
1: Christianity – Impossible with Men

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And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, Who then can be saved? And Jesus looking upon them said, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible. Mark 10: 26, 27¹

The more I think about it, the less surprised I am at the apparent and increasing failure of organised Christianity to appeal to the masses in these days; for the plain and obvious fact is that we, who still continue to attend our places of worship, have more or less 'sold the pass' and have neglected or given away that vital principle which ever was and always will be the true heritage of the church of Christ on earth. For it appears, on looking into it, that the church has always triumphed and had her greatest successes when she has preached the two-fold message of the depravity of human nature and the absolute necessity of the direct intervention of God for its final salvation, or, in the words of Peter, that 'there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.'

A church which preaches that, either attracts or repels, you either join her or hate her and persecute her, – one thing is certain, you cannot ignore her, for her message will not ignore you; it hurts, it upbraids, it condemns, it infuriates, or else it draws and attracts you. You are either right in, or definitely outside. If you feel you can save yourself, then this message insults you and annoys you, you resent the impertinence and the interference with your life; but if you feel you are lost and helpless you run into her open arms for release and salvation.

But how many of us believe that message in these days?

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How many of us believe truly that but for the intervention of God in our lives we would be damned and lost? Does the Christian church in these days give the impression, this exclusive impression, that mankind is doomed apart from the grace of God in Christ Jesus? Are we as certain and as confident of this as the apostles were, as the saints always were, and as the church has always been during every period of religious awakening and revival? This to me is the acid test of church membership, for, after all, everyone must agree that this is the central truth of the Christian message. It was the central truth in the teaching of Christ and has ever been the central truth in the tenets of the church, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, and that in spite of all the division into sects on other and smaller issues. Now there have been times when men have been concerned about the secondary and smaller issues, when they have divided and argued concerning the implications and the working out of this central truth. They all agreed that man was saved by the grace of God, but differed in the emphasis which they placed on the part of man and the part of God in this scheme, and the stress they laid on free will etc. But, as I see things in these days, the fight is not concerned with implications and corollaries, but rather with the central truth itself. It is no longer the case that any one sect or denomination is on trial, it is no longer a dispute between the various groups and divisions; the whole church, every church which claims the name of Christian, is on trial, ultimate issues are in the balance. That is why some of us so deplore the petty bickering concerning this or that minor matter, and the jealousies of the various sects towards each other – it is futile and childish to be arguing as to which is the best room in the house when the whole house is on fire! The flames are involving all the rooms, each is filled with smoke and our business is to quench the fire, not to save our own favourite bits of furniture.

What I mean is this, that the prevalent and favourite

view in the world, and also, to our shame, in the church in these days, is that every man has his own salvation within him, and that all he needs to do is to exercise this. Indeed it goes further and says that we are all gradually and surely working this process of salvation in ourselves by an evolutionary process which will eventually produce 'the perfect man'. You are all familiar with this view which states that mankind is gradually but surely evolving towards a higher type and how the people who hold it turn to history for material which they claim supports this view. Now it is not at all surprising that the world, that is to say the atheists and others, should hold that view. They must hold some view because, as someone has said, 'No age can live without an inspiration'. Finding things so hopeless at the present time, they quite naturally throw their imaginations into the future and console themselves with the thought that, although we are so bad, we are indeed improving. They point to the great advances that have been made, the hospitals and charitable institutions, the increase of comfort, the way in which pain can be avoided and relieved, the abolition of slavery and of various cruel sports, the abolition of woman and child labour in mines and factories, and the general improvement in the humanitarian instincts of the masses. 'Mankind is gradually evolving to a higher type', they say in view of these things.

Now there is no question but that these great improvements have occurred, but still I ask, do they prove that each one of us is a better man than our forefathers say of 500 years ago or even earlier than that? Does the fact that all these improvements have occurred mean of necessity that you and I obey with more and more facility the voice of our conscience within us? Are we more moral and better men merely because of these things? Is there less jealousy and envy and hatred in the human heart than there used to be? Is there less immorality and divorce in this country than there used to

be? What is the difference between slavery and modern industrialism, between the old aristocracy which we have destroyed and the plutocracy which has risen on its ruins?

In the middle of the last century men boasted that their swords had been beaten into ploughshares, but we have seen these very ploughshares smelted into high explosives. There may be less open theft and robbery than there was once, but nothing is commoner in our society today than to have people boasting of how they avoided the customs officers! And on one could go. These charges are all eternal, you and I remain what we ever were. Temptation is as subtle today as it ever was and men are as weak as they were in the days of the Old Testament. 'How dreadful life must have been in those days,' we say. 'They had no comforts, no hospitals and all these other things, and how cruel they were. What a great advance mankind has made since then'. On that negative argument they base their whole case. Because there were no hospitals in the days of David, it is assumed that we are a higher type than the people of those days. But why not read the Bible and take it as it is? Consider the positive things that we read of the people of those times. What are they? We are told that they were tempted, were weak and fell. To what sins? To the very sins that are most rampant amongst us in these days. These facts contradict the modern view, and there are many more which we will leave for the time being.

I really was amazed the other day to find a man stating seriously in a newspaper that amidst the mud, the blood and the gore of the last war, that in that inferno he had almost become an atheist and said that there was no God. Finding men butchering each other in that way and in those terrible conditions, he felt that they were so dreadful that the only conclusion he could come to was that there was no God. Yet, this man, at the same time, believed that mankind is gradually evolving to a higher type! The supposed failure of God becomes the basis of his belief in the gradual success of man. They really

cannot have it both ways. 'Mankind has been evolving for millions of years', they say, 'into a better type' and yet from 1914-18 they found men behaving in such a bestial manner as to make them doubt the very existence of God.

What I am concerned with is this, that this notion of gradual development and progress has taken a very firm root in our churches and is believed very extensively. And if this is so, it is then unnecessary to believe that God intervenes definitely in individual lives - it is a gradual process and we are all gradually improving. No wonder that the words 'conversion' and 're-birth' are being heard less and less frequently. No wonder also that men and women in increasing numbers are absenting themselves from places of worship. A Christian church is a place where it is preached that God does intervene and interfere, and that, apart from Him, souls are lost; in her history that intervention has often been seen and witnessed by hundreds and thousands. And as long as the church preached that, and for ever magnified the power of God unto individual salvation, men and women came, sometimes out of fear and for other reasons, but they came because they felt that their attendance might make an eternal difference to their lives.

When the church does not preach the intervention of God, and believes instead in the gradual evolution of men, why! there is no need to go to church or chapel, you can evolve at home or out in the field or on the beach, and that is a perfectly logical position for the world to take up. But it is not Christian and any man who believes and preaches that, according to the teaching of Jesus Christ, has no right to claim the name of Christian. For according to Him men are saved, not by gradual development over millions of years but by a change of life, at times sudden and dramatic, here and now in this present life. If He did not teach that, I ask you in all seriousness, what did He teach? The thrill and the ecstasy have gone out of our churches, we no longer expect conversions, and we no

longer get them, for it was of the essence of Christ's teaching that you get from God precisely what you expect or pray for with your whole heart and soul believing. The churches are ineffective and sparsely attended today. Why? Because they no longer believe in the power of God to convert and change men, here and now, but believe instead that the world and mankind are slowly improving. And yet, they persist in calling themselves Christian, which forces one to the conclusion that there must be something amiss with the common idea of what constitutes a Christian, and of what salvation means. For the majority of people, it means that they should avoid sins and do as much good as they can do to one another, and that Christ has become a benevolent reformer who provides us with an example which we ought to imitate.

Well now, let us consider what Christ really did think and say about this question of salvation. Read the Gospels again and I am sure that you will agree with me that nothing is more obvious, nothing stands out more strongly than the truth stated in my text tonight, namely, 'that with men it is impossible' and that it is possible only with God, or, as Paul puts it, 'it is the gift of God'. Let us consider some of the things Christ says.

Take first 'the Sermon on the Mount', that statement which many pretend to believe and on which according to them they build their philosophy and view of life. In reality, however, when you come to examine what they say, they have only extracted certain things which they like and have ignored the rest. What does it ask of us? We must be 'poor in spirit', 'meek', 'merciful', 'pure in heart', 'peacemakers', we must suffer persecution and scorn, gladly and joyfully for His sake. Not only must we not commit lust but we must not even *look* with lust in our eyes, we must love our enemies and bless them that curse us, we must do good to them that hate us, we are asked to be perfect, 'even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect', and many other things of that nature. That was

laid down, not as something which was to be expected from the perfect man who would evolve in millions of years, but expected there and then and ever since. Jesus Christ made it perfectly clear that He expected it from His followers at the time. Come now, let us face that challenge, we who are so much better than our forefathers were. What have you to say about it? For myself, with shame and with tears, I have to repeat the words of Jesus Christ, 'With men it is impossible'.

Take again that other statement which He makes in this 10th chapter of Mark to the effect that 'Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein', for in many ways that, to me, is even more difficult than the Sermon on the Mount. What does it mean? It means that my mind and heart and soul, like that of a child, shall become a clean sheet, that I must abolish and blot out all my knowledge of sin and evil, that I must rid myself of all the imaginations, insinuations and innuendoes which have accumulated in my mind since I was a child, that all my worldly wisdom and cuteness and cleverness must go, that I must feel helpless and have implicit trust in Another; in other words, that I must realise my utter dependence, face to face with eternal life and salvation, upon Someone greater than myself. My own knowledge will not save me, my cleverness, my great efforts will be of no avail. I must *feel*, not pretend, that I am helpless and therefore give myself over entirely to God as a child gives itself to its father. I must feel as blank and as void, faced with God, as a child does. 'With men it is impossible!' The more I try to forget myself, and my knowledge and my cleverness, the more I remember them and the more they worry me. The more man 'evolves' the more mind and thought does he develop - will he ever develop the soul of a child?

Consider also the case of the rich young ruler, described in this chapter. 'Thou knowest the commandment, says Christ to him. 'Do not commit adultery, do

not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, defraud not, honour thy father and mother'. 'Master, all these have I observed from my youth, replies the young man, and we, who cannot repeat his statement feel that he at any rate is saved. 'No', replies Christ, 'One thing thou lackest - in spite of all this and in spite of the fact that I love you, you must sell your goods and give them to the poor and take up the cross, and follow me'. Keeping the commandments is not enough for this salvation. 'Who then can be saved?' 'With men it is impossible' - even with this excellent young man; even with Nicodemus; even with that scribe who later on came to Jesus and who agreed with Him that there is one God, and who agreed about the greatest commandment, concerning whom we are told that 'when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God"'. 'Not far from the kingdom'. Who then can be saved and enter in? 'With men it is impossible'. 'I believe', says the man, 'that Jesus of Nazareth is the greatest man who has ever lived and I propose to follow Him and to imitate His example because I believe it is the best'. My dear friend, before you set out and begin to strive night and day, and work and sweat and half kill yourself, let me remind you that He has told you Himself that the thing is impossible, for He teaches that 'the kingdom of God is within you', and therefore before you can be in it you must completely change yourself. 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?' Yes, as easily as you can love your enemies, and enter the kingdom as a child.

It is not difficult to be a good citizen of a kingdom which is external, which is outside you, it is really not very difficult not to steal, and not to commit the common crimes against the law of the land. We might with a great effort be able to be worthy of citizenship in an ideal state such as that conceived by Plato and others, because that would simply mean an avoidance of offences against

others, but this kingdom of God is within. A thought here is as bad as an act in an external kingdom, a desire is as evil as a deed, to covet is as damnable as to commit. It is not very difficult to give up a career, to give up wealth, to give up prospects, to give up luxury and comfort, to give your intellect and intelligence and powers and energy to some good cause - well, if 'not very difficult', it can at least be done by anyone who has a will and who is determined. But before one can enter this kingdom of God, one is asked to give up oneself, pride, ambition, love of applause, popularity, notoriety and all! Can it be done? No wonder that the disciples turned to Christ and asked, 'Who then can be saved?' We, here tonight, realising what it all means, ask the same question, 'O Lord, who then can be saved?' To which He answers, 'With men it is impossible' - a man can not save himself, neither can he save others, it is impossible. We cannot change ourselves, much as we would like to. We cannot control our lusts, and passions, our cravings and desires, our tempers and our jealousies - our natures are stronger than ourselves. 'With men it is impossible'. But by the grace of God that is not all, that is not the end, for with God it is not impossible. 'With God all things are possible'.

This to me is the whole of Christianity. The ablest and the best man in the world cannot save himself, but God, who can do everything, can save all - even the most ignorant and the worst and vilest. Now we begin to see why it was that the publicans and sinners, the outcasts and the despised followed Jesus Christ. For Christ asks you and me, not to do the impossible, but to allow God to do it for us. The Pharisees and scribes objected because He held the standard so high, and well they might, because they attempted these things in their own strength. They lived good lives and felt that He was making things impossible for them, but at the same time the drunkards and the fallen women began to see some hope for themselves. They knew that they had failed and

had made shipwreck of their lives, and knew that neither they themselves nor any power of man could ever put them right, but when they heard Christ saying that God was concerned, and that He would change their natures and their lives for them, why, they saw hope after all. 'I cannot change myself', says the man. 'I cannot go straight, I cannot fight my temptations'. 'Of course you cannot', says Jesus Christ, 'no man ever can, but God can change you, God can give you power and give you strength. Submit yourselves to Him'. No wonder that Peter said that 'there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.'

Cannot you see it every day round and about you? See the poor drunkard and watch men trying to save him. 'In the name of decency', they say, 'change your mode of life'. No change! 'In the name of manhood and for the sake of your street and town and neighbourhood pull yourself together'. No change! 'In the name of your King and Country I appeal to you to be sober and to go straight'. They responded to that call a few years ago and were prepared to die for that name, but it is apparently easier to die for King and Country than to live for them. 'In the name of and for the sake of your dear old parents and home, do try to go straight'. No change! 'In the name of democracy'. No difference! 'In the name of your political party do go straight and return to your wife.' No change! He cannot do it. 'In the name of and for the sake of your dear little children whom you love, do give it up and change your way of living.' Still he is helpless. Well, is there no hope? Yes, my friends, eternal hope. Throughout the ages men and women as bad as, and worse than, ourselves have failed to respond to all these appeals, but in the name of Jesus Christ, in the name of God, their whole lives have been changed. The impossible has happened and God has done it. They have found themselves changed men.

What is your weakness, your sin? In the name of God

and Christ submit yourself to His power. It is active still, it operates now. Look at some of these men here. You know how they once were. See the change. What has done it? The power of God and nothing else. Ask them how it happened. They cannot tell you. They felt a power dealing with them and shaking them and changing them. You feel you are a desperate case. So were we all, but with God 'all things are possible.' He can change you and recreate you. There is no excuse. Submit yourselves. Think. Pray. For His Name's sake. Amen.