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Suffering for Conscience' Sake a Christian Duty One Should Not Seek to Shirk.

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It is part of true Christianity to be conscientious in one's every act. God's Word is the Christian's guide and rule of life, and his conscience binds him to follow its rule and guidance. If in any case he fails to do so, his conscience will reproach him. Therefore, if he would live conscientiously, he must bring all his actions into harmony with the teachings of the Bible. But one cannot do so without finding that many people take offense thereat. For instance, it is a matter of conscience for us to abide by the Biblical doctrine of conversion, predestination, the Sacraments *et al.*; to have no church-fellowship with all such denominations or synods as teach a doctrine different from what we know to be the truth. Our conscience being bound by the Word of God, we cannot do otherwise. But what is the consequence? People seem not to understand our position and therefore accuse us of conceit, bigotry, and of preventing Christian unity in the Church. What are we to do in the matter? We would fain avoid all this and live in peace and harmony with all that call upon the name of Jesus. But as that would mean sanctioning false doctrines and teaching otherwise than God's Word teaches, which for conscience' sake we cannot do, we must suffer uncharitable judgments and unmerited condemnation at the hands of those who would be our brethren. Yet we would rather have all the world against us than know that we are condemned by God and His Word. Ministers of the Gospel are criticized as being narrow-minded and fanatical, and they are hated by the public because for conscience' sake they refuse to officiate at some funerals or marriages or to admit unworthy communicants to the Lord's Table. And such cases are by no means rare in which earnest Christians experience enmity and annoyance from neighbors and relatives because of their Chris-

tian faith and conduct. Christians are expected to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness. Eph. 5, 11. That hinders them from joining all such societies and associations, social and commercial, as would entangle them in anything that is sinful and displeasing to God. There are the lodges with their heathenish rites, also some trusts with their dishonest practises. But because they refuse fellowship with them, Christians must endure hatred and persecution. And if they avoid worldly pleasures and even abstain from all appearance of evil, they will surely be ridiculed and scorned as fools and hypocrites by many, even by some of those who pretend to be Christians.

But, some one will rejoin, why should a Christian undergo all such suffering if he can keep away from it? To be conscientious is good and well, but it must not be carried to extremes. Can one not be a Christian without provoking the hatred and enmity of his fellow-men, especially of those of another belief? Why should I want to be something peculiar, as though I were better than others? In answering this question, let us refer to 1 Pet. 2, 18—21. The apostle here is addressing Christians who had to suffer severely because of their being Christians. And we may imagine that the question arose in their hearts whether there was no way out for them; whether they could not be good Christians and yet be spared such suffering. But the apostle warns them against giving ear to this temptation. He says: "For this is thankworthy if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully." This means, according to Scott's Commentary, that it would be grace, or the effect and evidence of grace, "acceptable to God," and worthy of man's commendation, if, from a conscientious regard to the authority and will of God, they patiently and meekly endured such treatment as was grievous to be borne; when, not having been faulty, they were unjustly punished. — This plainly shows *that suffering for conscience' sake is a Christian duty one should not seek to shirk.*

And why should Christians not seek to avoid such suffering? Says the apostle: "*For even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that ye should follow His steps.*" Christians are called "hereunto," namely, to suffer for conscience' sake, because Christ thus suffered for us. Christ surely was innocent in all that He suffered. He had given no cause why sufferings should be laid upon Him. "*Who did no sin.*" But it was for that very reason that His enemies hated and persecuted Him, even to having Him condemned to the death upon the cross.

Could He not have avoided this? He certainly could have done so if He had shaped His life and doctrine to suit the public sentiment in order to win the praise and approval of the men in power. But this Christ could not do because "*there was no guile found in His mouth.*" So He patiently endured all suffering, reviling not again when He was reviled, nor threatening when He suffered. And how could He do this? He "*committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously.*" That shows that He had a clear conscience. He knew that He was doing His Father's will, and that the Father, the righteous Judge, would take His part. So all the suffering of Christ was suffering for conscience' sake.

Now, Christ is the Lord of the Christians. They believe in Him. They glory in being His children and being of the same mind with Him. Does not everybody justly expect them to give proof of this by doing God's will faithfully and conscientiously, even if they have to suffer for it? But what is more, *the Lord expects it of them.* He has left them an example *that they should follow His steps.* He knows quite well that "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." 2 Tim. 3, 12. Yet, He never advised His disciples not to be so anxious about doing right because of His example, nor so strict and conscientious in fulfilling God's will as they know Him to have been, lest they be hated and persecuted by men. On the contrary, He wants His disciples to follow His steps, in no wise to turn aside from the ways and rules of God's Word, and gladly to endure whatever hatred and persecution may betide them. Therefore, if a Christian is approached by the Tempter, who urges him to "be sensible" and not overconscientious, to eliminate what he knows people do not like in his religion, because he could thus save himself much trouble and annoyance, — if a Christian is thus tempted, what is he to do? Tell the Tempter what the Savior said to him, "Get thee hence, Satan!" Being a Christian, being called into communion with Christ, and having pledged Him allegiance, what else can he expect, but that the world will treat him as it treated his Lord? How could he call himself a follower of Christ if he were to violate his conscience merely to avoid being hated and spitefully entreated by men?

Come, follow Me, the Savior spake,
 All in My way abiding;
 Deny yourselves, the world forsake,
 Obey My call and guiding.
 O bear the cross, whate'er betide,
 Take My example for your guide.

The apostle offers another reason why Christians should not seek to avoid suffering for conscience' sake. He goes on to say: vv. 24, 25. If Christians think of their conversion to Christ; if they consider their terrible state before conversion, and how happy and blessed they are now, they will gladly suffer for being conscientious servants of their Savior and never think of avoiding such suffering.

What kind of people are those who do not in their daily life obey the voice of conscience, but follow their carnal inclinations, hating and persecuting all such as refuse to be conformed to this world? They are those who, like sheep, have gone astray from God, turned to their own way, and were caught in the snares of the devil. They know not the Savior, and their end will be destruction. The Christians, thank God, are not like them. But was there not a time when they, too, were in that deplorable condition, to wit, previous to their conversion? Says the apostle, addressing the Christians: "*For ye were as sheep going astray.*" How is it that their condition is altogether different now? "Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; *but ye are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.*" In order to do away with sin, which caused those who are now Christians to stray from God, Jesus bore their sins in His body on the tree, paying the penalty for them and reconciling God. And then, as their faithful Shepherd, He sought them with His saving Gospel, calling them and converting them unto Himself. Now salvation is theirs. *By His stripes they have been healed.*—Should they now deny Him before men who know Him not, and who hate Him and His believers just because they know Him not? Should they reject the Word of God for the purpose of pleasing men and gaining their good will? Should they do what displeases their Lord, merely to avoid being ridiculed and scorned by men? That surely would be a sorry kind of gratitude for the love of the Savior and His precious redemption. Now that they have been converted to the Lord and know and appreciate the great things He has done for them, they should not permit the enemies of Christ to keep them from living according to the dictates of their conscience, in accordance with God's Word, and from being willing to endure any amount of enmity and persecution at the hands of the ungodly world.

Or *did not the Lord intend this very thing* when He bore our sins on the cross, "*that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness*"? He laid into His offering the power to work in men that very condition, that one be dead to sin and live unto righteousness. That power, indeed, is meant for all men; but many, because they believe not the Gospel, do not experience it. It is the Christians only, in whom that power asserts itself. Being converted to Christ, they are moved by the power of this sacrifice. They are now dead to sin. A worldly person, when seeing any one engaged in sinful things, will not hesitate to join him, because to sin is natural with him and altogether to his liking. Not so with the Christian. The sinful things he witnesses may allure him too, but his faith will at once protest against participating in them, saying, That is not for me; that is wrong; I will keep away from it. That is Christian character. A Christian will refuse to have anything to do with sin, as though he were dead as far as sinning is concerned. He will live unto righteousness, do what is right in the sight of God, and follow the dictates of his conscience.

Now, then, if a Christian would suffer himself to be hindered from doing thus, would it not be tantamount to suffering himself to be hindered from remaining in the blessed state of conversion, from being dead to sin? Indeed, it would mean denying Christ, denying faith. By such conduct he would practically say, I am no Christian, no believer; I am an unconverted, unbelieving person. Sin, to which the Christian is dead would be revived in the heart and invited to control the soul as before. Would any Christian think of doing such a thing? No indeed! No suffering for conscience' sake can be so great and so severe as to cause a Christian to deny his being converted to his faithful Shepherd, to the Bishop of his soul.
