

How to Preach the Gospel

by Jay Adams

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889) was born in Edinburgh, one of three sons who inherited the traditions of a long line of preachers. He left the Church of Scotland along with Thomas Chalmers in the disruption that led to the formation of the Free Presbyterian Church.

Bonar was devoted to preaching the gospel as clearly as possible. His sermons and his hymns (look them up) glisten with the gospel of pure grace. He was deeply concerned with the heresy called "preparationism" that boiled down to the idea that if you got yourself ready by doing all sorts of good works, the Lord would possibly be well-disposed toward you and regenerate you. It was a form of salvation by works rather than by the grace of God. Anything that obscured the gospel, or smacked of human merit, was utterly abhorrent to Bonar. The first verse of his well-known hymn, "Not What My Hands Have Done", ends with "not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load." He is referring to works of contrition supposed by some to merit regeneration.

From the title on you will discover this conflict between grace and human merit. Not only can you learn how to present the simple gospel in clarity from this sermon, but you can also learn to detect and avoid vestiges of works-righteousness that are still embedded in the preaching of some today who exhibit the same tendencies that were prevalent in Bonar's time.

Many preachers, meaning well, fail to distinguish between things that differ. You will notice, as you carefully study this sermon, how Bonar makes important distinctions for the listener in ways that cannot be missed; e.g., repentance is not the same as directions for "obtaining repentance." You will see deep insights into the nature of man as Bonar shows how human beings take the

plain words of Christ and torture them to mean the opposite. Read, study Bonar. It is worth taking your time to understand just how he preaches. Anyone who does so will notice the good effect this will have on his own preaching.

Believe Just Now

by Horatius Bonar

You are in earnest now; but I fear you are making your earnestness your Christ and actually using it as a reason for not trusting Christ *immediately*. You think your earnestness will lead on to faith if it be but sufficiently intense and long enough persisted in.

But there is such a thing as earnestness in the wrong direction: earnestness in unbelief and a substitution of earnestness for simple faith in Jesus. You must not soothe the alarms of conscience by this earnestness of yours. It is unbelieving earnestness; and that will not do. What God demands is simple faith in the record which He has given you of His Son. You say, "I can't offer Him faith but I can bring Him earnestness; and by giving Him earnestness, I hope to persuade Him to give me faith." This is self-righteousness. It shows that you regard both faith and earnestness as something to be done in order to please God and secure His good will. You say, "Faith is the gift of God, but earnestness is not; it is in my own power; therefore, I will earnestly labor, and struggle, and pray, hoping that before long God will take pity on my earnest struggles." You even feel secretly that it would be hardly fair in Him to disregard such earnestness.

Now, if God has anywhere said that unbelieving earnestness or the unbelieving use of means is the way of procuring faith, I cannot object to such proceedings on your part. But I do not find that He has said so or that the apostles, in dealing with inquirers, set them upon this preliminary process for acquiring faith. I find that the apostles shut up their hearers to *immediate faith and repentance*, bringing them face-to-face with the

great object of faith and commanding them in the name of the living God to believe, *just as Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand to stretch it out*. The Lord did not give him any directions as to a preliminary work or preparatory efforts, and struggles, and using of means.

These are man's attempts to bridge over the great gulf of human appliances, man's way of evading the awful question of his own *utter impotence*, man's unscriptural devices for sliding out of inability into ability, out of unbelief into faith; man's plan for helping God to save him; man's self-made ladder for climbing up a little way out of the horrible pit, in the hope that God will so commiserate his earnest struggles, as to do all the rest that is needed.

Now God has commanded all men everywhere to repent, but He has nowhere given us any directions for obtaining repentance. God has commanded sinners to believe, but He has not prescribed for them any preparatory process, the undergoing of which will induce Him to give them something which He is not from the first most willing to do. It is thus that He shuts them up to faith, by "concluding them in unbelief." It is thus that He brings them to feel both the greatness and the guilt of their inability; and so constrains them to give up every hope of doing anything to save themselves; driving them out of every refuge of lies and showing them that these prolonged efforts of theirs are hindrances, not helps, and are just so many rejections of His own immediate help; so many distrustful attempts to persuade Him to do what He is already most willing to do in their behalf.

The great manifestation of self-righteousness is this struggle to believe. Believing is not a *work* but a ceasing from work; and this struggle to believe is just the sinner's attempt to make a work out of that which is no work at all; to make a labor out of that which is a resting from labor. Sinners will not let go their hold of their former confidences and drop into Christ's arms. Why? Because they still trust these confidences, and do not trust Him who speaks to them in the gospel. Instead, therefore, of encouraging you to exert more and more earnestly these preliminary efforts, I tell you they are all the sad indications of self-righteousness. They take for granted that Christ has not done His work sufficiently and that God is not willing to give you faith till you have plied Him with the arguments and importunities of months or years.

God is at this moment willing to bless you; and these struggles of yours are not, as you fancy, humble attempts on your part to take the blessing but proud attempts either to put it from you or to get hold of it in some way of your own. You cannot, with all your struggles, make the Holy Spirit more willing to give you

faith than He is at this moment. But your self-righteousness rejects this precious truth; and if I were to encourage you in these "efforts," I should be fostering your self-righteousness and your rejection of this grace of the Spirit.

You say you cannot change your heart or do any good thing. So say I. But I say more. I say that you are not at all aware of the extent of your helplessness and of your guilt. These are far greater and far worse than you suppose. And it is your imperfect view of these that leads you to resort to these endeavors. You are not yet sensible of your weakness, in spite of all you say. It is this that is keeping you from God and God from you.

God commands you to believe and to repent. It is at your peril that you attempt to alter this imperative and immediate obligation, by the substitution of something preliminary, the performance of which may perhaps soothe your terrors and lull your conscience to sleep but will not avail either to propitiate God or to lift you into a safer or more salvable condition as you imagine. For we are saved by *faith*, not by efforts to induce "an unwilling God" to give us faith. In going to God, we are to take for granted that He will fulfil His Word and act according to His character. Our appeals are to be made not to an unwilling but to a willing God. We are not to try by our prayers or earnestness to persuade God to be gracious, to exhort salvation from the hand of a grudging and austere giver. God is pressing His salvation upon us and declaring His infinite willingness to bless at this moment.

God *commands* you to believe; and so long as you do not believe, you are making Him a liar, you are rejecting the truth, you are believing a lie; for unbelief is, in reality, the belief of a lie. Yes, God commands you to believe; and your not believing is your worst sin; and it is by exhibiting it as your worst sin that God shuts you up to faith. Now, if you try to extenuate this sin—if you flatter your soul, that, by making all these earnest and laborious efforts to believe, you are lessening this awful sin, and rendering your unbelieving state a less guilty one—then you are deluding your conscience, and thrusting away from you that divine hand which, by this conviction of unbelief, is shutting you up to faith.

I do not remember having seen this better stated than in Fuller's *Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*.

I give just a few sentences: "It is the duty of ministers not only to exhort their carnal hearers to believe in Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls; but it is at our peril to exhort them to anything short of it, or which does not involve or imply it. We have sunk into such a compromising way of dealing with the unconverted as to have well nigh lost sight of the spirit of the primitive preachers; and hence it is that sinners of every description can

sit so quietly as they do in our places of worship. Christ and his apostles, without any hesitation, called on sinners to repent and believe the gospel; but we, considering them as poor, impotent, and depraved creatures, have been disposed to drop this part of the Christian ministry. Considering such things as beyond the power of their hearers, they seem to have contented themselves with pressing on them the things they *could* perform, still continuing enemies of Christ; such as behaving decently in society, reading the Scriptures, and attending the means of grace.

“Thus it is that hearers of this description sit at ease in our congregations. But as this implies no *guilt* on their part, they sit unconcerned, conceiving that all that is required of them is to lie in the way and wait the Lord’s time. But is this the religion of the Scriptures? Where does it appear that the prophets or apostles treated that kind of inability, which is merely the effect of reigning aversion, as affording any excuse? And where have they descended in their exhortations to things which might be done, and the parties still continue the enemies of God? Instead of leaving out everything of a spiritual nature, because their hearers could not find it in their hearts to comply with it, it may be safely affirmed that they exhorted to nothing else, treating such inability not only as of no account with regard to the lessening of obligation, but as rendering the subjects of it worthy of the severest rebuke...

“Repentance toward God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ are allowed to be duties but not *immediate* duties. The sinner is considered as unable to comply with them, and therefore they are not urged upon him; but instead of them, he is directed to pray for the Holy Spirit to enable him to repent and believe. This, it seems, he *can* do, notwithstanding the aversion of his heart from everything of the kind! But if any man be required to pray for the Holy Spirit, it must be either sincerely and in the name of Jesus or insincerely and in some other way. The latter, I suppose, will be allowed to be an abomination in the sight of God; he cannot, therefore, be required to do this; and as to the former, it is just as difficult and as opposite to the carnal heart as repentance and faith themselves. Indeed, it amounts to the same thing; for a sincere desire after a spiritual blessing, presented in the name of Jesus, is no other than the prayer of faith.”

The great thing which I would press upon your conscience is *the awful guilt* that there is in unbelief. Continuance in unbelief is continuance in the very worst of sins; and continuance in it because (as you say) you cannot help it is the worst aggravation of your sin. The habitual drunkard says he “cannot help it”; the habitual swearer says he “cannot help it.” Do you admit the drunkard’s excuse? Or do you not tell him that it is the

worst feature of his case and that he ought to be utterly ashamed of himself for using such a plea? Do you say, “I know you can’t give up your drunken habits, but you can go and pray to God to enable you to give up these habits, and perhaps God will hear you and enable you to do so”? What would this be but to tell him to go on drinking and praying alternately; and that, possibly, God may hear the drunken prayers and give him sobriety? You would not thus deal with drunkenness, ought you to deal so with unbelief? Ought you not to press home its guilt and to show a sinner that, when he says, “I can’t help my unbelief,” he is uttering his worst condemnation and saying, I can’t help distrusting God, I can’t help hating God, I can’t help making God a liar; and that he might just as well say, I can’t help stealing, and lying, and swearing.

Never let unbelief be spoken of as a *misfortune*. It is awfully sinful. Its root is the desperate wickedness of the heart. How evil must that heart be when it will not even believe! If our helplessness and hardness of heart lessened our guilt, then the more wicked we became, we should be the less responsible and the less guilty. The sinner who loves sin so much that he “cannot” part with it is the most guilty. He who says, I “cannot” love God is proclaiming himself one of the worst of sinners; but he who says, I “cannot” even believe is taking to himself a guilt which we may truly call the darkest and most damnable of all.

Oh, the unutterable guilt involved even in one moment’s unbelief; one single act of an unbelieving soul! How much more is the continuous unbelief of twenty or sixty years! To steal once is bad enough, how much more to be a thief by habit and repute! We think it bad enough when a man is overtaken with drunkenness; how much more when we have to say of him, he is never sober. Such is our charge against the man who has not yet known Christ. He is a continuous unbeliever. His life is one unbroken course of unbelief and hence of false worship, if he worships at all. Every new moment is a new act of unbelief; a new commission of the worst of sins; a sin in comparison with which all other sins both of heart and life, awful as they are, seem to lose their enormity.

Let the thought of this guilt cut your conscience to the quick! Oh, tremble as you think of what it is to be, not for a day or an hour, but for a whole lifetime, an *unbelieving man!*