

THE FREE-AGENCY OF CHRIST

"And He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man unto Him, and besought Him to touch him. And He took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town, and when He had spit on his eyes, and put His hands upon him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees walking. After that He put His hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly. And He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town."

Mark 8:22-26

THERE are several points in which these people who brought the blind man to Christ deserve our commendation and our imitation. They believed that Christ could open that blind man's eyes. In like manner, may we all believe that Jesus can save our relatives, friends and acquaintances. If we are ourselves saved, let us always be firmly convinced that He is also able to save any whom we bring before Him in prayer. Let us never give way to despair concerning any person, however far he may have gone into sin. Who but the Divine Savior could open the eyes of this blind man? Nobody. Yet He could do it. So, if your friends are very sinful and hardened, no one but the Lord can save them. But He can do it, so believe that He can do it and in prayer bring your friend to the Savior as these people of Bethsaida brought this blind man to Christ.

Their faith was of a practical kind. They were not content to simply believe that Christ could heal this man and then to remain sitting still. True faith is active faith, so these people brought the blind man to the Savior in whom they believed. If you are praying for any man's salvation, mind that you use the means that will best help to bring about that result. If there is any instrumentality which God peculiarly blesses to the conversion of souls, take care that you bring your friend under that instrumentality in the hope that God will bless it to him. Further, note that the blind man was willing to be brought to Jesus. Evidently he had at least as much faith as his friends had in the power of Jesus to open his eyes. It was a very hopeful case when the man and his friends believed in Christ's power to heal him—it was not likely to be long, then, before the miracle of mercy would be worked!

Observe, also, that the faith of these friends of the blind man was further proved by their earnest prayers on his behalf. They brought him to Jesus, "and besought Him to touch him." It was prayer of a very forceful kind, as the word, "besought," clearly implies. It was also a very plain prayer—they did not make use of fine language, or beat about the bush so as to leave anyone in doubt as to what they wanted for their friend—they brought him to Jesus, "and besought Him to touch him." They desired that the blind man should be made to see and they thought that result would follow from Christ's touch—so they asked for that gift—and, dear Friends, whenever you pray for the conversion of anyone, mind that you pray straight for it. There are prayers that one has heard in Prayer Meetings which seem to go all round the world, but never to come to the case in hand. Let it not be so with you, especially in your private prayers, but pray for Jane, pray for Thomas, pray for your children or friends by name. Believingly, earnestly, in a business-like way put their case before the Lord Jesus Christ, just as if they were ill you would state their symptoms to the best physician you could find and ask him to prescribe for them!

In all these points that I have mentioned, these people are to be commended and imitated—they believed in Christ's power to heal the blind man, they brought their friend to Him and they

besought Christ's favor for him. In doing so, however, they made the mistake of prescribing to Christ the way in which they thought their friend should be healed—they "besought Him to touch him." It was quite the usual thing—indeed, it was almost universally the Savior's rule to heal sick folk by laying His hands on them. And having seen Him do this, perhaps, on several occasions, these people had imbibed the notion that Christ healed the sick by His touch—that this was the special or the only way in which His power was manifested. They did not appear to know that it operated in any other way, so they, "besought Him to touch him." Possibly they had more confidence in the touch than they had in the Christ who gave it! In any event, they thought that the touch was essential to the cure and did not realize that Christ could cure the sick in any way that He pleased—not only by His touch, but by His word, or, if He willed it, even without a word. Thus, they did, as it were, tie the Savior down to one particular method—and their faith, though it was real, was weak. Though it was acceptable as far as it went, it was imperfect—there was a measure of ignorance mingled with it. I am going to deal only with that point as I expect that some of us are making the same mistake that these people made.

1. My first observation will be that IT IS A COMMON WEAKNESS OF FAITH TO EXPECT GRACE TO COME IN A CERTAIN FIXED WAY.

Just as these people expected the healing of the blind man to come by the touch of Christ's hands, so many expect deliverance from trouble to come in a certain specified way. You know it is so with many of you to whom I am speaking. You have taken your troubles to the Lord—you have told Him all about your case and you have entrusted it to Him, but you have laid down the plan by which God is to work on your behalf. You remember how He delivered you on a former occasion and you expect Him to deliver you in exactly the same way again. Or you have been reading the biography of some worthy man who cast his care upon the Lord and he was helped in a certain manner—so you think you will be helped in the same manner. But, very likely, God will do nothing of the kind! He is not bound to give you any blessing in the particular way which you choose to select. He has His own method of giving a blessing and His own plan of warding off evil, so you must leave the, "how," and the, "when," entirely with Him. It is useless for you to think of mapping out the route for Him to whom the Psalmist said, "Your way is in the sea and Your path in the great waters, and Your footsteps are not known."

The same error also occurs with many in seeking sanctification and growth in Grace. They are moved to ask, "Lord, is this how we are to grow in Grace?" Then the great Husbandman says, "Yes, 'tis even so. Good vines must feel the pruning knife. That is the way to make them more fruitful." A perplexed soul enquires, "Dear Master, is this the way that I am to be made like You?" And He replies, "Yes. I was made perfect through suffering and you must have fellowship with Me in this respect if you are to become like I." We had marked out quite another mode of procedure—our Lord's hands were to be laid upon us and so we were to be blessed! Yet He knows best—therefore let us say, "Even so, Father, for so it seems good in Your sight."

The same mistake is often made with regard to conversion—the conversion of others, or our own conversion. I hope I am addressing many persons who are earnestly seeking faith in Christ, or who already have a measure of faith in Him, yet they have never obtained the full assurance of peace and rest because they have looked for it to come to them in a certain way. You expected to receive the blessing of forgiveness while you were listening to the preaching of the Gospel. Or having heard that many people have been converted under such-and-such a preacher, you have gone to hear him, earnestly praying all the while that the Lord would save you through that man's preaching. Yet He has not done so. It may be that He has ordained to bless you through some other means—well, be not cast down on that account, but be thankful if He blesses you anyway. Possibly you went with the great crowd that gathered to hear some notable evangelist and, after the public service, you went into the enquiry-room, as you heard that many had been led to Christ in that way, and you thought it would be so with you, but it was not. Well, be not surprised or sad if that is the case—it was not your place to dictate the way in which the Lord should reveal Himself to you!

It may be that you heard of a certain book being very useful to enquirers and seekers, and you said, "I will read that book and ask the Lord to bless it to me." You did so, yet you were none the

better and you blamed yourself for not getting any good out of the book which had been blessed to others. Yet you must remember that God has His own ways and times of revealing Himself to His people. It is quite possible that you thought too much of that preacher, or that enquiry room, or that good book—and that you did not think enough of Jesus, Himself—and probably if you had looked to Him rather than to the instrumentality, you would long before this have had your eyes opened and have seen everything clearly! You laid down certain conditions for Christ, but He would not comply with those conditions, but acted according to the good pleasure of His own will.

It is the same when we try to lay down conditions with regard to the conversion of our friends. I remember well the story of two Christian gentlemen who had a young companion who was about to start on a long voyage—I think, to China—and they persuaded him to spend a week with them. And they made it a matter of earnest prayer that during that week their young friend might be converted to God. They had real faith and they very properly used the means which they thought likely to be blessed to him. They induced him to attend various places of worship during the week, taking him to hear a different preacher each night—but apparently in vain. At last there remained only the Friday night—and only one man whom they had not taken their young friend to hear—that was good old Rowland Hill and they had left him to the last because he was said to be so eccentric and so likely to say strange things which they were afraid might disgust the young man.

They prayed very earnestly that God would keep Mr. Hill from saying anything amusing, lest their friend should be made to laugh, but, that night, the preacher was more humorous than usual and Surrey Chapel was made to ring again and again as peals of laughter followed the telling of some extraordinary story in his inimitable way! And the very proper gentlemen were quite shocked and saddened. Among other things, Mr. Hill said that during the day he had seen some pigs follow a butcher into the slaughterhouse and he could not make out why they did so until he noticed that the butcher had his pocket full of peas which he threw out to the swine and so induced them to follow him to their death. “Then,” added Mr. Hill, “I understood why people follow the devil though he leads them to death—it is because he draws them after him with the pleasures of the world—as the butcher drew the pigs after him with the peas!” Those gentlemen thought it was a pity that the preacher spoke like that and when they came out, they felt sorry they had taken their young friend to hear him.

But he walked along very quietly for a time and then said, “That was a very striking story about the pigs and the peas, and most appropriate to my own case. I have gone after sin for the sake of the pleasure of it, without thinking of the consequences, and now I see what a fool I have been.” That rather rough illustration was the means of leading the young man to lay hold on Christ as his Savior before he went on his way! Those two gentlemen brought their friend to Christ, as these people brought the blind man to Him, “and besought Him to touch him,” but the Lord Jesus chose to work by the very instrumentality of which his followers were afraid! He often uses very strange means—means we do not like, perhaps—means which would never occur to us as helpful. And He does this to teach us that the power to cure is not in the man, or in the means, or in the place, or in the excitement of the hour, but it is in Himself alone! And He works just how He wills and when He wills—and when it is His set time to save a sinner, He uses His own instrument—whether it is Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the learned, or the eloquent, or the impulsive!

II. Secondly, THE LORD TAKES CARE TO PREVENT THE DISHONOR WHICH WOULD THUS COME TO HIM.

Observe how He did it in this case. They brought this blind man to Him and besought Him to touch him. So, first, Christ did touch him, yet did not heal him—“He took the blind man by the hand.” That was certainly touching him, yet his eyes were not opened. Jesus kept His hand on the blind man “and led him out of the town,” but he was still a blind man! How very surprised the poor man, himself, must have been! His own faith led him to expect that if Christ would but touch him, his eyes would be opened. He must have had a feeling of astonishment and despondency when he felt that touch—a prolonged touch—a touch that gripped his hand and led him through the town, right away past the last of the houses and out into the fields—yet a touch that did not enable him to see! But did not that very disappointment make the man realize, once and for all, that it was not merely Christ’s touch that opened blind eyes, but Christ Himself who worked the

miracle? It was evident that He could, if He pleased, give a touch that did not open the eyes of the blind. Manifestly, there was no magic about the mere touch of Christ's fingers, for His fingers were touching the blind man's fingers all the while, yet he did not even begin to see anything.

This is the lesson which the Lord is still teaching us. The preaching of the Gospel is the great means of the salvation of sinners, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." But if you look merely to the preaching—and especially if you look simply to the preacher, instead of looking to Christ, Himself—it is more than likely that the preaching will be in vain as far as you are concerned. You may listen to it attentively and even ask God to bless you by means of it, yet it may be to you only like Christ's hand was to the blind man. It is even possible for the Gospel to be a savor of death unto death, as well as of life unto life! And even to those whom Christ means to bless, it may be without power as long as they look to it instead of looking to Christ.

The next thing that Christ did for the blind man was this. His friends expected that Christ would heal the man before the crowd but He did not. They probably thought, "Now, if the Savior will but put His fingers on our friend's eyes and make him see, all the onlookers will know of it, their faith will be strengthened and Christ will be glorified." But Christ will not do anything to the blind man before the crowd. He takes him by the hand and leads him right away from the throng. He will not begin to operate upon him while anybody else is near, but conducts him away where he will be quite alone. Now, in the preaching of the Gospel, it is a very usual thing for our Lord Jesus Christ to save men in the crowd there. And many thousands of souls have heard of Jesus, believed in Him and found salvation in the midst of a throng of their fellows. But nowhere in His Word do we read that He intends to always save people in throngs and crowds. On the contrary, there are some to whom He seems to say, "I shall not save you here. Come away from the public assembly and get into the quiet of your own home."

Do not object and say, "But, Lord, I thought I could believe in You, here and now, and so find peace." That is not His will, for your believing is to be exercised out in the fields where you can be quite alone, or upstairs in that little room of yours where, in the dead of night you shall sit up in your bed, with nobody near you, and turn over in your mind the Truths of God you have been hearing and then and there put your trust in Jesus. It is dishonoring to Christ for us to say, "If we can only get large companies of people together and arouse them with stirring appeals and sweet singing, we are sure to get them converted." The crowd has really nothing to do with the matter of conversion! And while Christ, blessed be His name, does save many in the crowd, yet if we get to regard the presence of the crowd as essential to the conversion of anybody, He will very likely take that individual apart, as He did with this blind man when He took him by the hand and led him out of the town!

The next point is this. Our Lord usually worked His miracles instantaneously, yet He would not be tied down to work always in the same way enabled to see. First, only partial sight is granted to him, then the obscuring film is removed and he sees clearly. There is a deep spiritual lesson for us in this action of our Lord. Perhaps somebody has said, "I know that So-and-So found peace with God in a moment—and I will not believe until I get the blessing in the same way." My dear Friend, let me tell you very solemnly that you must not presume to make any stipulation with Christ as to how you are to believe and when you are to believe! If you mean to be His follower, you will have to get rid of that proud spirit and leave the Lord to save you in His own way. Some find joy and peace in an instant, but there are others who first receive a little Light and then a little more, and a little more till gradually they see as clearly as this man did.

In the tropics, the sun seems, in the morning, to leap up the horizon and to turn darkness into light in a very short period. But in this country the sun gives us longer notice of its coming. It shoots many arrows of light before it, with rosy steps, advances in the full glory of the dawning day! It is just so in the spiritual realm—there are some tropical Christians who pass from darkness to light in a moment. Others are of the temperate zone—slower in their growth, yet they receive the Light of God just as surely as the others. When you read the story of anyone's conversion, do not say, "That is the way I am going to be saved." Of course there is only one way of salvation—that is, by faith in Christ—but there are many ways in which Christ gives this great blessing to the sons of men! And you must leave Him to work in His own way. The Spirit, like the wind, blows where

He wishes and when He wishes and if you try to dictate to Him, you will grieve Him and miss the blessing you desire to obtain.

Further, the Savior employed means which these people had not suggested and which probably appeared to them to be quite unsuitable. In a similar fashion, my Friend, I hope that you are going to be saved and I urge you to look to Christ that you may obtain salvation through Him. Yet it is quite possible that you are not going to be saved in the way you think. You are very fond of your minister and he is very helpful to you in many ways—yet God probably means to bless you by some other servant of His. Perhaps by some godly woman. The Lord has, many a time, brought “her ladyship” into the light by means of the cook or the housemaid! And “my lord” has been brought to the Savior by a man whom he would hardly have employed to black his boots. The Lord can use whatever means He likes—and sometimes He uses means which we would never have thought of using.

I have heard of a father who used to pray much for the conversion of his sons and daughters, yet he did not see one of them saved. When he came to die, his family had all grown up and they had, themselves, become the heads of other households. He sent for them to come to his bedside and he prayed very earnestly that he might die so joyful and triumphant a death that they might be convinced of the beauty and power of vital godliness—and seek the Savior for themselves. That was his plan of bringing his family to Jesus, but it pleased the Lord to allow him to be in great pain of body and much distress of mind. Indeed, he was in such anguish of heart that his testimony to the power of Divine Grace was of a very negative character! He had no songs of triumph, but he had many moans of pain and many questions about his spiritual state. God puts many of His children to bed in the dark, but they are His children all the same. It is of the wicked that it is written, “There are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.” God’s best servants often pass away under a cloud—and it was so with the friend of whom I am speaking. One of his last utterances was the expression of his intense regret that his sons would be confirmed in their unbelief by his experience in his dying hour—yet mark what really happened!

They all knew of his genuine piety. They had not a doubt about that matter, for they reckoned him to be one of the best of men and, as they gathered in the house after the funeral, the eldest son said to them, “Brothers and sisters, our father died a very sad death, yet we know that his soul was saved. We all know that he trusted Christ as his Savior and that he lived a most godly life. Now,” he said, “if such a man as our father found it hard to die, think how much harder it will be for us if we have to die without a Savior.” The same thought had occurred to the rest of the family and it was not long before they all sought and found their father’s God and Savior! You see, the Lord really heard his prayer and granted him the desire of his heart—though not in the way he expected. And He will hear you, my Brother, and He will hear you, my Sister, but the answer may not come in your way. The Lord has His own way of doing His own work and, sometimes He adopts very singular methods to teach us that there is no power in the method He uses, but that all the power lies in Himself!

III. The third thing to be noted in this narrative is that OUR BLESSED LORD TAKES CARE TO HONOR FAITH EVEN WHEN HE REBUKES ITS WEAKNESS. He did not open this blind man’s eyes in the way his friends asked Him to do, but He did open his eyes and He did a great deal more than that for him. And I want you to notice how the Lord Jesus honored the imperfect faith of this man and his friends—though He also rebuked its imperfections.

First, our Lord condescended to guide this blind man. This is one of the most beautiful incidents in Scripture. I should like to meet with an artist who could worthily depict Christ leading that blind man out of the town. It is not everybody who would undertake such a task as that, but our Lord condescended to take this poor fellow who could not see anything by the hand and lead him right away from the crowd that had gathered. It was something to be that blind man—I think I would be willing to lose the sight of my eyes if I might be led by Christ as he was! O blessed blindness that brings Christ into such close contact with this poor man! Was he not greatly honored? Surely he was the most highly honored blind man who ever lived, thus to have Christ to guide him. Sometimes you see a blind man led by a dog and, sometimes, by a child—but Christ

Himself undertakes the task in this case! The blind man believed in Jesus sufficiently to be led by Him and Jesus led him further than he expected.

Note next that Christ left all the rest of the crowd for the sake of this one blind man. I do not know how many there were to whom Christ was preaching, but He said, "Good-bye" to them all that He might take this poor blind man by the hand and lead him out of the town. Have not you, dear Friend, found the Lord Jesus Christ deal with you, sometimes, as if you were the only person in the world? Has not His love been so graciously manifested that you have said, "Why, if I were the most important person in the world, He could not do more for me than He has done." So, on this occasion, Christ left everybody else, for the time being, that He might devote all His attention to this one blind man. He seemed to say to him, "My Friend, I am going to take you into My surgery room that I may perform an operation upon you. And I want you to be alone with Me that I may give all My thoughts to your case."

So, putting all others aside, "Christ begins to cure this blind man. For ointment, He uses the spit from His mouth. Then He lays His hands upon the man and asks him whether he can see anything. After his answer, telling that the cure is working, Christ puts His hands again upon the blind man's eyes and makes him look up. Christ does not give His system a shock by revealing the full light to him all at once, but He works the miracle as gently as the wisest nurse or the most loving mother might have done. So it comes to pass that although the man does not get what his friends asked for him, he gets something a great deal better, for Christ gave him a complete cure, so that "he saw every man clearly." Christ did not send him away with one eye opened and the other still remaining closed, or revealing just a little light in one corner of it. Christ did not leave him cross-eyed or short-sighted, but he "saw every man clearly."

It seems to me that Christ must have cured this man entirely out of love to him. He may have cured some others partly with the view of their publishing His name and fame so as to attract other sufferers to Him, but He did not cure this man for that reason, for, when He had opened his eyes, He said to him, "Do not go into the town, and do not talk of this miracle to anybody who comes from the town. You can go home to your own village and tell the people there all about what I have done, but, otherwise, this is a matter between you and Me alone."

Now, dear Friends, you who are seeking the Lord, but cannot find Him, is there not a lesson for you in this narrative? I pray you to give up dictating to the Lord as to how He is to save you, for He has a far better way of working than you have even dreamt of at present and, possibly, His way will be to get you quite alone and gradually to lead you into the light. He means to have some private talk with you, not meant for any other ear. He means to make Himself known to you in a peculiarly special manner—not in your way, but in His own far superior way! Then, why do you object to His plan? Your one business is to believe in Him, to rely wholly on Him and to praise Him for His great goodness to you. I pray you, do not quibble about ways and methods, but trust the Lord fully. If you do so, it shall not be long before you will get the Light of God and the joy, and the peace for which you are praying!

How long I was, myself, dictating to God instead of trusting Him! I thought I must have a certain amount of conviction of sin before I could be saved. I really had it all the while, though I did not know that I had it. I thought I must feel a certain weight of guilt. I was feeling it and, for that very reason, I thought I was not. I might have been spared much needless suffering if I had only believed what the Lord had taught me in His Word—that I had nothing to do with feeling burdens or anything else by way of preparation for coming to Christ, but that I had to come to Him just as I was. If I could not come to Him with a broken heart, I was to come to Him to break it. If I did not feel any true conviction of sin, or a single atom of repentance in my soul, there was all the more reason why I should come to Him and, without money, buy all that I needed. So, poor blind ones, come to my Master, blind as you are—but do not lay down any rules or regulations as to how He is to save you, for He will do it in His own way, which is, after all, the best possible way.

IV. Now I close with a fourth remark. WHEN THE LORD HAS TAKEN PAINS TO PREVENT US FROM ATTACHING TOO GREAT IMPORTANCE TO THE MEANS, THEMSELVES, HE PUTS HONOR UPON THE MEANS.

I have already called your attention to this fact. The blind man's friends trusted too much to Christ's touch and too little to Christ Himself! He wanted to cure them of that evil, so He touched the man yet left him unhealed. But after He had taken him out of the town and away from the people, He did, after all, heal him by a touch, or something more than a touch, for He put His hands upon him twice, so that, though there was a touch that did not heal, there were afterwards two touches that did! It was as though Christ would say to them, "How foolish you are to trust in the touch instead of in Me! But when I have cured you of that folly, then will I put honor upon My touch which is the method by which I usually heal the sick."

It is so, too, with you who hear the Gospel, yet who seem to hear it in vain, for the Lord means you not to trust in your hearing. After He has cured you of that evil, I should not wonder if you hear the Gospel twice as well as anybody else does—and I expect that it will come with double power to your soul! It is so in this narrative and it is often so as a matter of spiritual experience. When the Lord has taken us away from trusting in ordinances, then He shows us what great blessings come from the ordinances when they are rightly observed. When we trust to the preacher, or the preaching, we get nothing—but when we trust in Christ alone, then He makes the preacher, the preaching and other means of Grace to be the channels of blessing to our souls!

Then, lastly, the Lord sent that man home without letting anyone in that neighborhood know of the cure He had worked. Christ thereby seems to say, "There are many whom I heal of whom nobody knows." There is a message to us preachers in this incident! Christ seems to say to us, "This is often My way of saving souls. I give the healing touch, but you do not know anything about it." Certainly, none of us can calculate the amount of virtue which pours out of Christ through the preaching of the Word. The Last Great Day will reveal the myriads of men and women who have been brought to Jesus through the preaching of the Gospel, but, who, nevertheless, were never known to the preacher, himself, although they were converted through his instrumentality!

O Brothers and Sisters, keep on telling poor sinners about the Savior! Try to bring them into contact with Christ! You may not actually see Him open their eyes, for He may take them out of the town and work the great miracle privately. You bring them into contact with Christ and although that may not save them, it will lead up to their salvation and, therefore, you will be doing good service to them and to your Master, too! Preach away, my Brother, and preach nothing but Jesus! Teach your classes, my Brothers and Sisters, nothing but Jesus and seek to get His hands into contact with the children of men! But when you work, and when you pray, do not lay it down that God must bless souls by you, or by anybody else! But say to Him that if He will but save them anyhow, you will be content and thankful.

And as for you, poor Sinners, seek salvation by simply trusting in Jesus and if you have not any clear vision of Him at this moment, get to your knees and do not rise till you have found Him as your Savior! He has His own ways and methods of working, so you must trust Him—not the method—and He will bless you with life eternal! So may He do for His ownname's sake! Amen.