

*“Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.”—James 1:16-21.*

**THE WORD OF TRUTH**  
*A Sermon by Theodor Zahn*

TWO very different notes are struck by the verses which have just been read. It seems as though the one ought to tune our hearts to thankful joy for the goodness of God, and the other to very solemn meditation on our own depraved nature. If we assent when we hear that all good and perfect gifts are from above, and come down to us from the Father of lights; if we remember that all that comes to us from God is verily a good and perfect gift; and if, moreover, we can fully say with James: The eternal Father of light and life has begotten us, according to His gracious will, has given us a new birth, so that we may be His children, has made us the first-fruits of His creatures, and set us as kings and priests over His world—what else can we do but praise God as our Heavenly Father? This note is in keeping with the present season, the time of joy for the community between Easter and Whitsuntide. The very names of the Sundays in our calendar—last Sunday was called Jubilate and to-day Cantate—appeal to us to sing praises to the Lord. Even Nature comes to our aid. This year, after long delay, she has suddenly awakened in peculiar loveliness; how seldom she dons her festal robe of blossoming beauty, and while the religiously-minded rejoice in her, they also rejoice in their God as the kind Giver of all these good gifts.

But in the same short passage in which our thoughts are thus directed, James strikes a very different note. He speaks, too, of very unpleasant things. He speaks of the filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness which are to be found amongst us, and also of unseasonable talk, and pernicious wrath. Before pointing us to God, as the Giver of all good things, he cries to us in warning, “Do not err, beloved brethren,” and he closes with the exhortation, “Lay aside all filthiness and wickedness.” What is the meaning of this, my beloved? James was certainly a man of intense earnestness; he did not make any allowances for the Christians to whom he wrote; he rebuked their sins with the fiery zeal of the old prophets. But yet it cannot have been his intention, in the same breath, to remind us of the inexhaustible goodness and mercy of the Heavenly Father, in order to tune our hearts to joy and thankfulness, and then to bring to our remembrance our own depravity in order to preserve us from an excess of joy. There are so few joyous people, so few joyful Christians. And there cannot be too much Christian joy; the higher it rises, the higher it raises us; the more uninterruptedly it fills us so much the better for us. “Rejoice in the Lord alway,” says the Apostle Paul; and James and Paul, and all right-minded preachers in the Christian community down to the present time, have not considered it their task to damp a joyful spirit in the community by rebukes and censures, but to be the partners in joy of their fellow-Christians who confess the same faith with them. But to this must be added the warning against the errors and depravity which spoil the joy of so many Christians in their God and His gifts. In a passage immediately before our text, James had referred to a dangerous, yea, an awful error, and without reference to that passage the words of our text cannot be properly understood: “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God.” There were Christians then, as now, who always succumbed to the same temptations, by sinning now against the truth, now against love, and now against purity, and who would finally excuse themselves to others and to themselves by saying: “I could not help it, and I cannot help it; it is just my nature, and circumstances oblige me to do it.” That is a mighty error, because there is truth in it.

The circumstances under which we Christians have to live our lives are not what they ought to be. The world is lying in evil. And our inherited nature is most certainly not what it ought to be. It is just the most religious Christians who have felt this the most deeply, and have most often confessed: "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing." But therefore to say, "I cannot help it," is but idle talk. It is not only a denial of man's nobility and our Christian dignity; it is an absolute slander of the Creator, who created us good and for good; it is blasphemy against the Governor of the world, who is more powerful than the very worst conditions of this wicked world; and a denial of the Redeemer who would lead us on to holiness. Do not err, dear brethren, God tempts no man to evil. No evil comes to us from God, but only good and perfect gifts. But yet those who acknowledge this, and would guard themselves against such blasphemy, need warning against errors which damp their joy in God and in His gifts.

James warns us against two of these errors to-day. Many Christians miss true Christian joy, because they do not estimate the gifts of God aright, and because they do not rightly use the noblest gift of God. James teaches us to regard the Word of Truth as such, by singling out this one of the manifold gifts of God and meditating on it. Let us therefore speak to-day of the Word of Truth as the noblest and most indispensable of the gifts of God. In so doing let us seek for an answer to the double question—

First: *In what does the surpassing worth of this gift consist?*

Secondly: *What must we do that we may truly possess it?*

May God give us His grace during this hour, that while we are hearing and speaking of God's Word, we may hear and speak His own Word!

## I.

All the good that comes to us in this life is a gift from above, and we may not consider any of God's gifts as insignificant, neither our daily bread, nor our rest at night, any hour of well-being, or week of blessed work, or enjoyment of all that is beautiful in nature and art, or the joys of home, the love of our family and the faithfulness of friends; in short, nought of all that is treasured by man as a happiness or a blessing may we as Christians accept as a matter of course. Our morning hymns, our grace before meat, the verses which little children learn as prayers from their mothers, should be said by old as well as young. It shows a very hardened heart and one that has wandered far from God, when these gifts are accepted coldly and silently without any thought or thanksgiving. But for us who have met together in the House of God, and thus acknowledge that we cannot live and die without God, doubt or error can scarcely arise as to such simple truths. All that gives us joy in our lives, and, more than all, joy itself, is a gift from heaven, a gift from our God which is worthy of thanks.

And yet it is to Christians that the words are spoken in the very presence of the manifold gifts of God: "Do not err, beloved brethren." The Father of lights will not allow us to grope about in darkness and clutch blindly at His gifts; we must distinguish between them, estimate them rightly, and accept them as He intended.

Now we cannot do this if we make the happiness of our lives dependent upon those gifts of God which He, in the riches of His goodness, pours out on the evil as well as the good. Are the people always happy and joyful to whom a peculiarly large measure of these goods has been allotted? And are not the men to whom but little has been given, to be happy and joyful? Let us take the blessing of health which is so much belauded and is so often longed for: who is always well, and who remains so to the end? Are the noble and faithful souls, who pass their lives in bodily weakness and pain, to be less

happy than the mean, sordid souls whose bodies are overflowing with health? It ought not to be so, and, God be thanked, it is not so. Or do we think of the work of our calling? One sees great results, another but little that is perceptible. Certainly every man, in whose heart glows a spark of piety, when he sees that God prospers the work of his hands and crowns it with His blessing, will transform all his joy in it into a sacrifice of thanksgiving. But when we are not so successful, are we therefore to hang our heads? In our home life and in social intercourse there are many hindrances and much to sadden the happiness of our lives, from the little vexations and petty troubles to afflictions which wound us severely; checks in the outer and sufferings in the inner life, which even a religious man cannot help feeling, and under which the most loving hearts, and those which need love most, suffer most keenly. But ought or dare a Christian therefore to be unhappy? Oh, we see so many gloomy faces and hear so many discontented words! I am not going to refer to those wearisome people who love nothing better than talking of their own sorrows and needs, or of the proud people who always find the cause of all their misfortunes in others instead of in themselves. But even humble and thankful men, who feel deeply and who gladly acknowledge that God has given them in this earthly life infinitely more than they have earned or than they deserve, often do not show the joyfulness which befits the children of God. The earth is not empty and bare over which the Father in heaven reigns, and heaven above us is not chary of its gifts. Therefore, if our life, in spite of all this, still seems poor and dreary, it can only be because we do not estimate the gifts of God aright, we do not know how to value His most noble gift, perhaps we do not really possess it, it may be scarcely desire it—the Word of Truth which is planted in our midst. Man does not live by bread alone, or by art or science, the culture of his mind, or the successful use of his talents. He does not live either by the happiness of his home, or by honour in the sight of other men. You know what our Lord once said, when a woman, in the midst of the people who hung upon His words, lifted up her voice and called the mother blessed who had borne such a son. It was certainly great joy to that mother to see her Son working as a teacher and helper of His people. Jesus did not rebuke the woman who called His sorrowful mother happy. But neither did He agree with her. He said: “Blessed are they which hear the Word of God and keep it.” Yea, verily, those only are happy on earth and blessed in eternity, who hear the Word of God and keep it.

Of all the things which we receive as the gifts of God, His Word is really the noblest and most indispensable gift. If God is silent to us, the world also is silent, a knot of tormenting riddles, and finally a burden which crushes us. He who investigates Nature, and endeavours to fathom her secrets with all the aids that the human search after knowledge has discovered, will not find any answer in this way to the question which no one can repress: What is man? Why is he here? and what is his end? Man feels defenceless in the presence of the forces of nature, in the presence of the innumerable, and for the unaided eye, invisible enemies of life; he is a beast, and in many respects more helpless than the beasts; the food of worms, and himself a worm. There is only one thing that he seems to possess above all other creatures, and that is that he knows his miserable lot, and that he cannot help craving for something beyond. Therefore man must be unhappy if he does not hear the voice from above: “Thou art My child, begotten according to My will, created in My image for eternal life, that thou mayest be the firstborn, yea, the lord of all creatures.” He who hears such a voice, and recognises it as the voice of his Father, will find that it is a Word of Truth which will save him from despair.

There are other questions also that torment us and may cause us to despair, if God does not give us an answer. However confused our thoughts about God, the world, and ourselves may be, yet every one who is not absolutely degraded, hears one word within: “Thou shalt;” and with that another always associates itself: “Thou doest not that which thou oughtest to do, thou art not that which thou oughtest to be.” But how then is man, who cannot deafen this inner voice, to believe the voice from above which says to him: “Thou art My child”? How can I, who daily and hourly lag so far behind what I ought to be, raise my eyes to the Father of lights? Yes, how can I rejoice in His gifts and discern a Father's love in them if I still feel that He is unknown to me, and that I have wandered far from Him? I am not worthy to be called His child. Only God's voice and Word can save me from this painful

position. Man only is happy and blessed when he hears again and again a voice from above which says to him: "Thou art lost, but still My child, if thou wilt but return home a prodigal son whom the Father will clasp in His arms." Every Christian child knows the story; oh that every Christian man experienced it! The father overwhelms the son with proofs of his love; he orders the best robe to be given to the ragged vagabond; he puts a ring on his hand; he prepares a feast for him. The son rejoices in all this, but how different his rejoicing is now and when he was living in his father's house; he has learnt how to estimate aright the blessings of life. Infinitely more precious to him than the best robe, the gold ring, and the festal meal, is the love of the father who forgives him his great sin, and the words in which the love and the joy of the father are poured forth: "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Blessed is he who hears such words, and recognises the voice of the Father in them, treasuring them as words of truth and life. Therefore let us thank the Father in heaven, that to all His other good gifts He has added the Word of Truth, and has implanted it in our midst that our souls may be saved.

Or can a preacher, nowadays, no longer say to the community what James said to his hearers: "The word which is implanted in you"? When we talk of the Word of God, we first think of the Bible. Certainly the Bible is the Word of God reduced to writing for His community, and far be it from me, or any other Evangelical preacher, to undervalue the worth of the Bible. It is quite impossible to imagine what would become of the preaching of the Gospel, of our Divine worship, of the Christian instruction of the young, and of theology, if we did not possess this book of books. But James is not speaking of the Bible. I will only refer in passing to the fact that there was no New Testament in existence when James wrote the Epistle from which our text is taken, and which is perhaps the earliest of all the writings which are contained in our New Testament. The Christians of his time possessed only the Bible of the Jewish people, the Old Testament. The most precious part of our Bible was not as yet in existence, that in which the whole course of the salvation of God was first revealed and our perfected redemption was proclaimed. But though we now possess the Gospels and the written testimony of the apostles, we may not speak of the Bible as James speaks of the Word of Truth. We cannot say of any book, even the holiest and the most indispensable: This book can save us; By this book the Father hath begotten us again, so that we may be His children. Neither can we say of this book that it is implanted in us or amongst us. The Bible is widely circulated amongst us; it is a cheap book. Would to God it were more read by individuals and in families! Many do not even seem to know what an interesting book the Bible is; it is a book full of life and spirit, yea, of the Holy Spirit and of Divine life. But still it is a book consisting of words and letters, and the letter killeth. The bitterest enemies of Jesus, the scribes and the Pharisees, honoured the Bible most highly. They possessed an amazing knowledge of the Bible, and yet the Lord must say to them: "Ye have never heard the voice of God, and ye have not His Word abiding in you. Ye think that ye have eternal life in the Scriptures, and ye will not come to Me that ye may have life." It is possible to honour the Bible and to read it diligently, and yet not to hear the voice of God or to possess His Word. The Word of Truth, which saves us and makes us the children of God, comes, like all good gifts, from the Father of lights, and is not cut off from the source from whence it flows. It has come to us children of men in the Son of God, who was and is Himself the living Word of God. It was planted in the hearts of men by the Spirit at Whitsuntide, and has taken root in the community of Christ. It is a wonder of the grace of God, amazing indeed and worthy of thanksgiving, that this health-giving Word, in spite of all the weakness of human preachers and teachers, in spite of all the misunderstandings of Bible readers, in spite of all the errors, which even amongst us Christians are still powerful, should now be living and fruitful amongst us, that God should still speak to us, and call us by His own Word out of darkness into light, and lead us out of despair unto salvation.

## II.

My beloved! If we do not yet know how to value this most noble and indispensable gift of God at its

real worth, if we still make the happiness of our lives depend upon things that one has and another has to do without, which we have to-day and may lose to-morrow, and if we therefore are not truly happy men and joyful Christians, it may be, perhaps, because we are leaving undone what God expects of us when He speaks to us. James says: "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak—and receive with meekness the ingrafted word." It is not speaking but hearing which makes man wise, rich, and blessed. It is also true that men must speak so that other men may hear the voice of God. God does not refuse to allow His Word to be proclaimed by the mouth of sinful man. When I think of the young friends who are preparing in our town to be hereafter preachers of the Divine Word of the Lord, and to minister to His community, it almost seems as though it were doubtful advice to say to them: "Let every man be slow to speak." Ought we not rather to say: Be zealous preachers of the Word of God, and be ready at all times to proclaim joyfully the word of salvation? And yet, my friends, allow me to say even to you: "Be ye also quick to hear, but slow to speak." The repetition of Biblical sayings, tacking on to them a few wise or foolish thoughts, and weaving in a few flowers of rhetoric, cannot be called proclaiming the Word of God. Again, the warmth of imagination and the fervour shown by men who are talking at random, and still more the anger with which the sins and follies of this wicked world are condemned, do not produce that which is right in the sight of God, and for the good of His community. Whoever is to proclaim the Word of God, must first fear and tremble in the presence of this most holy task, like the great Prophets of old.

But, first of all, he must *hear* a Word of God, that he may be able to *preach* the Word of God. He must receive in order that he may give. Certainly it is necessary that men should not give up searching and living in the Scriptures, but, as I have already said, it is not every one who reads and studies the Scriptures, be he learned or unlearned, who also hears the Word of God. And yet all depends upon this. He only is, and he only can be, a preacher of the Divine Word, who is always, and above everything else, a "bearer of the Divine Voice." He must be ready to hear it at all times, and when he is not, he must wrestle in prayer, he must pray with the Psalmist: "Unto Thee will I cry, O Lord, my rock; be not silent unto me." Like young Samuel, he must cry: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." It is only thus that any one can become a preacher of the Word of God. But to all of us also, my beloved, even though we have to confess that the Word of God is not the costly gift and the blessed strength, which have been extolled by the faithful of all ages, let it still be said: "Let every man be swift to hear, but slow to speak."

Here in church it may seem superfluous to give a warning against much speaking, and to admonish all to be meek and willing hearers, for here always there is only one who speaks, while the rest are silent and listen. But do all these patient hearers hear the Word of God? I believe there is many a one in church who does not hear the Word of God, because he does not seek it, because he is by no means ready and desirous to hear the voice of God. He wishes to hear the preacher, and for his patient hearing he makes amends to himself, afterwards, by talking all the more, and also by speaking of and judging the preacher and the sermon. If the preacher does not suit him, the hearer stays away, and it is very questionable whether he often tries to provide himself with a substitute when he stays at home. God's Word is not indeed confined within the walls of the church. When we sing in the assembled community,

"Let us fall down, for God is here,  
In worship, love, and holy fear,"

surely we must not forget that God is present everywhere, and that His health-giving Word, which is ingrafted amongst us, has many ways and means of drawing near to us. But it is nevertheless true everywhere, that he who acknowledges that all the gifts of God cannot make him joyful and blessed if the Heavenly Giver is silent to him; that he who longs again and again to receive the Word of God from the source of truth, which promises him forgiveness of sin, adoption as the child of God and eternal life, must be slow to speak and willing to hear. He must, as much as in him lies, shut his ears to the

noise of the world and the idle talk of man. He must silence all his own thoughts which rise up within him; he must not avoid the quiet of solitude; nay, he must seek it and love it, that he may be alone with his God. Then the best company will be ours, and the most refreshing communion, when all around and within us is still, and we can think of nothing more to say than the one prayer: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth; speak, that I may see Thee and live." Then we too shall have an answer; we shall hear the voice of God, and receive anew that most indispensable gift of God, the Word of Truth which will save us. Amen.