

New Years' Address, January 1856

by J.C. Philpot

J.C. Philpot's New Year's Address urges believers to steadfastly hold on to truth, the church, and God's servants in the face of spiritual challenges.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, John 8:31, 2 Corinthians 1:20, Ephesians 4:15, Philippians 3:7, Hebrews 10:24, Hebrews 13:8

Topics: "Faith And Hope", "Spiritual Struggle"

Description

J.C. Philpot delivers a sermon addressing the spiritual struggles and temptations faced by believers in the church of God, emphasizing the importance of holding on to the truth of God, the church of Christ, the servants of God, the work of God on one's own soul, promises made to the soul, means of grace, and ultimately, holding on to the Lord Jesus Christ with unwavering faith and hope.

Transcript

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Spared as we are by the tender mercies of God once more at the commencement of another year to address those of our readers who fear his great name, we desire to come before them with the Gospel in our hands, and under the teaching and unction of the blessed Spirit in our heart. Unable of ourselves even to think a good thought, much less to produce by tongue or pen anything for the spiritual edification of the family of God, we have again and again presented our supplications to the God of all grace, that he would on this occasion teach us how and what to write, that our words might be truly profitable to that portion of the church of Christ to which they may come. Our only claim upon their attention is the truth we may bring before them, and the spirit in which we write; and if these be commended to their conscience and fall with any weight or power upon their heart, they will receive our words, not because our pen indites them, but because of the testimony which accompanies them to their own soul.

We can say, we trust with all honesty, that we feel an increasing desire to be made a blessing to the church of God. Placed as we are in a position unsought and undesired by us to edit a periodical widely circulated among the living family, we desire it to be a means in the Lord's hands of great and increasing profit to their souls. In laboring month after month for their benefit, we have no party ends to serve, no miserable petty ambition to gratify, no schemes of pelf or pride to advance, no rich readers to flatter, nor worldly professors to fear. To say we have no workings of pride and self would be to say that we have no blood of the old Adam nature circulating in our veins; but we hope we can say, in the sight of God, and before his people, that our chief desire and aim is the spiritual profit of the church of Christ. If our readers

believe this, and if, in addition to our assertion, they have the more convincing evidence of their own conscience that they have felt any blessing or derived any profit from our labors, they- as knowing that in many things we offend all- will overlook those blots and stains which human infirmity will ever drop on the fair page of truth, and will ascribe them not to willful design, but, to a hand unsteady through the fall.

To speak the truth in love; to be faithful yet affectionate, keeping back nothing that is profitable, but abstaining from all harsh, unbecoming language; to watch for souls as those that must give account; to renounce the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God- if this is the spirit which should influence the servants of God who speak in their master's name, should it not equally be the ruling desire and aim of those who write for the honor of the same blessed Lord and for the benefit of his people?

What is any man or minister but a fallen creature in himself? Whatever measure anyone may possess of light or life, wisdom or knowledge, faith or hope, liberty or love, he owes it wholly and solely to sovereign grace. If, like Asher, he be blessed with spiritual children; if he be acceptable to his brethren, because he dips his foot in oil, it is only as poured to him out of the Rock. (Deut. 33:24; Job 29:6.)

Well, then, may the Lord say to any servant of his, who from deeper experience or greater gifts would gladly lift up himself above his brethren, "Who makes you to differ from another? and what have you that you did not receive? Now, if you did receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it," but had procured it by your own exertions? Or if any wanderer in the wilderness gather less manna than his brother, still, when meted with the spiritual omer, it will be found that, as he who has gathered much has nothing over, so he who has gathered little has no lack. This is the beauty and blessedness of grace, that it sets all the family of God upon a level, allows no man or minister to exalt himself above another, allows no boasting for deeper experience or greater manifestations, but most humbling the most favored, and most exalting the most self-abased, hides pride from man, and secures all the glory for God.

Whence, then, such self-exaltation among many, such bitterness of spirit, such envy and jealousy, such slander and detraction? Certainly not from grace- for grace no more teaches a servant of God to exalt himself and despise others, or beat his fellow-servants, than it teaches him to eat and drink and be drunken. (Luke 12:45.) Grace, on the contrary, constrains him by every tie of love to the Lord and his people to count all things but dung and dross for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ, to lay himself out for his brethren's good, and to esteem all time lost that is not spent in seeking the profit of his own soul, the glory of God, and the welfare of Zion. We know too much of ourselves, and of the evil that dwells in us, to say that this is our constant or frequent frame- but if this is not deeply engraved on our heart, and does not influence our mind and guide our pen, the sooner we lay it down the better.

In this spirit, then, do we now desire to address our spiritual readers, and to present them with a few thoughts which have struck our minds as applicable to the present state of things among us.

Spiritual matters are, by general confession, at a low ebb in the church of God. Churches are much rent and torn; godly ministers very scarce; little blessing comparatively resting upon the preached Gospel- and most of God's saints complaining of barrenness in themselves and in others. Pained and wounded by seeing so much carnality and death in the churches, or disgusted, perhaps, by individual instances which have come before them of ungodliness in professors, many, tender in conscience, but not much acquainted with the evils of their heart, have experienced a revulsion of feeling which has almost driven

them from truth itself. "Are these the people of God? Is this a church of Christ? Can this man be a servant of the Most High? Are these the doctrines of the Gospel, and do Gospel doctrines produce effects like these?"

Staggered and thrown back by such thoughts and feelings, some of God's people have been tempted to secret infidelity, and to think religion itself all a delusion; others, almost to abandon their profession, or renounce the truths they have hitherto held; if members of churches, to throw up their membership; if accustomed to hear at a certain place, to resolve to go there no more. Driven from those they once so highly esteemed, they look around to see where they are to go, or what they are to do. Some specious form of religion at this moment catches their eye. The "Brethren" have a little room in the town; they will go there. They will find, they think, more spirituality among them, more love and union, more zeal and fervor, more devotedness and holiness, more faith and fruits of faith, as well as more frequent opportunities for communion and religious communion.

Others, who see clearly enough where the "Brethren" are, determine to go nowhere; they will stop and read the Bible at home, and will have nothing more to do with any professors whatever. There are, they think, now no ministers worth hearing, and no books worth reading. There is no real religion in the land; all professors are alike, deceivers or deceived, the Calvinists worse than the Arminians, and the experimental ministers, so called, not a whit better than the dry doctrinal men. They will, therefore, they say, come out from them all, and read nothing but the Bible and Deer's hymns, and sometimes the old Puritan writers, or Huntington and Hawker, and have nothing whatever to do with the profession of the day, for they are sick and tired of it.

Much of this feeling, we doubt not, springs in some from spiritual pride and secret humiliation that they themselves are not valued by others so highly as they stand in their own eyes- in others, from that self-righteous spirit which leads men to say, "Stand by yourself, I am holier than you;" in others, from ignorance of their own hearts, and expecting more from the church of God than is usually found in her. On people in this state of mind we do not expect our words to make any impression; but if these lines should meet the eye of any who, pained and grieved by the state of things in many churches, are perplexed what path to take, and have felt any such workings of mind as we have just sketched, will they bear with us in laying before them and the church of God generally what we believe is the safest and wisest way to take?- and in so doing we shall attempt so to frame our observations and counsel, that they may have as wide a bearing as possible on the line of conduct which those should pursue who love Zion.

We do not conceal from ourselves the evils we have mentioned, and which all who fear God must deeply deplore. Let us confess and acknowledge them, and seek of the Lord deliverance from them. But let us not be driven by them to the other extreme. If our words could find an entrance into the heart of any who are tried and exercised by painful things in the church of God, and by powerful inward temptations, springing out of and connected with them, we would lay before them the following advice- advice which we have proved in our own souls, and therefore know to be sound and good.

1. Hold on to the TRUTH of God.

Remember those words of the Lord himself- "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Let men profess the truth and not possess it; or let men profess the truth and disgrace it. Does that stain and sully the purity of truth itself? Look at that clear stream gushing out of the hill-side, sparkling in the sun, as it leaps forth to meet his rays.

A few yards lower down, a sheep, attempting to drink, muddies the water with its foot. Wait a moment. That water which the sheep has stained, you need not drink. See how the pure stream comes leaping to you from the rock. Drink that which neither foot of man nor beast has yet polluted.

Have you ever felt the power and sweetness of God's truth? Has it ever made you free from the guilt and filth of sin, the bondage of the law, the terrors of death, the love of the world, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life? Can you, then, abandon the truth? Is it not your life, your all? Say that men disgrace it, hold it in unrighteousness, act inconsistently with it, or profess it without feeling its power. Let these be warnings to you, not to do the same; but, do not give up truth because others make an ill use of it. Do not countenance their evil deeds, nor be a partaker of other men's sins; keep yourself pure from their or similar inconsistencies; but forsake not truth because men abuse it.

What blessings have men not abused! Some have fed their dogs with hot slices from the joint. Will you never touch meat again? Health is abused by thousands. Will you, therefore, prefer sickness? Money is daily perverted to the vilest purposes. Will you, therefore, throw up your situation, let anybody take your rents or profits, work without wages, or put up your shop shutters, because wicked men abuse what you may accept with thankfulness as God's gift, and use to his glory? No; let us rather hold on to truth all the more firmly because it is abused; let us rather seek for a more full revelation and powerful application of it to our own soul, a stronger faith in it, and a more earnest desire to live more abidingly in the enjoyment and sweetness of it, seeing all the more clearly from the example of others how dangerous a profession of truth is without a heartfelt possession. If you are grieved or disgusted by the conduct of some who profess truth, show that there is one person at least in this crooked and perverse generation that can and does adorn it; and bear in mind that the purity of truth can no more be really sullied by the treachery of its professors than the cheek of Christ was stained by the kiss of Judas, or his pure humanity disgraced by the stripes and thorns of Pilate's judgment-hall.

And in holding on to truth, hold on, above all things, to the power of truth. It is not the letter of truth, however clear or correct, which can save or bless your soul. How well, because how experimentally, does Deer speak on this point in that wonderful experience of his- that undying testimony against Pharisaic self-righteousness and Antinomian licentiousness- "Notions of religion I needed no man to teach me- I had doctrine enough; but found by woeful experience that dry doctrine, though ever so sound, will not sustain a soul in the day of trial."

When we look a little more closely at matters, we see why many, of whom better things were once hoped, have been driven from the truth. They never felt its power, nor tasted its divine blessedness, by a gracious experience of it as made known to their soul. Therefore they were driven from truth to error by the conduct of its professors, just as men are often driven from one extreme of politics to another by the ill-treatment they meet with from their own party. But the truth of God- the truth as it is in Jesus- the truth which makes free is not to be abandoned thus. Let this rather be our feeling. If every professor in England disgraces it, if every minister in England turns from it, let me hold it all the closer; for if I abandon it, I abandon Christ himself, who is the "Truth," as well as the "Way" and the "Life." Let us rather, if all abandon it, follow that noble example portrayed so beautifully in the seraph Abdiel-

"So spoke the seraph Abdiel, faithful found;

Among the faithless faithful only he;

Among innumerable false, unmoved,

Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified;
His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal
Nor number nor example with him wrought,
To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind,
Though single."

2. Hold on to the CHURCH of Christ.

The Lord's own promise was, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." There is then a church of Christ still. Men speak sometimes as if there were no people of God now, no church of Christ on earth, and almost say, with the prophet Elijah, "I, even I only, am left." But as in those gloomy times, there were seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, so in our day God has still a seed to serve him, a remnant according to the election of grace. Were it not so, we would soon be as Sodom, and be like unto Gomorrah.

However low, then, or divided, or scattered, this remnant may be, they are still the church of Christ, dear to him as members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. And should they not be dear to us? Can we love the Head and not love the members? seek union and communion with the Lord, and separate ourselves from the Lord's people? "Ah! but they are so crooked, and I have had so much trouble among them; have been so cruelly wounded in the house of my friends; have had such grief and sorrow of heart from my connection with them; my feelings have been so crushed and trampled on; my motives so misinterpreted, my words and actions so misrepresented, that I have been absolutely forced to leave them!"

Does this step that you have taken, or are about to take, flow from grace? May there not be some strong mixture of self-pity, or wounded pride, or natural resentment, or fretfulness and irritability of temper, or mortification because you cannot have your own way, blended with your present exercises of mind? Oh! how deceitful and desperately wicked is the heart of man! How it can hide from itself all its own faults; and, dwelling on or magnifying the faults of others, can raise up storms of wrath against our dearest friends, and for a little offence cherish enmity towards the choicest saints of God! Your present feelings then of shyness and distrust, and your shunning those you once had sweet communion with, may not be wholly from grace. Would not grace rather say, "Well, with all their faults, they are the people of God still. I mourn and grieve over their crookedness and waywardness; but I cannot and must not give them up. May not I too be partly to blame? Have I always spoken and acted quite in the spirit of the gospel? Have not I sometimes been provoked myself, and dropped hasty expressions, given way to my temper, and though I contended only for right things, yet did not do so in the spirit and meekness of the gospel? Have I not also been too ready to take up prejudices and listen to unkind speeches- and may I not have wounded them as well as they have wounded me?"

But whether so or not, let you have acted most blamelessly in word and spirit, still it comes to the same point. Nothing must separate us from the suffering members of Christ. These we took as our brethren and friends when we came out of the world, and we must not give them up. Christ, whom we profess to love, loves them with all their crookedness; and think what we may, or say what we may about them, there is more crookedness in our heart- any one of us- than in all their words and actions put together.

But if our advice be good for those who fear God generally, many of whom are not in church fellowship, how much more forcibly will it apply to members of gospel churches! This is your position. You have joined, and still are a member of a gospel church. But many things in that church deeply try your mind. It is much divided, and with some of the members you have little or no union; others you believe are deeply tainted with legality and free will, and others, who have a good experience, are so obstinate and headstrong, that if they cannot rule and have just their own way, the church has no rest or peace. Well, certainly, you might save yourself a great deal of trouble and sorrow if you left them altogether. And so would the martyrs, if they would have given up the truth- and so would Paul, had he abandoned the care of all the churches- and so would the blessed Lord himself, had he prayed the Father for twelve legions of angels. But he suffered, and so must you. And this may be your especial cross. We know how heavy church troubles are- the greatest of all next to personal soul trouble, and few can be in church-fellowship without them.

If the church is an ordinance of Christ, for a believer not to be a member of a church is, to say the least, not to walk in Christ's ordinances; and if he be a member of a church, he must, in the exercise of Christian love, bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things, sooner than give up his membership with it.

3. Hold on to the SERVANTS of God.

We move here on tender ground, for really, when we look around us, we find but few worthy of that title. But the point we would mainly press is this. It is not for us to say who are and who are not servants of God; but we do say, if any man be commended to your conscience as a minister of Christ, and any blessing has ever been communicated to your soul through him, do not allow a little thing to separate between him and you. We are creatures of extremes. Some think too much, and others too little, of the servants of God. Some see in them no fault, at least, none in the one object of their idolatrous affection, and others see in them little else but faults. Remember that God sends men to preach, not angels- and as men, they are not only of like passions with their hearers, but are peculiarly exposed to temptations, not only from their very position, but because Satan more particularly thrusts severely at them that they may fall, well knowing that their fall would- fill the church with mourning, imbue the enemies of truth with rejoicing, disgrace the cause of God, stumble the weak, drive the tempted almost to despair, and cast a cloud over a congregation which might never be removed, furnish a standing reproach for years, and supply hundreds with the most powerful weapon against the truth as long as the chapel walls stand. Bearing this in mind, how incumbent it is on the family of God to hold up the hands of the servants of Christ by prayer and supplication, and if the ministry has been blessed to their souls to seek of the Lord continued supplies of grace for their minister that his soul may be watered and kept alive, and that dew, savor, and power may rest abundantly on him and the word preached by him.

4. Hold on to the WORK OF GOD ON YOUR OWN SOUL.

This is your treasure- the treasure in the earthen vessel which God has lodged there by his Spirit and grace. Here you may be deeply tried. Such darkness may at times cover your soul that you cannot see a single feature of God's work upon your heart; or you may have got into such a cold, dead, lifeless state, that you seem past all feeling, without even a sigh or cry; or you may be severely tempted to think yourself a wretched hypocrite or self-deceiver, and that the best way will be to make away with your profession or even with yourself. Still, with it all, there is a 'secret something' which you cannot give up. You know there have been times with you when you could and did feel Christ precious, when you did love him with all your

heart, when you did see the King in his beauty, and the land now so very far off, and were softened and melted into contrition by a taste of his love. You can look back, too, and see how you were first wrought upon, what convictions you felt, what sighs and groans you uttered, what prayers and cries you poured forth, and how you were brought out of the world or a dead profession, and made to seek pardon and peace for your own soul. How can you really give up what you have thus felt? No! Hold on, then, to it, for it is your life. Part with everything before you part with that. The Lord can and will shine, sooner or later, on his own work, and bring it forth to his own praise.

5. Hold on to any PROMISE ever made to your soul.

The Lord's usual way is first to give a promise, and then test it. So it was with Abraham, so with Jacob, and so with Joseph. Sarah's barrenness tried Abraham; Laban's persecutions tried Jacob; and Pharaoh's prison, where the iron entered into his soul, tried Joseph. But not one jot or tittle of the promises made to them fell to the ground. And so, if the Lord has ever made you a promise, though your path now be dark and gloomy in Providence or grace, still, if you are enabled to do as Jacob did, put the promise that God made into God's own hand, with a "You said I will surely do you good," (Gen. 32:12,) he will honor in his own time and way his own word, and fulfill it to his glory and your joy.

6. Hold on to those MEANS OF GRACE which have been blessed to your soul.

God has given his word of truth into your hands, set up a mercy-seat, a throne of grace, for you to approach, favored you with Christian friends, and blessed you, perhaps with a servant of his own teaching and sending, for you to hear. How good it is to read his word with an enlightened understanding and a believing heart; to pour out the soul before the mercy-seat with liberty and access; to feel union and communion in Christian converse with the saints of God; and to hear the preached gospel with life and power. It is true that we may not be often thus favored; but, if we are sometimes or ever have been, we shall prize these means of grace, these channels of divine communication. The Scriptures may be to us a sealed book, but we shall read them still; the throne of grace covered with a cloud, but we shall still present our supplications there; converse with the children of God may be a burden, but we shall not forsake their company- and the ministry a dry breast, but we shall not neglect the assembling of ourselves together in the house of prayer. We may give way to temptation in these matters, be overcome by sloth and negligence, until our soul resembles the garden of the sluggard. We may neglect reading the Bible, until we get into a habit of scarcely looking into it at all- be cold and formal at a throne of grace, until prayer is quite restrained; be shy of the saints of God, until we forsake their company altogether- allow any excuse to keep the foot away from the house of prayer, until it becomes a burden to go. The Lord does not tie himself to means; but he is usually found in them, and it is therefore our wisdom and mercy in them to seek him.

7. Hold on to the Lord JESUS Christ to the utmost of your faith and hope in him.

Many changes pass over our mind; but he changes not, for he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Without him we can do nothing; with him we can do all things. He can support us under our trials, comfort us in our afflictions, deliver us out of our temptations, subdue our sins, smile away our fears, cheer us in life, bless us in death, and present us in eternity before his Father's throne, holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight. To him, then, may we ever cleave with purpose of heart; and may our desire ever be to glorify him on earth, with the prospect before us of spending an eternity with him in heaven.

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