

The Comfort of the Gospel

The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification – Direction 9

Direction 9: We must first receive the comforts of the gospel, that we may be able to sincerely perform the duties of the law.

Thesis: Receive the comfort of the Gospel.

Introduction: The purpose of this direction is not to limit the comfort of the Gospel, which comes to true believers on every side (Ps. 71:21) both before and after this duty nor is the purpose to give comfort to those who continue in their natural sinful state. This direction is not to ring raptures of joy, but to “rationally strengthen, in some measure, against the oppression of fear, grief and despair, which we are liable to reason of our natural sinfulness and misery.”

I. This is made clear from the principles of holiness already affirmed.

- A. We must have a good persuasion of our reconciliation with God, and of our happiness in heaven, and of our sufficient strength both to will and to do that which is acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, that we may be rationally inclined and bent to the practice of holiness.
- B. These endowments must be had by receiving Christ Himself, with His Spirit, and all His fullness, by trusting on Him for all His salvation, as He is freely promised to us in the gospel.
- C. God will not give such benefits as these to those that do not desire and esteem them above the world, and the very receiving of them will bring comfort.

II. Peace, joy, hope are recommended to us in Scripture as the spring of other holy duties; and fear and oppressing grief forbidden as hindrances.

- A. Scriptures:
 - 1. Phil. 4:7 – “and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”
 - 2. Neh. 8:10 – Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”
 - 3. 1 John 3:3 – “everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”
 - 4. 1 John 4:18 – “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.”
- B. The ability to perform these duties is comfort itself. This is the reason why the apostle doubles the exhortation, to rejoice in the Lord always, as a duty of exceeding weight and necessity (Phil. 4:4).

III. The usual method of gospel doctrine, as it is delivered to us in the Holy Scriptures, is first, to comfort our hearts, and in this way to establish us in every good word and work.

- A. 2 Thess. 2:17
- B. This pattern is followed in the apostles’ writings when they first exhort them in the grace of God toward them and then exhort them to holy living in light of those privileges.

To give you a few instances, out of a multitude that might be alleged, we are exhorted to practice holy duties because we are dead to sin and alive to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:11); and because sin shall not have dominion over us, for we are not under the law, but under

grace (Rom. 6:14); because we are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, and God will quicken our mortal bodies by His Spirit dwelling in us (Rom. 8:9, 11); because our bodies are the members of Christ and the temples of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. 6:15, 19); because God has made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21); and has promised that He will dwell in us, and walk in us, and be to us a Father, and we shall be to Him sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:18; 7:1); because God has forgiven us for Christ's sake, and accounts us His dear children; and Christ has loved us, and given Himself for us; and we, that were sometimes darkness, are now light in the Lord (Eph. 4:32; 5:1, 2, 8); because we are risen with Christ and, when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory (Col. 3:1, 4); because God has said, 'I will never leave you, nor forsake you' (Heb. 13:5); because of the many promises made to us (2 Cor. 7:1). Search the Scriptures, and you may with delight see that this is the vein that runs through gospel exhortations, and you may find the like vein of comfort running through the prophetic exhortations in the Old Testament.

- C. Some object that the apostles used of this method of those who had already begun the faith. Marshall's answer is simple: if this method is appropriate for those already maturing, how much more is it appropriate for those just beginning in the faith?
- D. The gospel proposes peace and comfort freely to those that are not yet brought to holiness that, if they have hearts to receive it, they may be converted from sin to righteousness.

IV. The nature of the duties of the law requires a comfortable state of the soul for the performance of them.

- A. Can we love God, and delight in Him above all, while we look on Him as our everlasting enemy, and apprehend no love and mercy in Him towards us that may render Him a suitable good for us, and lovely in our eyes?

What doleful melody will the heart make in the duty of praise, if we account that all those perfections, for which we praise Him, will rather aggravate our misery than make us happy? What a heartless work will it be to pray to Him, and to offer up ourselves to His service, if we have no comfortable hope that He will accept us? Is it possible for us to free ourselves from carking cares by casting our care upon the Lord, if we do not apprehend He cares for us? Can we be patient in affliction, with cheerfulness, and under persecutions, except we have peace with God and rejoice in hope of the glory of God? (Rom. 5:1-3.) What reason can persuade us to submit willingly, according to our duty, to the stroke of present death, if God is pleased to lay it upon us, when we have no comforts to relieve us against the horrible fear of intolerable torments in hell forever?

- B. If we should be called to suffer martyrdom for the Protestant religion, as our ancestors in this nation have done, we should find it necessary to abandon the late upstart notions that have been bred in a time of ease, and to embrace the comfortable doctrine of former Protestants, which, through the grace of God, made so many courageous and joyful martyrs.

V. After someone is brought from death to life and from sin to godliness, they need confidence and comfort to encourage their fainting souls.

- A. No reputable doctor would tell a bed-ridden man to get up and exercise without first seeing him recovered.
- B. The law obliges one to obedience, but God expects no sincere performance of his law from a person until they have been delivered.
- C. We may require a strong healthy person first to work and then to eat but a fainting, famished person must first have food to strengthen his heart before he can work.

VI. Both Scripture and experience show that this is the method by which God brings His people from sin to holiness.

- A. God gave to Adam, at his first creation, the comfort of His love and favor and the happiness of Paradise to encourage him to obedience, and when he had lost these comforts by the Fall, he was no longer able to obey until he was restored by new comfort of the promised seed.
- B. We have several examples in the New Testament of the joy that sinners had in the first receiving of Christ (Acts 2:41). And when the gospel first came to the Thessalonians, 'they received the word in much affliction, with joy in the Holy Ghost' (1 Thess. 1:4, 5, 6). 'When the Gentiles heard the word of God, they were glad; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed' (Acts 13:48). The apostle Paul was constrained by the love of Christ to give up himself to live to Christ (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).
- C. I dare appeal to the experience of any that obey God out of hearty love. Let them examine themselves and consider whether they were brought to give up themselves to serve God in love without comfortable knowledge of the love of God towards them?

VII. Religion without the comfort of assurance of salvation is an unpleasant and grievous thing.

- A. All true spiritual comfort, as well as salvation, is indeed quite banished out of the world, if it be suspended upon the condition of our good works - which has already appeared to be the condition of the law, that works no comfort, but wrath (Rom. 4:14, 15). This makes the way of godliness odious to many. They think they shall never enjoy a pleasant hour in this world, if they walk in them, and they had rather comfort themselves with sinful pleasure than have no comfort at all.
- B. Others labor a while in such a comfortless religion, with inward fretting and repining at the bondage of it, and at last grow weary and throw off all religion, because they know none better.
 - 1. They that bind such heavy burdens on men, and grievous to be borne, will plead that they are not to be blamed, because they do but preach the gospel of God and Christ; whereas, indeed, they preach a gospel of man's own forging, contrary to the nature of the true gospel of Christ, which is glad tidings of great joy to all people (Luke 2:10).
 - 2. An uncomfortable gospel cannot proceed from God the Father, who is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3); nor from Christ, who is the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25); nor from the Spirit, who is the Comforter (John 14:16, 17).
- C. No sorrow is approved of by God, except godly sorrow, which can never be in us without some comfort of the love of God towards us. They that are offended at the uncomfortableness of a religious life never yet knew the true way of religion; else they would find that the ways of wisdom are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace (Prov. 3:17).