

Homiletics II: The Conquest of Unconscious Sins

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Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16 and Matthew 7:21-27

Text: Psalm 51:10 "Create in me a clean heart, O God; Renew a right spirit within me."

On the front of the Post Office Building of the old battle scared City of Quebec there is a tablet known as "Le chien d'Or," "The Golden Dog." Of all the stories and traditions which are centered about this famous old city—the city in which many of the most interesting and romantic incidents of the New World have happened, not one is more interesting or fascinating than this Legend of the Golden Dog.<sup>2</sup>

In the days when Louis VIV was ruling in France, days which were as black and as foul [as] any in French history; days when beneath the gorgeousness and splendor of the court life, there was as foulness and a corruptness which would make us shudder with shame; Philibert, a man of rank and wealth, was degraded to the plane of common citizenship, the Bourgeois, his property was confiscated, and he was sent on exile to New France. All this punishment, and hardship fell upon him because he was unwilling to submit to the degrading influences of the court life, because he was unwilling to sell his character and manhood for his title and wealth.

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<sup>1</sup> This is from a collection of manuscripts—mostly class papers—written while Davis was a student at Harvard Divinity School, 1902-1904. This manuscript is clearly for the Homiletics II class he took during the 1903-04 academic year.

<sup>2</sup> According to the online *Canadian Encyclopedia* Canadian author William Kirby (1817-1906) published *The Golden Dog (Le Chien d'Or): A Legend of Quebec* in 1877. This publication had errors and an "authorized edition," *The Golden Dog (Le Chien d'Or): A Romance of the Days of Louis Quinze in Quebec* was published in 1897.

Philibert the Bourgeois came to New France to serve under new conditions the country which had dishonored him. In the course of time, he built up a large trading post. In this business he accumulated a large fortune, and at the same time, so conducted himself that he became a man of great influence in the affairs of New France, honored and respected for his great honesty.

Now while Bourgeois Philibert was living his quiet life in Quebec, Bigot, the last of the French Intendants, came to Quebec as representative of the court of Louis XIV. As Intendant of the New France, Bigot had to deal with collecting revenue for the government. He immediately set about his task, and soon showed his purpose of using his office simply as a means of supplying himself with all luxuries and extravagant articles of life. He organized the "Frippone." This was simply a company of dissipated and idle men, who proposed to live in ease and luxury at the expense of the people. But the "Frippone" soon came to find that it had a formidable rival in Bourgeois Philibert, and was not loath to show its feelings, and to make known that it resented Philibert's honesty. Philibert, to express his feelings, had placed over the entrance of his trading store this tablet of the golden dog. It consists simply of a dog lying, gnawing a bone, and beneath it are four lines of verse. And Bigot learned the full meaning of these lines, for as the days passed Bigot's stealing so sapped the life of New France, that it fell into the hands of the English. Bigot fell with it and was lost to the world behind the fatal walls of the Bastille. I fancy that he grew to know the full meaning of those lines on the tablet of the Golden Dog. Often in the loneliness of his cell he must have repeated them to himself.

I am the dog who gnaws his bone.  
I crouch and gnaw it all alone.  
A time will come which not yet,  
When I'll bit him, by whom I'm bit.

I fancy that, if the unconscious sins<sup>3</sup> within mere personal beings could express thoughts, they would find no better words than these which we find upon the Tablet of the Golden Dog.

I am the dog who gnaws his bone.  
I crouch and gnaw it all alone.  
A time will come which not yet,  
When I'll bit him, by whom I'm bit.

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<sup>3</sup> The professor has put an "X" in the margin beside this line.

We are constantly threatened by this great danger of unconscious sins. There may be in our lives some influence, which to us seems good and right, but which is in reality an unconscious sin eating slowly the moral fiber of our character. It is weakening us slowly, but surely, imperceptibly perhaps, but yet persistently. We may not realize or comprehend the process of destruction, which is going on within us, but when the time comes to test us, we are found wanting. Our moral nature is destroyed and that which we thought to be our strong moral character, turns out to be only a shell which crumbles and falls in the face of temptation or trouble. The germ of disease gets into our body, and slowly undermines our health. Imperceptibly it gnaws<sup>4</sup> at our physical strength upon which we so pride ourselves. When we are called upon to use that strength, it is no more. We are forced to stand aside defeated. We must turn away from the world which is so dear to us. In the same way some germ of selfishness gets into our nature. We coddle it and try to think that it is good and right, but nevertheless it destroys all that is strong and noble in us.

It may be simply a tendency to idle gossip that is our unconscious sin. It is harmless at first perhaps, but it comes to mean only a tendency to speak evil of another, only the tendency to see evil in another. In time the gossiper must learn that thinking of evil, and talking of evil, in another will have but one result. It will destroy the good in his own character. Sometime when the test of character comes, the fiber and filling of the moral nature will be found wanting, the shell will crumble, and the world will be shocked.

The devotion of a businessman to his business involves this same danger. We admire the strong sensible businessman. He is doing a great work. He is a great servant of the people. But yet when he becomes so engrossed in his business, that he has no time for his family, no time to give to his friends, no time to devote to the interests of the town in which he lives, we may be sure that he is being destroyed by some unconscious sin. When a

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<sup>4</sup> The professor has underlined this word and put a mark in the margin beside the line containing "gnaw."

real test<sup>5</sup> comes, he will turn out to be a mere money getter, a parasite feeding upon the demands of society.

Yes, a person's love for the church, which ought to be one of the greatest goods, one of the greatest pleasures of his life, may carry him so far from the true Christian life, may so undermine his strength of character, his moral nature, that he will awake one day to find himself praying as did the Pharisee of old, "Oh Lord. I thank thee that I am not as other men are."<sup>6</sup> Not only the more obvious sins will work our destruction,<sup>7</sup> but also these unconscious sins, which are destroying when we think they are building up, sins which come to us in the guise of good, destroy and breakdown our moral life. These sins also we must overcome, constantly we must pray, "Create in me a clean heart. Oh God. Renew a right spirit within me."<sup>8</sup>

But even as we are making this prayer, we must remember that whether it is answered or not rests with us. If we honestly and sincerely mean that we want a clean heart, we must remember that if we wish to receive, we must ask; if we wish to have the door opened unto us, we must knock; if we wish to find, we must seek. The man who prays and expects his prayer answered without any exertion upon his own part, does not deserve an answer to his prayer. The man who sits idly before a beautiful painting, longing to know and understand its meaning, will sit there forever. The only way to understand the picture is to study, to dig into the background<sup>9</sup> and find what was in the painter's mind. Then and only then will the secrets of the picture be revealed to him. The man who sits idly dreaming all day long of the great things which he will do by and by, never accomplishes anything. If he would have his prayers answered, he must be about his work, he must show by deed and action that his prayer comes from the very depths of his soul. How did Jesus pray? Did he ever stand idly praying when the sick were to be healed? Did Jesus pray that the tables of the money changers in the Temple might be overturned, or did he overturn them? Did Jesus ever pray for

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<sup>5</sup> The professor has underlined the words "real test" and put a mark in the margin beside the line containing them.

<sup>6</sup> See Luke 18:11.

<sup>7</sup> The professor has written, "Recast" in the margin next to this line.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 51:10, the text for the sermon.

<sup>9</sup> The professor has put a mark in the margin by this line.

his own personal safety? Oh. The Prayer of Jesus was deeper than mere words. It was the prayer for strength and courage and power to do the true and the perfect will of God. It was a prayer of consecration and devotion, the prayer which followed by action and labor and struggle, not the prayer of the idle dreamer but of the active worker. It was the prayer of one who saw and understood the full meaning of the words, "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened."<sup>10</sup>

Such must be our prayers, not mere idle words, but strong manly action, a high purpose, and a fixed determination. If our prayers are sincere and honest and determined, then we may be assured that they will be answered, and the answer will be realized by our own efforts. Our prayer to God will be answered in our own heart. And when we pray, "Create in me a clean heart. Oh God. Renew a right spirit within me." we must realize that the prayer is meaningless unless we first begin to work, to do things that create in us a clean heart, to think the things that renew a right spirit within us. We must answer our prayer by good thinking and good living.

In short, our danger of destruction by unconscious sins can be avoided by our own efforts in answering the prayer. "Create in me a clean heart. Oh God. Renew a right spirit within me." We can assume ourselves against this slow-working and unseen enemy only by good living and good thinking.

If I am a businessman, how can I work so as to avoid becoming the victim of some form of selfishness, of some unconscious sin? Must I not attend to my business? Must I not see to it that my business is conducted upon such a basis as to ensure its success? To all these questions we answer, "yes." No man can be a good man who does not do his work well and carefully. He must put the best of himself into whatever he does. But added to this effort must be the conviction that in his business he is not only working for himself but that he is doing a small part of the work of the world. He must have the conviction that his business is valuable, not because of what it enables him to get out of the world, but what he can put into the world, what he can do to make men better, to make their lives richer and more noble, to make them see and feel and know that there is a great

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 7:7.

purpose in life besides mere existence. He must feel and realize that his business is a part of the great world plan of God, which will be of advantage to men or not according to how he uses it.

Or take the work of the scholar. No matter how good a life he may lead, no matter how much enjoyment he may get out of life, we cannot, with justice, count him a good man, free from the danger of unconscious sin, unless he labors that he may add something to the Truth, unless his work makes it possible for us to live better, fuller, and more complete lives, unless it helps us to understand a little more clearly the great mysteries of life.

The man who works in the church can assure himself against a selfish work only by realizing clearly and fully that he loves and works for the church, not for what the church is, but for what it does; not so much for what it does for himself as for what it does for others, what it may do in making life more satisfactory, in showing to us the sacredness of all that is good and true and pure. The man in the church, and the church itself, must conform to God's purposes. Unless he does, he may yet find himself praying "Oh Lord. I thank thee that I am not as other men are."

Is not the essence of Jesus' teaching, the doing of things that will make men better, and make their living more pure? Do we not think of Jesus as the man who went about doing good. He himself was a great noble character, and he made his power and influence count for the good of men. He put his whole life, soul, and devotion into the realization of God's purposes and plans. He lived and died for others. Is not that giving oneself over to the service of man and of God? Is not that answering the prayer for a clean heart?

If we pray to have a clean heart and to love a right spirit within us, must we not give ourselves over to the realization of God's purposes? Must we not answer our prayer by good and righteous living? We must put ourselves to the service of men, to the accomplishing [of] the true and the perfect will of God? That is loving God. To put ourselves into right relations with God's plans; to do something useful in the world and to do it well; to help make the world better; to help make men's lives richer and fuller and more satisfying, that is the expression of

a true and perfect love for God. We may think of our love for God and our love for men; we may talk of our love for God and our love for men; we may pray for our love for God and our love for men. But it is all meaningless unless we do something. It becomes as of sounding brass and of tinkling cymbal, unless we work to answer it. Oh. There is a deep meaning in those words: "He is more willing to give than we are to receive."<sup>11</sup> Everywhere about are countless opportunities by which our prayer, "Create in me a clean heart. Oh God. Renew a right spirit within me." may be answered. Even before our prayer is uttered has God given us the opportunities and yet we are unwilling to receive. Why do we not realize that we have a greater mission in life than to merely get things out of the world? Why can we not realize that we ought to put something into the world? Why can we not see that we owe it to our fellow men that our professed love for God compels us to do something that is worthwhile? "God is more willing to give than we are to receive." Every moment is a precious opportunity and yet we work merely for ourselves. Let us put ourselves heart and hand, body and soul, into the great plans of God. Let us put our shoulder to the burden and do our part. Then and only then will our prayer be answered. We may not do a great work. It may seem trivial and unimportant, but let us go about it in the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of service, of work for God's Kingdom. In the home, in the workshop, in the counting room, as servants of the people, let us remember that even the smallest work done for the service of man, is a proof of our love for God, is the answer to our prayer, "Create in me a clean heart. Oh God. Renew a right spirit within me."

Thus, to we conquer our unconscious sins.

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<sup>11</sup> See Acts 20:35.