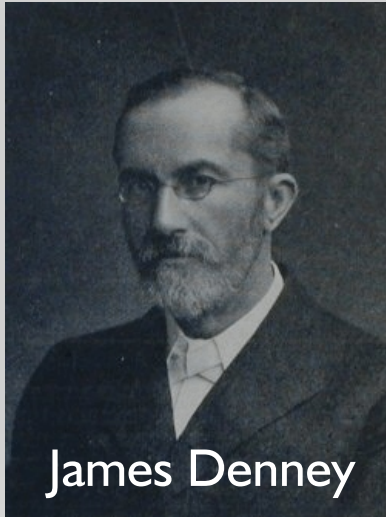


APOLOGIA

... always be ready to give a defense [Greek, *apologia*]
to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ... 1 PETER 3:15_



James Denney

*Are you on
the Narrow
or the Broad Way?*

Edited by DAVID ASPINALL

"He gave teachers" series # 3

IN HIS precious little book *Gospel Questions and Answers* (1896), James Denney first deals with the young Jewish ruler, who put to Jesus the question which to most religious people may be an indication that religion is not enough:

"What lack I yet?", the young Jew inquired. Or, as we would put it today, "what am I still lacking?"

Now, in Matthew's account of this incident (19:16-22), the young man apparently had no inward assurance that his life was pleasing to God. He had already asked Jesus a question which put his inward doubts out in public view:

"Good teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?"

Christ's answer was characteristically blunt, a question itself – and not a little unbalancing to a Jewish ear:

"Why are you asking Me about what is good? One there is Who is good."

Immediately, the young man's inquiry – "what must I DO ...?" – is set in absurd relief against its necessary backdrop, the blinding white purity of the character of God Himself.

"One there is Who is good." If you are seeking to establish your own righteousness as a guarantee of your entrance into blessedness, if you are setting your 'goodness' against the backdrop of other men's lesser 'spiritual' attainments, then you might well fall into the characteristic folly of those who call Jesus "Good teacher" while failing to acknowledge the patent absurdity of their self-contradiction. For, as CS Lewis so memorably pointed out, no one who said the things the gospels record Jesus as saying could be merely a 'good teacher'. He would have to be either deluded, evil – or the Son of God.

But Jesus lets the young man's logic play out. "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."

At this challenge, which most of us would likely flinch at, the young man's confidence of his righteousness seems to flare. For after congratulating himself that he had never broken the commandments against murder, adultery, theft, bearing false witness, and dishonouring

father and mother, he still was unaware of any stain on his record. Even Christ's addition of the ultimate self-righteousness deflater, "you must love your neighbour as yourself" left this young man unbowed.

"All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?"

* * *

Here James Denney, with typical X-ray vision – X as in utilizing the microscope only Christ's vision supplies – diagnoses the young man's religion.

James Denney on
The QUESTION of MISGIVING:
"What lack I yet?" – Matt. 19:20

Most people would have envied the man who put this question to Jesus. He seemed to have everything that heart could wish. He had youth, which means hope and inspiration and an unknown inheritance in the future. He had social position, which usually tends to satisfaction with one's self. He had wealth, which attaches the soul so powerfully because it is on the borderland, as it were, of the material and the spiritual – not bad, if not good, but a permanent possibility of doing and of enjoying most things that men wish to enjoy or to do. He had character, too, which was better than all: he could hear the commandments recited by Jesus with no qualms of conscience. Neither rank nor wealth nor youthful passions had hurried him into any of those excesses which can never be forgotten, and which make memory a curse. But in spite of this extraordinary happiness, in spite even of his good conscience, his soul was not at rest. He felt that something was wanting; he could not say he had eternal life, and it was a divine prompting that brought him to Jesus with the question, 'What lack I yet?'

No situation is commoner in the Church than that of this man. There are hundreds and thousands who have been brought up in Christian homes, and recognise more or less their own likeness in him. They, too, have

kept the commandments all their life. There is no great stain upon their conscience that makes them hopelessly miserable. If they have not rank or wealth, at all events they know that it is not rank or wealth that would make any difference to them. They have been, as a rule, pure, truthful, kind, respectful to their parents, considerate of the rights of others, reverent to the law of God; but they are not satisfied. They know that at the very heart they are not right. They have religion, of a kind, but it is not the religion of the New Testament. They do not take it with rapture. The characteristic note of New Testament religion -- its assurance, its confidence, its joy in a life which leaves nothing to be desired -- is the very one which their voice does not command. They are perpetually asking, 'What lack I yet?'

Jesus answers the question with the utmost plainness. But the answer was in more than words. 'Fastening His eyes on him. He loved him.' He appreciated all the good there was in the man, and still more his wistful inquiry after a more perfect good. Christ and a young man, as Samuel Rutherford said, is a meeting not to be seen in every town, but it is a grateful meeting to the Lord. No one can be surer of Christ's interest and sympathy than one who comes with such a record as this ruler's to put the same question of misgiving. If there must be something peculiarly trying in the answer, Christ will flash His love into the heart before he speaks, that the questioner may know that the exacting words do not come at random or from want of feeling, but are inspired by a genuine care for his soul. But after the loving glance Jesus did speak, and that with all gravity. He did not pooh-pooh the man's misgivings, as unwise friends sometimes do. He did not say, 'This uneasiness of yours is morbid: it is an unwholesome mood which you ought not to indulge. Accept the responsibilities and the advantages of the position which God has given you, and do not worry or mope about ideals and impossibilities. Nobody can be more perfect than his nature and his place allow him to be; and it is a mistake to nurse what are really spiritual ambitions which forget what man is.' On the contrary, with His earnest, loving look fixed on the man, Jesus answered: 'One thing thou lackest. Go thy way, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow Me.' There is no understanding this answer until we see that the pith of it lies in the last

words, and that those which precede are only conditional. When Jesus says Follow Me, He implies that He has what the ruler lacks, and that the misgiving which troubled the ruler's soul was one which He, and only He, could overcome. This is the constant attitude of our Lord toward men; it is in this that we feel, first and last, how He is the Lord, and is conscious of being so. He stands over-against the world, and He knows that He has what all men need, and has it in such fulness that all men can obtain it from Him. This is the ultimate proof of His divinity, this is the infallible sign that He is Saviour: He can do for men, and for all men, what all men need to have done; He can give to men, and to all men, what all men need to receive; in His company, misgivings die, for He is the Author of perfection, of eternal life, to those who receive Him. There were men present when Jesus spoke who could certify that that was so. Peter was there, who had cried not long before, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life.' John was there, who wrote long after, 'God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.' This was what the ruler lacked, and it was to be had nowhere but in Jesus. Only through Him, through His words, through His revelation of the Father, through His coming death, through the Spirit which those who were His should receive, could he enter into a life in which misgiving should be no more. To sell all that he had and to give to the poor was for him, in the circumstances of the time, and with his moral constitution, the one condition on which it was possible to follow Jesus into eternal life. Jesus, in short, asked him to do what the twelve had done: 'Lo, we have left all, and followed Thee,' -- at the same cost he should have the same reward.

Yet, although this is so, great emphasis is undoubtedly laid upon the preliminary condition: 'Sell all that thou hast.' Eternal life is not only the free gift of God in Jesus Christ; it has to be purchased with a great renunciation by every one who enters into it. He who lives in it, with a life from which misgiving has vanished, can not only say, as Paul said of his Roman citizenship, 'I was free born,' but also what Claudius Lysias said of his, 'With a great sum obtained I this freedom.' To put the same truth in another way, salvation is not only a gift, but a calling. Perhaps among Protestants it has been presented too exclusively as a gift. Men have been conceived as sinners *simpliciter* -- as defeated, disgraced,

doomed, in despair; eternal life for such must be a gift as pure and simple. But it is possible to conceive men also as seekers and aspirants. It is possible to find men in whom the inner life is characterised not by the sense of guilt, but rather by that of deficiency: whose souls do not cry with St. Paul, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' but rather question gravely with this ruler, 'What lack I yet?' To these last salvation is a calling. Follow Me is the sound of a trumpet. It is an appeal to those who are capable of great actions: who are brave enough, honest enough, earnest enough, to renounce everything, to pierce through everything, that they may win Christ. If they can find it in their hearts to count the cost and pay, they enter into the life which is life indeed. And they have no misgivings as to whether they are saved by grace. None are readier than they to confess what they owe to Christ. None are readier than they to utter John's confession: 'God hath given unto us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.'

But the price has to be paid, and often it is staggering. It has to be paid by every one. 'If thou wouldest be perfect . . . follow Me': Christ says that to us all, but between the two parts of the sentence comes the condition which must be fulfilled before we can follow Him, and enter into life. It will vary in different men, but it would be very extraordinary if it were not, in many, connected with money. There is nothing, for reasons already suggested, with which so many spiritual perils are associated. There is nothing to the advantages of which we are more keenly alive, to the risks of which we are naturally so blind. Does anybody really believe that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God? Does any one realise the deceitfulness of the heart implied in a remark of St. Francis of Sales, that in all his experience as a confessor no one had ever confessed to him the sin of covetousness? If there is anything in the teaching of Jesus, we may be sure that voluntary poverty -- the deliberate renunciation of possessions -- is the strait gate through which alone multitudes can enter into the Kingdom of God. Self-scrutiny would often reveal that the one thing an otherwise good character lacks is to be made right with God in this particular: to resign a source of income that He could not approve, to arrest a self-indulgent expenditure, and replace it by an unselfish spending for a good greater than our own; to

bring money, in a word, under law to Christ. And when we look at society as a whole, the one conspicuous feature is, not simply the power of money, but the power of money organised and entrenched against the Kingdom of God. The vested interests of iniquity are the most gigantic social forces among which we live.

It is easy to protest against such ideas, and one can easily imagine the disciples themselves protesting. It was seldom they had the chance of enlisting such a recruit as this respectable proprietor, and they were certainly astonished, and probably disconcerted, at the exacting terms of discipleship proposed to him by Jesus. Many share their astonishment, and criticise the incident in the spirit of Strauss, who thinks that Jesus in His teaching fails to do justice to the instinct of accumulation. Jesus had no right, such persons say, to make the demand He did. God gave the ruler his property, not to squander it on so-called charity any more than on self-indulgence, but to administer it in His service. It is enough to reply that of this the ruler was the best judge, and his conscience sided with Jesus. Certainly, at the first hearing, the words startled him; one of the evangelists notices his sudden change of countenance; but he went away sorrowful. Not angry, as he would have been if the demand of Jesus had been a mere impertinence; but sorrowful, because he felt that Jesus had touched the secret infirmity of his character, and that he had not courage to face the cure. Could anything be more melancholy than to see a man whom Jesus loved, a man with a yearning after eternal life, drop his eyes under that loving, searching glance, and go away sorrowful -- go away, although he wished to stay; go away, because he loved money better than the life of God; go away, with a more poignant ache in his heart than when he came to the Great Physician? It is one of the saddest things in the gospel, and how much sadder when we think of the look with which Jesus followed him -- a man who, when it came to the point, counted himself unworthy of eternal life.

Let his very sorrow speak to us in Christ's name. It is the only experience in such cases. No one is ever glad that he has turned his back on Jesus. The things we prefer to Him lose their value the instant they are so preferred. The possessions of the ruler would never again be to him what they had been. The brightest sun that ever shone would never lift from his fields the cold shadow of that great refusal. He knew now

what he lacked and how much it was. And if we want a companion picture to inspire, as this to awe us, let us look at St. Paul as he writes to the Philippians : ' Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him.' That is the life in which there is no misgiving more -- the life that only God can give, in Jesus Christ His Son; the life, too, that every one has to buy, at the cost even of his money,

James Denney on

The QUESTION of FOLLY:

"Are there few that be saved?" -- Luke 13:23

This question may no doubt be asked from different motives. Sometimes it has been forced upon men by the rigour of the theological systems in which they have been educated. 'By the decree of God', says the Westminster Confession, 'for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.' 'These angels and men,' it proceeds, 'thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.' Calvinism is strong because, when necessity and chance are offered to it as the alternative explanations of the universe, and even of man's destiny, it elects for necessity; but a statement like this is not required by any religious interest, and it stimulates a curiosity which may become a pain and a torment, but can never obtain the kind of satisfaction it seeks. There is no list published of the citizens of heaven, as there is of those who possess the franchise here. Others, again, ask this question in the perplexity of love. They look at the world, perhaps at themselves, or their own family or friends, and cannot but have misgivings. They are not sure that those who are dearest to them are in the way of salvation, and they are certain that multitudes are not. May not the way, after all, be wider than they had supposed? May not God have, among the forces working for

redemption, some that are unknown to them, and that only produce their effect in the world unseen? Others may have the question prompted by the words of Jesus Himself. It seems to have been in some such way that it occurred, if not to the man who put it, then to the evangelist who records it. Luke has just set down the two parables which predict the extension of God's kingdom: it is like a mustard seed which expands into a great tree; like a piece of leaven which leavens a great mass of dough. The contrast between this glorious prospect and the actual fruit of Christ's labours reminded him of this question, as it may have put it into the questioner's own head at first. Nevertheless it is a foolish question. When it comes from the head it always is so; only when the heart lends it its tenderness and anxiety can it be profitably asked. And Jesus treats it as a foolish question: He does not respond to the speaker's curiosity or speculative interest; turning away from him to the others who were present, He says: 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate; for many, I tell you, shall seek to enter in and shall not be able.' It is the same word, no doubt, which we find in a fuller form in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Enter ye in at the strait gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way which leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it'. Question and answer alike recognise, what is recognised by every unsophisticated conscience, that there is such a thing as salvation, and that it cannot be taken for granted. In other words, what is put before us in this life is an alternative. There are two gates, two ways, two goals, two sides of the throne, two kinds of foundation for the house we build: and we have to make our choice between them. We can go in at the strait gate, or at the wide gate, but not at both. We can travel in the broad way or the narrow way, but not in both. We can build on the rock or on the sand, but not on both. We shrink from making this decisively plain to ourselves, that the decisiveness of our action or inaction may also remain veiled; but it is implied even in this foolish question; it is emphasised in our Lord's answer; and it is the one conviction without which thought on this subject is fruitless. The ideas we have formed of salvation and perdition, of life saved and life lost, of the bright banqueting hall and the outer darkness, of heaven and hell, may be erroneous enough; but there

can be no reason for thinking of such things at all, and as little profit in it, unless we feel that in the very nature of the case these are alternatives which forever exclude each other. Christ's answer bears directly on this, and is wholly plain and practical. 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate.'

The strait gate, as we see from the Sermon on the Mount, is so called in opposition to the wide gate, and the wide gate is not so hard to understand. A wide gate is one through which you can pass easily, carrying what you please, and no questions asked. That, Jesus tells us, is the kind of gate which opens on the way that leads to destruction. Anybody can go in and take what he likes along with him. You can go in with your money, your pride, your sloth, your appetites, your vices, whatever you please. Nothing is excluded, and there is no toll. The consequence is that many do go in. The wide gate is always busy; the broad way thronged with travellers. You can drift in with the stream, you can have the pleasant sense of being well supported, you can maintain a certain self-respect by pointing to the large numbers of people, of all possible capacities, tastes, and characters, who have taken that way. Nevertheless, it leads to destruction. Its very breadth and easiness prove this. Conscience is not only quite decided and unambiguous on the first point, that there is such a thing as salvation, and that it cannot be taken for granted; it is as decided and unambiguous on the further point, that while you may drift to perdition you cannot drift to eternal life. No matter how false our ideas may be as to the precise import of salvation or ruin, we have a witness in ourselves that Jesus speaks truth when He says that it is easy to be lost, and not easy to be saved; that you can be lost without an effort, but if you are to be saved, must summon up every atom of resolution. What, then, is meant by the strait gate which opens on the path of life? It is a gate, as the name suggests, which excludes much. You can carry a thousand things to hell which you must lay down before you can take the first step on the way which leads to heaven. In one sense it is wide enough; it can admit any man; it can let the whole human race pass through, if they come one by one, and strip at the outside; but it is not wide enough for anything else. The question has sometimes been asked, 'What, in one word, is the strait gate?' and various answers have been given. It has been called Repentance, Faith, Christ, and what not. Even if these answers are in

some respects true, as they are, they are misleading; they divert the mind from the very point which Jesus wishes to emphasise. His purpose is to make us feel that the entrance to the path of life is an entrance in front of which man becomes suddenly, profoundly, perhaps startlingly conscious, that if he is ever to pass through there he must leave much behind him. If there is one word which expresses this, it is Renunciation. The strait gate is the gate of renunciation, and it is left for every man to say what in his case must be renounced before he can enter. No sin can go through: the strait gate calls for repentance, and renunciation of evil. No sham can go through: it demands renunciation of acted insincerity, and a humble resolve to walk in the truth. No compromising relations with evil can go through, no tenderness for old associations which ignore God, no disposition to fret or pity ourselves; and hence for some there is no entrance unless they pluck out a right eye, cut off a right hand or a right foot, and enter halt or maimed or blind rather than stay outside. To come to the strait gate is to feel that what lies beyond is the one thing needful, and that it is a good bargain, for the sake of it, to renounce all that has ever been dear to us.

Jesus takes it for granted that every one has something to part with. The gate is a strait gate for all who go up to it. There is not a man on earth who can be saved as he is : he has something to renounce before he can enter into life. This is one of the indirect ways in which Jesus assumes the natural sinfulness of the human heart. The heart may have the capacity of heroism, and of making the great renunciation which is required ; but no heart is spared renunciation ; no man enters the Kingdom without the sense of sacrifice and constraint. And it is because the renunciation is painful and requires a great effort, that Jesus says with such solemnity and urgency : 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate ; for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in and shall not be able.'

Strive to enter in ; is this what everybody does, whom God in His grace brings up to the strait gate? Unhappily not. Some, when they come face to face with it, and understand in the depth of their hearts the renunciation it requires of them, simply withdraw. They will not think of entering at such a cost. Others hesitate, and stand hesitating for years, perhaps for a lifetime. They are in two minds about going in till their dying day. The blessings of the heavenly kingdom, the company of Jesus,

and the new life, are very real to them, and very dear ; they so crave the enjoyment of them ; but the things they must renounce are also very real and very dear ; and they cannot win from themselves the irrevocable sacrifice, and go in. Others, again, to an ordinary observer, are even more promising. They admire the life beyond the strait gate; they extol those who have paid the price and forced their way in ; they take themselves a hasty timid step, now and again, in the direction of the door ; but they remain outside. All such persons are in view when Jesus says, Many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able.'

At first this seems a hard saying, and terribly unlike what we mean by 'the gospel.' The gospel is all grace and generosity : its characteristic word is, 'Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.' Why are there some, why are there many, unable to enter in, though they seek to do so?

Partly, no doubt, as Jesus goes on to explain, because they do not seek entrance till it is too late. How ominous is that double 'begin' in Luke 13:25,26! What a time to begin to think of entering – when the Master of the house has risen and shut-to the door! Is a man to keep God and the universe in everlasting suspense? Is the world to wait for ever to see whether I will make up my mind? If not, there is the possibility of beginning too late: of refusing to be serious till the door is shut, and seriousness no longer avails. 'Today, if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts.'

Delay becomes fatal, because it begets irresolution, and nothing more easily than irresolution becomes chronic, incurable, irreparable. Decent people probably lose more by it than by all the sins they confess put together: They lose eternal life by it when it makes them, as it eventually does, incapable of the grand decisive renunciation by which alone we can pass the strait gate. Many, again, are unable to enter, because instead of accepting the conditions which the strait gate imposes, they try to get these conditions modified. They spend infinite time and pains trying to transact, to negotiate, to compromise with Christ. The gospel abounds in unqualified statements and in peremptory demands ; such and such things, Christ tells us, are impossible; such and such others are necessary -- they simply must be. Many waste life, like incompetent men

of business, trying to evade the inevitable, to achieve the impossible ; they exhaust their talent in attempts to qualify our Lord's inexorable words ; they seek, so to speak, to widen the strait gate, before they make any push to enter. They would fain justify their retention of something upon which the door closes, and in sophisticating conscience, and arguing against Christ's ultimatum, – the end comes and the door is shut.

But above all, many are unable to enter because they will not make the effort they could if they were wholly in earnest. Many shall seek, Jesus says; but His commandment is not seek, but strive. 'Strive' is much the stronger word ; it is the word appropriate to a contest in which all the force of man is exerted against an adversary. Well-meaning people, as we say, will seek to enter in ; but eternal life, our Lord tells us here, is the prize not of the well-meaning but of the desperate. Put all your strength into it when you come to pass the strait gate : it will need it all. 'The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.'

Such is the answer of Jesus to the idle, or at least in this case the idly put question : 'Are there few that be saved?' It is hard to be saved, it is easy to be lost, as experience shows. Jesus does not answer as knowing some divine decree which fixes men's destiny irrespective of their will; He answers out of His own sad observation of men's deliberate and voluntary conduct. He saw with His eyes many entering in at the wide gate, and travelling at their leisure, or at reckless speed, down the broad way; He found few who had it in their hearts to make the needful renunciation and to follow Him. It is throughout simple, stern, unquestionable fact in which He deals. No doubt many, when this question rises before them, look away from the present disheartening world, and speculate on the possibilities of salvation in the unseen ; some can even assert roundly that sooner or later all shall be admitted to the light and joy of heaven, and can be indignant and almost contemptuous to those who do not share their confidence. But can we help feeling that to enter on this line is to ignore not only the testimony of experience, but the testimony of Jesus ; and that conclusions which require us to treat the words of our Lord and the facts of life as things that must somehow or other, we cannot tell how, be got over, are not conclusions

on which one dare venture much either for this life or for that which is to come? Jesus refuses to look at the question of salvation except in connection with man's responsibility and action. Many, He sees with pain, yet cannot help seeing, enter on the way that leads to destruction ; many also, He sees with pain as keen, refuse to make the effort which is needed to enter into life. These are facts which consist with God's character, and no appeal to God's character can alter them. If a man is on the wrong side of the strait gate, it is not because God has shut it in his face, but because he is keeping something which can never go through.

The severity of our Lord's words about the strait gate is indeed mitigated in two ways. There is nothing Scripture teaches more plainly than the truth, which the heathen also had discovered, that though it is hard to become good, it is easy to be good. The initial difficulty in Christianity is the supreme one. Everything is unexact compared with the entrance on the way. Christ's commandments are not grievous. His yoke is easy and His burden is light. 'A life of self-renouncing love is a life of liberty.' Even from outside the gate we can see this ; it is the joy set before us to enable us to make the hard renunciation.

And the second lightening of the prospect is found in our Lord's express teaching, in this very connection, that hard as it is to enter into life, many will be found there whom men in general did not think to see. 'They shall come from the East and the West and the North and the South, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God.' The true Church, if these words are true, must be to a great extent invisible : 'the Lord knoweth them that are His,' and in every nation He has those, unknown to us, who have counted the cost and passed the strait gate into the everlasting Kingdom.

BIOGRAPHY

DENNEY, James (1856-1917) Free Church theologian, NT scholar. Commentaries on Romans (EGT), 2 Corinthians, Thessalonians . Also *The Death of Christ; The Atonement and the Modern Mind; The Doctrine of Reconciliation*

