

Expulsive Power of a New Affection

These are excerpts from a sermon by Thomas Chalmers, a Scottish pastor in the early 19th century. Chalmers encourages the reader to let go of the things of the world. His argument is that it is harder to stop sinning by mere self denial than it is to stop sinning by replacing that affection with a greater affection, the love of Jesus. If we are to love Jesus more, then the things of the world will slowly pass away.

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There are two ways in which a practical moralist may attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world—either by a demonstration of the world's vanity, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its regards from an object that is not worthy of it; or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one. My purpose is to show, that from the constitution of our nature, the former method is altogether incompetent and ineffectual and that the latter method will alone suffice for the rescue and recovery of the heart from the wrong affection that domineers over it.

A Second Affection is More Powerful

The ascendant power of a second affection will do, what no exposition however forcible, of the folly and worthlessness of the first, ever could effectuate. And it is the same in the great world. We shall never be able to arrest any of its leading pursuits, by a naked demonstration of their vanity. It is quite in vain to think of stopping one of these pursuits in any way else, but by stimulating to another. In attempting to bring a worldly man intent and busied with the prosecution of his objects to a dead stand, we have not merely to encounter the charm which he annexes to these objects - but we have to encounter the pleasure which he feels in the very prosecution of them. It is not enough, then, that we dissipate the charm, by a moral, and eloquent, and affecting exposure of its illusiveness. We must address to the eye of his mind another object, with a charm powerful enough to dispossess the first of its influences, and to engage him in some other prosecution as full of interest, and hope, and congenial activity, as the former. It is this which stamps an impotency on all moral and pathetic declamation about the insignificance of the world. A man will no more consent to the misery of being without an object, because that object is a trifle, or of being without a pursuit, because that pursuit terminates in some frivolous or fugitive acquirement, than he will voluntarily submit himself to the torture, because that torture is to be of short duration. If to be without desire and without exertion altogether, is a state of violence and discomfort, then the present desire, with its correspondent train of exertion, is not to be got rid of simply by destroying it. It must be by substituting another desire, and another line or habit of exertion in its place—and the most effectual way of withdrawing the mind from one object, is not by turning it away upon desolate and unpeopled vacancy—but by presenting to its regards another object still more alluring.

These remarks apply not merely to love considered in its state of desire for an object not yet obtained. They apply also to love considered in its state of indulgence, or placid gratification, with an object already in possession. It is seldom that any of our tastes are made to disappear by a mere process of natural extinction. At least, it is very seldom, that this is done through the instrumentality of reasoning. It may be done by excessive pampering - but it is almost never done by the mere force of mental determination. But what cannot be destroyed may be dispossessed and one taste may be made to give way to another, and to lose its, power entirely as the reigning affection of the mind.

It is thus, that the boy ceases, at length, to be the slave of his appetite, but it is because a manlier taste has now brought it into subordination—and that the youth ceases to idolize pleasure, but it is because the idol of wealth has become the stronger and gotten the ascendancy and that even the love of money ceases to have the mastery over the heart of many a thriving citizen, but it is because drawn into, the whirl of city politics, another affection has been wrought into his moral system, and he is now lorded over by the love of power. There is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object. Its desire for one particular object may be conquered; but as to its desire for having some one object or other, this is unconquerable. Its adhesion to that on which it has fastened the preference of its regards, cannot willingly be overcome by the rending away of a simple separation. It can be done only by the application of something else, to which it may feel the adhesion of a still stronger and more powerful preference. Such is the grasping tendency of the human heart, that it must have a something to lay hold of—and which, if wrested away without the substitution of another something in its place, would leave a void and a vacancy as painful to the mind, as hunger is to the natural system. It may be dispossessed of one object, or of any, but it cannot be desolated of all. Let there be a breathing and a sensitive heart, but without a liking and without affinity to any of the things that are around it; and, in a state of cheerless abandonment, it would be alive to nothing but the burden of its own consciousness, and feel it to be intolerable. It would make no difference to its owner, whether he dwelt in the midst of a gay and goodly world; or, placed afar beyond the outskirts of creation, he dwelt a solitary unit in dark and unpeopled nothingness. The heart must have something to cling to—and never, by its own voluntary consent, will it so denude itself of its attachments, that there shall not be one remaining object that can draw or solicit it.

Resolve Is Not Enough

It will now be seen, perhaps, why it is that the heart keeps by its present affections with so much tenacity - when the attempt is, to do them away by a mere process of extirpation. It will not consent to be so desolated. The strong man, whose dwelling-place is there, may be compelled to give way to another occupier—but unless another stronger than he, has power to dispossess and to succeed him, he will keep his present lodgment inviolable. The heart would revolt against its own emptiness. It could not bear to be so left in a state of waste and cheerless insipidity. The moralist who tries such a process of dispossession as this upon the heart, is thwarted at every step by the recoil of its own mechanism. You have all heard that Nature abhors a vacuum. Such at least is the nature of the heart, that though the room which is in it may change one inmate for another, it cannot be left void without the pain of most intolerable suffering. It is not enough then to argue the folly of an existing affection. It is not enough, in the terms of a forcible or an affecting demonstration, to make good the evanescence of its object. It may not even be enough to associate the threats and the terrors of some coming vengeance, with the indulgence of it. The heart may still resist the every application, by obedience to which, it would finally be conducted to a state so much at war with all its appetites as that of downright inanition.

So to tear away an affection from the heart, as to leave it bare of all its regards and of all its preferences, were a hard and hopeless undertaking—and it would appear, as if the alone powerful engine of dispossession were to bring the mastery of another affection to bear upon it. These remarks apply not merely to love considered in its state of desire for an object not yet obtained. They apply also to love considered in its state of indulgence, or placid gratification, with an object already in possession. It is seldom that any of our tastes are made to disappear by a mere process of natural extinction. At least, it is very seldom, that this is done through the instrumentality of reasoning. It may be done by excessive pampering - but it is almost never done by the mere force of mental determination. But what cannot be destroyed may be dispossessed and one taste may be made to give way to another, and to lose its, power entirely as the reigning affection of the mind.

One Must Value God Over the World

The love of the world cannot be expunged by a mere demonstration of the world's worthlessness. But may it not be supplanted by the love of that which is more worthy than itself? The heart cannot be prevailed upon to part with the world, by a simple act of resignation. But may not the heart be prevailed upon to admit into its preference another, who shall subordinate the world, and bring it down from its wonted ascendancy? If the throne which is placed there must have an occupier, and the tyrant that now reigns has occupied it wrongfully, he may not leave a bosom which would rather detain him than be left in desolation. But may he not give way to the lawful sovereign, appearing with every charm that can secure His willing admittance, and taking unto himself His great power to subdue the moral nature of man, and to reign over it? In a word, if the way to disengage the heart from the positive love of one great and ascendant object, is to fasten it in positive love to another, then it is not by exposing the worthlessness of the former, but by addressing to the mental eye the worth and excellence of the latter, that all old things are to be done away and all things are to become new. To obliterate all our present affections by simply expunging them, and so as to leave the seat of them unoccupied, would be to destroy the old character, and to substitute no new character in its place. But when they take their departure upon the ingress of other visitors; when they resign their sway to the power and the predominance of new affections; when, abandoning the heart to solitude, they merely give place to a successor who turns it into as busy a residence of desire and interest and expectation as before - there is nothing in all this to thwart or to overbear any of the laws of our sentient nature - and we see how, in fullest accordance with the mechanism of the heart, a great moral revolution may be made to take place upon it.

Relevant Scriptures

1 John 2:15 - *Do not love the world...*
John 3:30 - *He must increase...*

Questions for Discussion

- Do you agree that the human heart is always trying to find something to fill its void?
- How do you see this play out in our world today?
- What are some “things of the world” that you have held on to in your heart?
- What are some ways in which you can increase your love of Jesus to displace these things?