience remaining that they cannot commit open sin without their conscience smiting them. When a man commits

murder or theft, no eye may have seen him, and yet conscience makes a coward of him. He trembles and is afraid; he feels that he has sinned, and he fears that God will take vengeance. Now, brethren, that is not the conviction of sin spoken of here; that is a natural work which takes place in every heart. Conviction of sin is a supernatural work of the Spirit of God. If you have had nothing more than the ordinary smiting of conscience, then you have never been convinced of sin.

Second, it is not any impression upon the imagination. Sometimes when men have committed great sin, they have awful impressions of God's vengeance made upon their imaginations. In the night, they almost fancy they see the flames of hell burning beneath them; or they seem to hear doleful cries in their ears telling of coming woe; or they fancy they see the face of Jesus all clouded with anger; or they have terrible dreams of coming

vengeance. Now, this is not the conviction of sin which the Spirit gives. This is altogether a natural work upon the natural faculties, and not at all a supernatural work of the Spirit. If you have had nothing more than these imaginary terrors, you have had no work of the Spirit.

Third, it is not a mere head knowledge of what the Bible says against sin. Many unconverted men read their Bibles and clearly know that their case is laid down there. They are sensible men. They know very well that they are in sin, and they know just as well that the wages of sin is death. One man lives as a swearer, and he reads the words and understands them perfectly: "Swear not at all"—"The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain." Another man lives in the lusts of the flesh, and he reads the Bible and understands these words perfectly: "No unclean person hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Another man lives in habitual forgetfulness of God—never thinks of God from sunrise to sunset—and yet he reads: “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God.” Most unconverted men have a head knowledge of their sin and of the wages of sin; yet this is far from conviction of sin. This is a mere natural work in the head. Conviction of sin is a work of God upon the heart. If you have had nothing more than this head knowledge that you are sinners, then you have never been convinced of sin.

Fourthly, conviction of sin is not the same as feeling the loathsomeness of sin. This is what a child of God feels. A child of God has seen the beauty and excellency of God, and therefore sin is loathsome in his eyes. But no unconverted person has seen the beauty and excellency of God; therefore, even the Spirit cannot make him feel the loathsomeness of sin. Just as when you leave a room that is brilliantly lit and go

out into the darkness of the open air, the night looks very dark; so when a child of God has been within the veil—in the presence of his reconciled God, in full view of the Father of lights, dwelling in light inaccessible and full of glory—then, when he turns his eye inwards upon his own sinful bosom, sin appears very dark, very vile, and very loathsome. But an unconverted soul never has been in the presence of the reconciled God; therefore, sin cannot appear dark and loathsome in his eyes. Just as when you have tasted something very sweet and pleasant, other things appear very insipid and disagreeable; so when a child of God has tasted and seen that God is gracious, the taste of sin in his own heart becomes very nauseous and loathsome to him. But an unconverted soul never tasted the sweetness of God's love; he cannot, therefore, feel the vileness and loathsomeness of sin. This, then, is not the conviction of sin here spoken of.

What, then, is this conviction of sin? It is a just sense of the dreadfulness of sin. It is not a mere knowledge that we have many sins and that God's anger is revealed against them all; but it is a heart-feeling that we are under sin. Again, it is not a feeling of the loathsomeness of sin—that is felt only by the children of God; but it is a feeling of the dreadfulness of sin, of the dishonor it does to God, and of the wrath to which it exposes the soul. Oh, brethren, conviction of sin is no slight natural work upon the heart. There is a great difference between knowing a thing and having a just sense of it. There is a great difference between knowing that vinegar is sour and actually tasting and feeling that it is sour. There is a great difference between knowing that fire will burn us, and actually feeling the pain of being burned. Just in the same way, there is all the difference in the world between knowing the dreadfulness of your sins and feeling the

dreadfulness of your sins. It is in vain that you read your Bible and hear it preached unless the Spirit use the words to give sense and feeling to your dead hearts. The plainest words will not awaken you as long as you are in a natural condition. If we could prove to you, with the plainness of arithmetic, that the wrath of God is abiding on you and your children, still you would sit unmoved; you would go away and forget it before you reached your own door. He that made your heart can alone impress your heart. It is the Spirit that convinces of sin.

Learn the true power of the read and preached Word. It is but an instrument in the hand of God. It has no power of itself except to produce natural impressions. It is a hammer, but God must break your hearts with it. It is a fire, but God must kindle your soul with it. Without Him, we may give you a knowledge of the dreadfulness of your condition, but only He can give you a

just sense and feeling of the dreadfulness of your condition. The most powerful sermon in the world can make nothing more than a natural impression, but when God works through it, the feeblest word makes a supernatural impression. Many a poor sermon has been the means by which God has converted a soul. Children of God, that you would pray night and day for the lifting up of the arm of God!

Learn that conversion is not in your own power. It is the Spirit alone who convinces of sin, and He is a free agent. He is a sovereign Spirit and has nowhere promised to work at the bidding of unconverted men. He has many on whom He will have mercy; whom He will, He hardens. Perhaps you think you may take your fill of sin just now, and then come and repent, and be saved; but remember the Spirit is not at your bidding. He is not your servant. Many hope to be converted on their deathbed; then they come to

their deathbed and yet are not converted. If the Spirit is working with you now, do not grieve Him, do not resist Him, do not quench Him, for He may never come back to you again.

The Arguments the Spirit Uses

There are two arguments by which the Spirit usually gives men a sense of the dreadfulness of sin.

1. *The Law*: “The law is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ”—“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God.” The sinner reads the law of the great God who made heaven and earth. The Spirit of God arouses his conscience to see that the law condemns every part of his life. The law bids him love God. His heart tells him he never loved God—never had a thought of regard toward God. The Spirit convinces

him that God is a jealous God—that His honor is concerned to uphold the law and destroy the sinner. The Spirit convinces him that God is a just God—that He can by no means clear the guilty. The Spirit convinces him that He is a true God—that He must fulfill all His threats: “Have I said it, and shall I not do it?” The sinner’s mouth is stopped and he stands guilty before God.

2. *The gospel*: “Because they believe not on Jesus.” This is the strongest of all arguments, and therefore is chosen by Christ here. The sinner reads in the Word that “he that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life”; and now the Spirit convinces him that he never believed on the Son of God—indeed, he does not know what it means. For the first time the conviction comes upon his heart: “He that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” The more glorious and divine that Savior is, the

more is the Christless soul convinced that he is lost, for he feels that he is outside of that Savior. He sees plainly that Christ is an almighty ark riding over the deluge of God's wrath, and he sees how safe and happy the little company are that are gathered within; but this just makes him gnash his teeth in agony, for he is not inside the ark, and the waves and billows are coming over him. He hears that Christ has been stretching out His hands all the day to the chief of sinners, not willing that they should perish; but then he never cast himself into these arms, and now he feels that Christ may be laughing at his calamity, and mocking when his fear comes. Oh yes, my friends! How often on the death-bed, when the natural fears of conscience are aided by the Spirit of God and how often, when we speak of Christ, His love, His atoning blood, the refuge to be found in Him, how safe and happy all are that are in Him—how often does the dying sinner

turn it all away with the awful question, But am I in Christ? The more we tell of the Savior, the more their agony is increased, for they feel that that is the Savior they have refused. What meaning this gives to these words: "The Spirit convinceth of sin, because they believe not on me."

1. Now, my friends, there are many of you who know that you never believed on Jesus and yet you are quite unmoved. You sit without any emotion, you eat your meals with appetite, and you doubtless sleep sound at night. Do you wish to know the reason? You have never been convinced of sin. The Spirit has never begun His work in your heart. Oh, if the Spirit of Jesus would come on your hearts, like a mighty rushing wind, what a dreadful thought it would be to you this night, that you are still outside of Christ! You would lose your appetite for this world's food, you would not be able to rest in your bed, you would not dare to live on in your

sins. All your past sins would rise behind you like apparitions of evil. Wherever you went you would meet the word, "Without Christ, without hope, and without God in the world"; and if your worldly friends should try to hush your fears and tell you of your decencies and that you were not so bad as your neighbors, and that many might fear if you feared, how you would thrust them away, cover your ears, and cry, "There is a city of refuge, to which I have never fled; therefore, there must be a blood-avenger. There is an ark; therefore, there must be a coming deluge. There is a Christ; therefore, there must be a hell for the Christless."

2. Some of you may be under conviction of sin—you feel the dreadfulness of being out of Christ, and you are very miserable. First, be thankful for this work of the Spirit: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father." God has brought you into the wilderness just that He might

allure you and speak to your heart about Christ. This is the way He begins the work in every soul He saves. Nobody ever came to Christ without first being convinced of sin. All who are now in heaven began this way. Be thankful you are not dead like those around you.

Second, do not lose these convictions. Remember they are easily lost. Involve yourself over head and ears in business, and work even on the Sabbath, and you will soon drive all away. Indulge a little in sensual pleasure, take a little diversion with companions, and you will soon be as happy and careless as they. If you love your soul, flee these things. Do not stay; flee away from them. Read the books that keep up your anxiety, wait on the ministers that keep up that anxiety. Above all, cry to the Spirit, who alone was the author of it, that He would keep it up. Cry night and day that He would never

let you rest out of Christ. Oh, would you sleep over hell?

And third, do not rest in these convictions. You are not saved yet. Many have come thus far and perished after all; many have been convinced, not converted; many lose their convictions and wallow in sin again. "Remember Lot's wife." You are never safe until you are within the fold. Christ is the door. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate; for many shall seek to enter in and shall not be able." Amen.

Killing Remaining Sin

Every Christian finds himself living out two realities: what he is in Christ, and what he is at present, wherever he happens to be in his earthly pilgrimage. The one reality is the fact of his justification “by faith alone in Christ alone” from the guilt of all sin and his personal union with Christ crucified, risen again, and received up into glory.

The other reality is the Christian’s degree of personal sanctification. Unlike justification, sanctification is never complete in this life. A substantial first step is the regeneration of the heart that marks the beginning of all true Christian life. But the way forward is rife with difficulties. We can go backward as well as forward in this way; and we all pass through seasons of stagnation and declension.

The Christian learns early on that sin still has a hold on him and remains in him, even “besetting” him, dogging his

steps and burdening him with guilt and shame. Paul describes this remaining sin as “another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind” (Rom. 7:23).

How does the believer respond to this “law of sin”? We must mortify (put to death) what Paul calls “the old man and his deeds,” and “the lusts of the flesh” (Rom. 8:13; 13:14; Col. 3:15). This mortification is both a *gift* (of the Holy Spirit) and a *duty* (ours). In our own strength we cannot accomplish any lasting mortification, without the Spirit’s grace. But by the powerful and enabling grace of the Holy Spirit, we may and must hate sin, strangle it, and put a sword through it. We must meditate often on the horrific consequences of sinning against our beloved, triune God and Savior. We must know our own hearts and weaknesses, and avoid those situations that tend to promote the temptations that we are weakest in battling against. We must cast off all remnants of the life

we left behind when we began to follow Christ. We must put ourselves under the death-dealing power of the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14) so that the Spirit of Christ may put to death what is earthly in us.

The Spirit of Christ focuses us on Christ when teaching us how to mortify sin. Mortification begins when we condemn our sins as transgressions of the law of God. We confess these sins to be forgiven by God and cleansed by the blood of Christ. Then we forsake these sins for Christ's sake. Paul tells us to fight against sin from a position of strength (Rom. 6; Eph. 6). Know what you are in Christ. In Christ we have died unto sin. In Christ we have been raised again to newness of life. In Christ crucified we have been set free from sin's dominion and continue to die to sin, so that, as John Owen emphasizes, we experience the death of sin in the death of Christ. Sin may assail but cannot master us, so long as we stand firm in

Christ, calling upon His name. In Christ we are assured of God's help in striving against sin. Though we may fall and lose various skirmishes against sin, because of our union and communion with Christ we have by faith the promise of ultimate victory and final deliverance, which, more than anything else, gives us hope and sustenance in the daily fight against sin. The only sin fatal to our cause is unbelief. Unbelief alone can rob us of God's grace and shut us out of His kingdom.

—Joel R. Beeke

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