GREAT PULPIT MASTERS

VOLUME VIII

A. J. GORDON

INTRODUCTION BY
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Like calls for like in the divine reckoning. You cannot balance your book by making music a voucher for money and singing, "Worthy the Lamb that was slain to receive riches," while you keep your riches to yourselves.

A.J.G.

16. THE MISSIONARY DEBT

I am a debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and to the unwise.—Romans 1:14.

A remarkable saying this, and not least because those to whom the Apostle declared himself indebted had never brought any claim against him. Merchants press their debtors for payment; but debtors pressing their creditors to allow them to pay an unrecognized claim—what an extraordinary thing is this in man's dealing with man! Yet this is what the Apostle was constantly doing in his ministry. To his listeners in cultured Athens, inquiring why he had come thither, and to the rude inhabitants of Melita, wondering at his message and at his visit to this island, his answer would be the same: "I have come to settle a pressing obligation to you, for I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and to the unwise. Not only my own kinsmen according to the flesh, but aliens and strangers are my spiritual creditors. To these I must pay what I owe."

What is the Great Commission but a transfer of obligation from the ascending Lord to the world which He has redeemed? You would like to express to Him how much you feel you owe Him for the gift of eternal life; you would gladly make a royal offering such as Nicodemus
brought to honor His burial. But He is gone, and can no longer accept such personal tokens of affection. Yet provision has been made that His heirs shall receive what is owing to Him. And His heirs are all men for whom He has shed His precious blood. Have you never found yourself indebted to one whom you have never seen, and with whom you have had no direct dealings? A summons comes to you from a perfect stranger to settle a specified obligation, and you ask in astonishment, "Who are you that you should make such a demand upon me?" The answer is that "Mr. Blank holds your note for the sum named; he is dead and I am his rightful heir." That makes all plain. And China's millions, the myriads of India, the dying souls of Africa and the islands of the sea are importuning us to pay our debt to them. When such demand is strongly pressed from the pulpit even some Christians ask with astonishment how the claim may be defended. We reply, "Christ is dead, and these are His heirs; they have redemption rights which have been created by the shedding of His blood, and they now exact of your estate a settlement. In appealing on their behalf we do not ask charity; we plead for equity. We bid you deal as honestly with the heirs of Jesus Christ as with the heirs of your own brother who has made you his executor." Is it not a shame that so many well-to-do Christians, whose business pride would never suffer them to be behind a day in meeting their financial obligations, are ready to take the poor debtor's oath the moment you mention the claims of the unevangelized world, and with ample means in their hands yet beg their pastor to give them their discharge in bankruptcy?

I stand here in behalf of these heirs of Jesus Christ. As their advocate I am in court to plead their cause and defend His will. Listen to this: "Who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." He has made provision for carrying out His will, that "he gave himself a ransom for all to be testified in due time." Matthew Henry says beautifully that Jesus gave all His personal possessions before He died. He gave His peace to His disciples: "My peace I give unto you." He gave His clothes to the soldiers: "They parted his garments among them." He gave His mother to His beloved disciple: "Woman, behold thy son." Yes, and the only bequest He left was of that which could not be given away till after His death. The title deed of redemption He made over to the world, for which He gave His life. By the "death of the testator" that legacy is now due. The Greek and the barbarian, the Brahmin of India, and the savage of Africa, the scholar of Japan and the ignorant peasant of China—all these have a right to claim from the church and to demand of you and me the Gospel of salvation, the knowledge of the "way the truth and the life." The Apostle to the Gentiles acknowledged this claim, and, at the cost of unspeakable self-denials and hardships, gave himself to meeting it. Yet we are just as truly and just as greatly debtors as was He, and debtors to precisely the same kinds of people. Repudiate the claim if you will, but I warn any of you who do repudiate it that such a course means eternal insolvency when you are called to answer at the judgment-seat of Christ.

Deeds do not find their equivalent in mere words. Our obligation was contracted by the sacrifice of Christ; its discharge must be by the sacrifice of self. It is a significant note in the song of the heavenly choir: "Worthy the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing." "Riches," mark you, before "honor and glory and blessing." If you
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were to borrow a thousand dollars from the bank, and were to go to the officials when the note became due, and say, "I have called to express my thanks for the loan of that money." I venture to think they would reply, "Pay what you owe us first, please, and then thank us afterward." Let us understand before it is too late that celestial praises are no equivalent for the sacrifice of the cross. Christ enjoins us to answer His cross born on Calvary with our cross borne in daily self-denial, His surrender of heavenly riches with our surrender of earthly riches. Like calls for like in the divine reckoning. You cannot balance your books by making music a voucher for money and singing, "Worthy the Lamb that was slain to receive riches," while you keep your riches to yourselves.

Note the practical turn of the Apostle's word in Hebrews. "By him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks in his name." But lest we should conclude that lip service is enough, he adds: "But to do good and to communicate forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well-pleased." The praise of giving, the worship of surrendered wealth! This is what God calls for imperatively. Yet how constantly we labor to cheat God out of His dues, and to cheat ourselves out of our reward in our manner of bestowing. We say to a brother, "You could give a hundred dollars to this cause and not feel it." That means: "You can shave closely to the edge of self-sacrifice, and yet not touch it; you can bestow charity and yet keep clear of the cross." What ingenuity of self-defrauding! God would have us give so that we shall feel it. More than the money rendered to Him is the mortification of our avarice in giving it. It is not what a contribution nets Him but what it costs us which determines its real value. I know not but that the

widow's mite, the giving of which causes her to go hungry a day is of more value than contributions from the wealthy man's millions which necessitated no curtailment of his luxuries to bestow.

So I do not urge on you merely this question "How much owest thou to thy Lord?" but I urge you to pay the debt in kind. It is written of our blessed Lord that "though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich." To make any adequate return we must impoverish ourselves in our luxuries, we must straiten ourselves in our living; we must let our charity go so deep that it hurts. I am eager that we shall all learn what we may of the "sacrifice of giving" while we still have the opportunity. Fasting is enjoined in the Word of God. Why? Does it profit God when we fast? No, but it costs us something. And the things which cost us will be the things which bless us. Whatever humbles this proud flesh of ours tends to lift us Godward: whatever taxes our self-indulgence tends to enrich our faith. As between the flesh and the spirit, the great objective is to tip the scale toward the spirit. In order to this we must not only put into the spirit side of the balance spiritual things, but we must take out of the flesh side of the balance fleshly things. A pound of avarice taken out of one side does as much to turn the scale Godward as a pound of benevolence put into the other side. So he who gives till he feels it secures a double blessing, the blessing of gain to God's treasury, and the blessing of loss to his own covetousness. In the Sermon on the Mount we have the so-called Beatitudes of Jesus, but from the Mount of Glory He gives us a "more-than" beatitude. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Christ had claimed this beatitude for Himself. "He gave Himself for our sins." And now He invites us to share this highest beat-
attitude with Him, by giving ourselves to Him. Let us give therefore—give ourselves, give our money, give our time, give our all. The sacrifice of Calvary has put an assessment of love on every redeemed soul. That assessment cannot be paid with crumbs shaken from the table-cloth after we have enjoyed a sumptuous meal; it cannot be paid with pennies drawn from the bank in which the pounds are untouched; it cannot be paid from the interest which forever leaves the principal intact for our own use. Redeemed as we have been by the precious blood of Christ, let us treat the Son of God as our creditor, to whom we owe a debt, not as a pauper to whom we may dole out alms.

Remember this, too, that God’s claims, as well as man’s, become outlawed if not settled on time. We hear talk about a second probation for sinners who, while living, neglected their opportunity of grace. I do not believe in that doctrine. Neither do I believe in any second probation of Christians who failed to do their duty to the world in their day and generation. There will be no chance for us to preach the Gospel to the heathen after we have passed through the narrow portals of the grave. There will be no chance to give to the cause of missions when our hands are stiffened in death. Skeleton fingers cannot turn a safe key, or sign a check or open a pocket-book. The present is our opportunity; and opportunity is but another word for importance; as though God did beseech you by us to use the present moment for doing all possible for making known the grace of God to all those who have not heard it.

This incident occurred in a bank recently. A plain man, evidently not accustomed to the ways of business, called for the cashier of the bank. “Bank closed at two o’clock,” was the gruff reply. “But I called to pay that note of mine.” “Too late,” was the reply, “it has gone to protest.” “But here is the money,” insisted the farmer. “Sorry, but we cannot receive it.” “What,” exclaimed the astonished debtor, “don’t you receive money that is due you when I have it in hand?” “No, sir,” was the inexorable verdict, “it is too late.” And the iron gate was shut in the man’s face.

It is a sort of parable and prophecy of what may occur on a larger scale by-and-by. Belated servants will crowd around the judgment seat to pay the dues of which an awakened conscience has now at length reminded them. I see them reaching out eager palms toward the judge. “Lord, I am ready to pay my debt to the unevangelized world, though I have neglected to pay it for so long.” “Lord, I desire to give myself for the salvation of the lost, though I am very slow in reaching the decision.” And the Saviour stretches out His nailed-pierced hand, and answers, “Too late! Too late! This is judgment-day and not pay-day. Oh that thou hadst known in thy day the things that belonged to thy peace.”

Every man’s duty is chiefly to his own generation. This is why I object to Christians’ waiting to bestow their money through their wills. They defraud their real creditors in the interest of those to whom they are not immediately indebted. I can imagine some well-to-do Christian coming up to judgment and hearing the Lord’s word, “Inasmuch as ye did it not,” and answering with a look of exceeding surprise, “Lord, but I did. I gave five thousand dollars at one time for the promotion of missions.” “Examine the book of remembrance,” says the judge to the recording angel. And the latter, after searching, replies: “I find nothing to this man’s account. When did he give as he claims?” “I put it in my will,” the Christian explains. “Alas!” declares the judge. “In that case it is not set down

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here to your credit. Have you never read that it is according to deeds done in the body that men receive their reward? What is done outside the body does not count.”

We learn from Scripture that God worketh in His servants “both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” To will without doing is not obedience; it is only intention. To do without willing is not obedience; it is compulsion. God has constituted these two as parts of one great obligation, and “what God hath joined together let not man put asunder.”

To will what others shall do with your estate after you are dead, others who may have no sympathy with your desires —this is not obeying the command of God. Nay, how does it read, “Will with thy might what thy will findeth to will”? Rather, “Do with thy might what thy hand findeth to do, for there is no work, or knowledge, or device, or wisdom in the grave whither thou goest.”

Again I remind you that just as certainly as “the field is the world,” so certainly the seed-time is now. When the Apostle writes, “As we have opportunity let us do good unto all men,” he uses a word which signifies season. The spring-time is the season for sowing. Therefore it is our opportunity. The autumn is the season for reaping. Therefore it is our opportunity. So time is the seed-plot of eternity. Do with all diligence and dispatch what you ought to do, and do it now. “For the night cometh,” shall I say? No. The day cometh. “The night is far spent,” as the Apostle says, “and the day is at hand.” The Sabbath of the ages is about to dawn. The millennial rest is close upon us. “Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt not do any work.” “There remaineth, therefore, a sabbath keeping for the people of God.” “Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest.”

There are aged men here who have lived through the larger part of this century, and have seen the beginnings and growth of the mighty missions movement. I ask for your five thousands, your one thousands, your hundreds. You can give them. This is your century. The next will not be yours, and you have little hope of living into it. I importune you not to lose your chance of doing what you may do now. It is for you I am solicitous, more than for your gifts. We need your offering, but a hundred times more you need to offer it, for your soul’s sake and for the clearing of your conscience against the day of reckoning. Widows are here with ample property, and none depending on them for support. Young men and women who are earning ample wages. I enjoin you all to seize this opportunity, which may never come again. And may God help you meet to the full your debt to Him.