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THE MORALITY OF CHRISTIANITY

Southern Baptist Convention Sermon preached by J. B.
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Galatians 6:10

This text is a simple exhortation to moral action. Behind it is the apostle's conviction that all men live under the moral law of the harvest, that whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. Behind it also is the conviction that Christianity is not only a fellowship of faith, but a brotherhood of moral obligation in which one man seeks another's good, and men bear one another's burdens. It is an exhortation to simple kindness and helpfulness toward the needy and downhearted. It was written by Paul to the Galatian Christians in a time when both physical want and spiritual peril were poignant and critical. Wealth and a sense of security were the fortune of a comparatively few. The range of want was wide, and its threatening shadows were never absent. Especially was this true among the Christians, for the followers of Jesus were often despised as deserters of their traditional faiths; they were cut off from their means of livelihood, banished from their homes, and persecuted in all the ways that religious prejudice could devise. In addition to such sufferings, and far more dangerous, were the spiritual perils of

of pagan environments which sought constantly to entice and ensnare and pull men back into their old pagan sins. Men needed one another. Many there were who were weak and uncertain and stumbling, needing the comfort of another's generosity, the reenforcement of another's faith, the strength of another's moral triumph. It was people like these and conditions like these that Paul had in mind when he wrote, "So then we have opportunity let us work that which is good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of faith.

Today these simple words press forward for a new utterance and emphasis. There are other texts of greater grandeur and emphasis. There are other texts of greater grandeur and more stirring phraseology, born of more dramatic circumstances, but none is more Christlike than this, and none touches like more surely or helpfully. If we will follow its sure counsel and make its application as broad and deep as the needs of our day demand it will charge modern Christianity with a new and strange power. If we will search out the springs of its passion, and discover for ourselves its motive, its vision and the wisdom of its final emphasis, it will prove its meaning amid the complex moral situations which we face in the growing social network of our twentieth century. It was uttered first in a comparatively simple social situation, but it has in it the

secret of moral triumph in every situation. Let me repeat it: "Let us work that which is good," - there sounds the essential moral note of our religion.

"Toward all men" - there sounds the note of a universal moral obligation. "And especially toward them that are of the household of faith" - there sounds the note of moral fraternity which is essential to Christian triumph.

Christianity Is a Moral Religion

Christianity is a moral religion. It comes to men with a doctrine to be believed; it announces a divine atonement by which men find everlasting fellowship with the Eternal Father; it preaches a regeneration that changes the spirit of men. It also creates in man a moral motive, introducing him to moral purity and love, and to that goodness of heart which can find no rest except in doing good. And this moral motive is not an option, it is of the very essence of our religion. Let there be no divorce between the two. There are some in our day who magnify morality and minimize religion; and there are others who magnify religion and display a low moral sensitivity. And they never tire of warring against one another. The moralist accuses the religionist of being a spiritual dope addict, and the religionist accuses the moralist of being a drowning man grasping at a straw. And both are right if morality and religion are divorced. But in Christianity they are not two, but one, as essentially and vitally one as the vine and the branches.

The morality of Christianity is the logic of all its doctrines, the fruit of Christian experience and the inspiring challenge of him who loved us and gave himself for us. It is bound up with vital faith as inseparably as the lily's beauty and fragrance are bound up with the lily.

Examine the Christian faith at any point and you will find this to be true. The Christian doctrine of God awakens inevitably the moral sense. Other religions have their theologies that leave the worshiper morally cold and bankrupt because they are partial and perverted. Not many weeks ago I walked through a temple in which there were seven hundred gilded gods. I saw men and women prostrate upon the floor. In another temple I saw scores of priests participating in a ceremonial setting apart other men to the priesthood of those gilded gods. They had their theology, but what a vast difference there is between their faith and ours! Like us they believe in the knowledge and the power of deity. That is why they prostrated themselves in fear, trembling and pleading for mercy. But there was not light from heaven, no lifting up of the heart, no moral vision inspiring the soul to purity and love and good deeds. The gilded gods were as hard as the wood out of which they were made and were looked to not to remake character but only to reshape circumstance. But our God has that

in him which banishes fear and lifts up our hearts and sets our hands to noble deeds. Hear the words of Jesus, two words, two little words that gave to the world its sublimest theology: "Holy Father." Such is our God. Jesus Christ gave him to us, or rather he gave us to him, imparting to us that spirit that cries "Father." He called him "Father" and the world was flooded with a new hope. He also called him "Holy," and said to those about him, "Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." And surely that moral challenge was as truly in the will of God as his message of mercy. If Fatherhood means hope and assurance, Holiness means moral aspiration, and one dare not claim the peace of security if one does not know the passion for goodness. One cannot accept the benefits of Fatherhood without accepting also the requirements of Holiness.

But the morality of Christianity is more than a challenge by its view of God. What God requires he gives. That is the deep meaning of the Cross. Jesus was "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." The purpose of the Cross was moral. "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin." The Cross is more than legal satisfaction. The atonement is more than a contract of fellowship sealed with blood. The fiery passion of Calvary, like the living coal that touched Isaiah's lips, burns out fear and self-pity and despair,

pride and selfishness, and subdues man's spirit to the will of God. Salvation is cleansing; it is a new birth, a new creation. It is a new kind of life in a new realm - eternal life in the Kingdom of God. And that means a spiritual order which is over all - that order which Isaiah saw in the temple, and Stephen when they were stoning him, and John on the isle of Patmos. It means also a pure life in a moral order where there is no place for anything that defiles. It means a socially dedicated life in a social order where no man can say "Am I my brother's keeper?" whose law of life is love, and whose highest dream and hope is the untrammelled presence of Christ and his unquestioned rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Christian doctrine and Christian experience awake in men the urge to work that which is good. I speak of reality, not of mere profession and pretense. Paul protested that there was nothing unique in his experience of grace and he would protest that there was nothing unique in his urge to do good. Around the world today the essential morality of Christianity is manifest. In our mission work in China, for example, we see the Christian spirit following human need farther and farther and saying at an increasing number of points, "Such as I have give I unto thee." Our first missionaries first saw the appalling spiritual darkness and guilt and despair

which were the work of sin, and their answer was the evangel of grace, the gospel of Jesus Christ unto the salvation of the soul. Soon another need was seen in the intellectual poverty and superstition which fettered the spirits of men, and Christianity answered with Christian schools. Another need appeared in the diseases and pestilences that brought suffering and death and sorrow, and Christian compassion with its urge to do good began to build hospitals and in every possible way to heal the bodies of men and eradicate disease. And in more recent years Christianity has seen other needs. It has seen a poverty that not only keeps men hungry and dirty and cuts off life prematurely, but also makes self-supporting and growing church life impossible. And these needs and the Spirit of Christ are compelling us to enlarge the work of foreign missions to encourage and promote those economic, agricultural and industrial movements that will make possible in China a vigorous church life and free the Chinese for a great spiritual advance. American missionaries can no longer go to China and preach the gospel without also living the gospel in doing what a Christian ought to do in the presence of all kinds of human need. The Christian missionary cannot give to the Chinese the spirit of the abundant life and then refuse to teach and heal and counsel and plan with them for the further freedoms. And you and I

at home must understand that if Christianity is to represent Christ either at home or abroad it must follow human need wherever it calls and answer in the spirit of this text.

"Let us work that which is good" is the vibrant echo of the ministry of our Lord himself. He went about doing good and went forth to preach and teach and heal, - to deliver human spirits and unshackle human life, filling men with the life and light of God. That we must also do. "Let us work that which is good," not that which may by chance have a good effect sometimes somewhere, but that which is good when it is conceived and before it leaves our hearts. Paul is saying, as Christ said, that Christian living must have the moral quality of goodness. Its deeds must be the calculations of love. Remember that deed of Mary's concerning which Jesus said "She hath wrought a good work on me." It was not its originality, not its prodigality, that made it shine, but its love, sympathetic insight and its fulness and simplicity of devotion that sought to do its best. In Christian morality "good" is a superlative. Mary's good work was her best work. "She hath done what she could." That which is good is not out of an evil spring. It is not selfish or dishonest or false. Like love it seeks not its own. It is not of pride to be seen of men. It breathes no hatred. It nourishes no jealousy. Goodness seeks another's good and asks no

recompense. It is born in a heart that knows what love is, love that is akin to the love of Christ. And such goodness lies at the very heart of Christianity.

Christianity Is an Adventure in Goodness

The Christian life then, urges Paul, is an advance in goodness. The mercies of Romans one to eleven call for the morals of Romans twelve to sixteen. "Let us do good" is the inescapable voice of Christian experience and of the holy example of Christ. But something more is to be added. The morality of Christianity is not to be thought of as exclusive or provincial. The universal note must be added: "Let us work that which is good toward all men."

That was not easily said, and less easily acted upon, in the first century. The religions of the world were still provincial in their outlook and morals. Even the Jewish religion with its noble ideas and prophetic outlook was still Jewish. It paid scant attention to aliens and strangers and outcasts. And it was a sharp, two-tongued lash that Jesus laid upon the religionists of Israel when in the parable of the Good Samaritan he suggested that it was easy for orthodoxy to be blind to its moral obligation to humanity and that there were heathen men who surpassed them in goodness. Their morality said "Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy." His morality replied, "Love your enemies,

and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. For if ye love them that love you what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only what do ye more than others? Do not even the Gentiles the same? Ye therefore shall be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." He astounded the religious leaders by his strong emphasis on the universality of moral obligation. He surprised his disciples and the Samaritan woman by his lack of racial prejudice. His goodness overleapt all barriers of sex, race, religion, class and condition. Only once did he seem to hesitate at a racial barrier, but in that seeming harshness toward the Syrophoenician woman he was showing his disciples the utter folly and impossibility of limiting the moral responsibility of a Christian spirit to a nation or a race.

Paul reiterated again and again what he saw and heard and felt in Christ. He preached a moral reality and passion that must express itself in an overleaping desire to do good to all men. It meant in that day the returning of good for evil, the banishment of hatred on the part of Jew and Gentile alike; it meant the abandonment of trickery and deception in trade, and giving to the poor, pagan poor as well as Christian poor, out of scanty resources; it meant that the strong must bear

the infirmities of the weak and lift up those who stumble. In short, it meant an attitude of helpfulness that was positive, open-eyed, and unhampered by any artificial barriers. It saw all men as brothers and human need as Christian opportunity.

"Let us work that which is good toward all men." Can we measure the meaning of that principle in our day and in our streets? "Toward all men." There are the members of my family, the friends of my neighborhood, the people of my church and my clubs, my partners in business and those upon whom I depend for a livelihood. To do good toward these may be a pleasure. But there are others. The negro servant, the negro family living in the alleys of our cities and the shacks on our farms, the noisy neighbors who do not fit in, the Jews, the other races of different colors and customs, the competitors, the exploiters, the atheists and heretics, all of these are but the beginning of the roll-call of all the kinds of men that fill my world, my little world that I touch daily. It is a world that tries my soul. It excites my prejudices, gets on my nerves, costs me money. It makes me afraid. One Jew or Catholic makes me think kindly of the Ku Klux Klan. One foreigner makes me think in terms of big armies and navies. It is no easy thing to do good toward all men in my little personal world. One must first be good and then keep

his heart warm by dwelling constantly upon the goodness of God.

Paul uses one expression here which someone may lean upon to ease his burden. He says "as (or while) we have opportunity." Now in that day life was thus limited, the door of opportunity was not large and the path of opportunity was neither wide nor long. But not so today. We touch our world at a hundred points more quickly and more powerfully than a first century Christian touched his at one. We no longer live in our little personal world, but in the world of races and nations and vast interrelationships. No longer are our attitudes concerned only and directly with persons, but with institutions and movements and with persons as they are related to them. Doing good to all men draws us to face the question of war, and to face it as Christians in the light of Jesus Christ and the Cross of Christ. It draws us to face the spirit of nationalism in the light of Christian internationalism and the foreign mission enterprise. It draws us to face racialism and our duty as a favored race and as Southern Baptists toward another race whose millions share our particular faith, walk the same streets with us, and work in our fields and factories. It draws us to face the inhumanities of an economic and industrial system whose chief principle is self-interest and whose chief passion is profits. The challenge to Christian moral action comes to us today through broader doors and

and from greater distances than ever before in Christian history. I suggest no program of action, but I do remind you that Christianity must play a part. The Christian conversion experience is a moral experience, the Christian motive is a moral motive, the Christian life is a moral adventure, and the Christian mission in the world is one of moral transformation, whose achievement hinges upon the quality of soul that we call goodness toward all men.

Christians Owe Something to Fellow Christians

The final emphasis of our text, however, is not on the universal note. Paul adds "and especially toward them that are of the household of faith." We are debtors to all men, but we are not debtors to all men equally; we owe a special moral obligation to our fellow-Christians. Goodness owes its first duty at home.

Was that an anti-climax? I confess that I used to think so. That word "especially" seemed to surrender something, to retreat from that high position from which one could see the whole world at once. Men love the mountains. There is a thrill in the far distances and magnificent panoramas. We Christians are warmed by those all inclusive words, "the world" "all the world," "all the nations," "all men," "always," "all things." Let us work that which is good toward all men." "In those words a universal religion calls to a universal goodness. But then comes that narrowing "especially" that brings us

back home with a call to do our first work there. Anti-climax? To the mere dreamer and romanticist, yes. But to the missionary who wanted to see Christ crowned King in all the world, no. Here was no retreat, no provincialism come out of hiding, no incipient ecclesiasticism, but the insight of a prophet and the wisdom of a statesman who knew that the "fundamental condition of a successful war is the impregnability of the home front," that the evangelization of the world waits upon the moralization of the church. For the home front in Christianity is the Christian community, the church, the household of faith. World consciousness must not discount church consciousness, not the brotherhood of man destroy the unique brotherhood of believers.

If Paul could be challenged to give his reasons for this final emphasis he would begin there with that word "brotherhood" or "family." One is our Father and all we are brethren, bound by a common faith and experience in a common sonship to God and brotherhood with one another. To recognize that kinship and honor it with a special love and care is not to disparage other relationships. The reasonableness of that appeal must not be lost upon us, for the choice of the terms associated with the family relationships to symbolize the Christian bond was made by the Lord himself. Christian fraternity must be restored to a high place in our loyalties. The ties that bind our hearts in Christian love we must cherish, knowing this,

that if our churches are to live and be strong and effective in their mission to all men they must be supported from within by the power of brotherly love.

Paul would remind us also, no doubt, of special conditions of poverty and social ostracism that made the early Christians everywhere almost wholly dependent upon one another for sympathy and help. Judaism and paganism together had seen to that. And for Christians to have failed in that day would have been to leave them in hunger, loneliness and despair, and thus to have brought disrupting disaster upon the Christian movement. The necessity of circumstance had a part in that final emphasis.

After a brief word about such things, the Spirit that spoke in that first century would turn to us of the twentieth century and say that the exhortation holds. The world is not herding us together and marking us for persecution, but it is doing something worse: it is assimilating us, drawing us to its own moralities, breaking down our spiritual loyalties and making us forget our mission. And we need one another desperately to save us from ourselves, our attitudes, and the inviting world. Like Simon Peter, too many of us find ourselves denying the deepest facts of our experience, and dishonoring him for whom we would gladly die. We need one another not to be critics, but brothers, even as the disciples needed one another on the eve of the crisis of Calvary. Recall

how they went with Jesus to the upper room to observe the passover. There was the basin with the water, but not one of the twelve was in a mood to serve. They were thinking of place and power. They had the dust of the world not only on their feet, but on their hearts, and that in an hour when humility and brotherliness ought to have been at their best. Jesus saw and arose from the table, girded himself with a servant's apron, washed their feet, and said, "Ye also ought to wash one another's feet." 'You ought to help one another keep clean'. And that call with its special emphasis comes home to us in a day when the air is full of dust. We are tempted to deny him, to betray him for silver, to fight among ourselves for position, to violate truth and honor, and bestow on a secular world the loyalties that belong to the household of faith. We ought to wash one another's feet, to help one another keep clean.

Our own peril calls us, but not that alone. Many people in the world are saying that Christianity does not have the moral resources adequate to produce a peaceful and well-ordered society. They are challenging the power of Christ to destroy selfishness. Love, they say, fades as it passes beyond even the simplest primary relationships. Christianity may give to an individual a sense of security and create a certain inward peace and hope of peace in another world, but as between man and man and groups of men they deny that it has power to conquer.

That is our challenge and it cannot be dismissed. We must take it up and in all earnestness dedicate our generation to making Christianity Christian. And that is not done by taking the name, but by establishing a fellowship of unselfishness, unalloyed and positive, free from self-seeking, dishonor, jealousy and strife. We all of us in a freest dedication of ourselves to the moral idealism of Jesus must find and prove his power. For until Christianity can point to churches and Christian communities as the rule, rather than the exception, and say, "Behold here and here and here the power of Christ to make a society after the pattern of his principles of purity, love, and service," we have no acceptable answer to the unbelieving world. In the churches Christianity has its easiest opportunity of social success. There men profess a common experience, a common faith and loyalty; they subscribe to the same high motives. There, through association in sorship and a common task, men have an opportunity of understanding one another, and every incentive to adjustment. Therefore if the church is the home of disharmony that defies adjustment, of self-seeking that tramples upon another's welfare, of jealousy that has no praise for another's worth, of dishonor that shames and destroys, - if Christian morality cannot succeed in a professedly Christian group then it cannot be made operative in a workaday world; and from the social point of view to Christianize the world would not be to save the world.

I speak not as an unbeliever, not as a pessimist. I believe in the power of Christ. I believe also in the timeliness of the apostle's exhortation, for the power of Christ is available now for men who claim it, who are willing to leave all and follow him in self-denial and sacrificial brotherhood. For such a proof and witness of the reality and power of our faith the unbelieving world waits. And Christ waits. "So then while we have opportunity let us work that which is good - toward all men - and especially toward them that are of the household of faith."