

THE GREAT CONTRADICTION

"But Peter said, Not so, Lord: for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean" (Acts 10:14).

Cornelius was the first Gentile to become a Christian. He was a centurion, which means an officer in command of a hundred soldiers. Cornelius was a devout, duty-performing, alms-giving, and prayer-offering man. He was a sincere, honest, conscientious, and faithful worshiper of God. To him God vouchsafed a vision in which he saw an angel approaching him, whose appearance struck fear into his heart. Cornelius said, "What is it Lord?" The angel replied, "Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God." The assurance that God approved his prayers and his alms must have been encouraging to Cornelius. What was there to his credit? He was devout; he was sincere; he was a good example to his family and to his soldiers; he was a man of prayer; and he performed many deeds which were helpful to his fellowmen.

Imagine the thrill that came to Cornelius when the heavenly messenger commanded him to contact Peter, who was at that very time in Joppa. God knew Peter by name, where he was, in whose house he was staying and the location thereof, and the business of the man where he lodged. He also knew the prejudice of Peter that had to be overcome before he could be helpful to Cornelius. God knew the needs of Cornelius, and the man who could be of help in meeting them.

In obedience to this command, Cornelius immediately sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to bring Peter back with them. On the next day, about twelve o'clock, just as the three men were approaching Joppa, "Peter went up on the housetop to pray." Since it had been some time since he had eaten, Peter's body craved food and his soul longed for communication with God. Soon Peter fell into a trance, a state in which his senses were sealed to all surrounding objects. While he was in the trance, he had a vision in which he beheld a sheet let down from heaven, wherein were all kinds of wild and revolting animals, creeping things, and fowls of the air. Everything within him recoiled from such a ghastly sight.

The purpose of the vision was to convince Peter that the Gentiles, whom the Jews had esteemed unclean and profane, were as admissible to the privileges of Christianity as were the Hebrew people. When the Lord said, "Rise, Peter; kill, and eat," the Apostle, faint with hunger, protested, saying, "Not so, Lord." Thus Peter refused to do what the Lord commanded.

It would be impossible to have a greater contradiction than in the two words which Peter spoke, "Medamos, kurie," meaning, "Not so, (in no wise), Lord." What a strange combination of words! It is an odd jumble of self-will and reverence.

When it comes to correct speech, most of us are frequently at fault. In our utterances there is often faith mixed with unbelief, love defaced with a lack of submission, gratitude combined with distrust, humility flavored with self-conceit, courage undermined with cowardice, and fervor mingled with indifference. However, anybody who says, "Not so," should never say, "Lord." Multitudes give Christ the title, Lord, but deny Him His rights. Verbally they are correct, but practically they are wrong.

Remember in mind that the man who said, "Not so, Lord," was not only a Christian, but one who had enjoyed a Pentecostal experience. He had borne a fine witness, and had been blessed greatly by the Lord, and yet, when this great opportunity to take the gospel to the Gentiles presented itself, he said, "Not so, Lord." If he had simply said, "Even so, Lord," that would have been understandable; or if he had said, "Even so, Lord," that would have been permissible; but his remark, "Not so, Lord," cannot be justified.

One truth which we may learn from this incident is that the old nature is not eradicated when one becomes a Christian. Albeit we are made new creatures in Christ Jesus, and the new life that is within us is holy and heavenly, yet the old nature still survives. You certainly did not lose your old nature the day that you became a Christian. You received a new and better nature, but the old self is there still. You experienced a great change because God did such wonderful things for you, such as giving you a new heart, and putting a new song on your lips, but your inclination to do wrong did not disappear entirely.

Notwithstanding the fact that God's marvelous grace did some wonderful things for him, Peter retained many of his personal weaknesses. He still blurted out his thoughts. Whether for good or evil, a prompt deliverance of what was on his mind was still the characteristic of Peter. He had seen the vision, and had heard the voice of God saying to him, "Rise, Peter; kill, and eat;" and without a moment's deliberation Peter replied, "Not so, Lord." That was the way that he had done previously. He was always blundering because he was so impulsive and in such a hurry. If he had thought for a minute, he would never have said many of the things which he did say. Frequently Peter betrayed the infirmities which he possessed before he was saved.

Peter refused to obey the divine command because God required him to do that to which he was naturally opposed. Quite frequently God's commands are opposed to our natural inclinations. Naturally a man thinks of himself, of his own comfort, of his own interests, and of what appeals to him to be for his own general well-being. But God thinks of the welfare of souls, of the progress of the kingdom of righteousness, and of His own glory. His commands are given with a view to accomplishing His holy desires and bringing to fruition His righteous purposes. In Peter's case God desired the salvation of the Gentiles, but the Apostle did not care much whether the Gentiles were saved or not. Quite naturally, therefore, the two purposes conflicted, and the conflict found expression in Peter's reply, "Not so, Lord."

God issues His commands without respect to our likes and our dislikes. Peter did not object to preaching to the Jews, but he did not have any desire to go to the Gentiles. In some business establishments the employees have been allowed to choose their own work. If they do not like one kind of work, they are allowed to attempt another. Until they have learned God's way of working, Christians often expect Him to allow them the same choice.

But that is not God's way. He gives "to every man his work." How many times have we answered, "Not so," because we have thought that God had made a mistake and had given to us the wrong work. Remember that God does not consider what we like when He utters His commands. He sends him to the Gentiles whom He desires to go there, never asking whether he would prefer to preach to the Jews. It is our privilege with the Psalmist to delight in His law, but if we do not appreciate it, He will not change the law to suit our peculiar fancy. If we say, "Not so, Lord," God will not respect our objection and give us instead a command which will please us better. A parent may say to a child, "If you won't do that for me, then do this," but God says, "Do that or do nothing, and take the consequences."

Peter said, "Not so, Lord," in answer to a command which was intended for his own benefit. It was food that the hungry Apostle needed, and it was food the Lord in vision brought him, but because it was of a kind that was particularly obnoxious to him, he answered, "Not so, Lord."

Back of this was the truth that Peter was hungering and thirsting after righteousness. He doubtless longed for more of the divine fullness, and God desired to satisfy that longing of his soul. He wanted to give him such a revelation of Jesus Christ as not one of the apostles had yet received. He wanted to show him the very heart of God, by showing him that the provisions of the gospel were sufficiently bountiful for Jew and Gentile.

Peter was a far happier, holier, and more useful man when he had learned by obedience to command to go and preach to the Gentile believers that the love of God was large enough to embrace both Jew and Greek, that in fact with Him "there is not difference." And yet, left to himself Peter never would have walked this avenue of superlative blessedness. He would have deprived himself of all the joy of introducing souls to Christ, saying in answer to a command which seemed unpleasant, "Not so, Lord."

In making provision for his personal needs, Peter wanted God to comply with his own sense of fitness. Peter was too particular. DeQuincy said a very clever thing about Coleridge which exactly describes this attitude. He said Coleridge "wanted better bread than could be made from wheat." That spirit is quite common. Make the best of what you have. It would be very delightful if we could always get everybody to agree with us, and to do things in our way, but we can't, and that is the end of it. To demand it is to ask better bread than can be made of wheat. That is all too common in actual life. What a pity that some people that some people allow their willfulness to stand in the way of their usefulness!

Are we not all one with Peter in this experience? As Christians we are hungry. I trust we know something of peace, rest, and joy. And yet, we long inexpressibly for a larger measure of these blessings: we crave a more perfect peace, a more abundant rest, and a greater joy. And God is ever mindful of these desires. Our Lord said, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

But blessedness is ever found in the way of obedience to His commandments, and satisfaction is found in the doing of His will. Therefore, when God would lead us into a more abundant life, He challenges us to obey His commandments. The moment Peter said, "Not so, Lord," he was without peace. Any person who says "Not so, Lord," in answer to some divine command, will have some unpleasant and unpeaceful experience. In those three words you have the very virus that has poisoned the world.

Peter was not willfully disobedient. He did not intentionally set his will against the will of God. He argued that the food was so ordinary and common that it was not worth eating. Like him, many others have tried to classify God's commands. They deem that some of them are important, but that they are few. Many of them are looked upon as quite unimportant, and therefore to be lightly esteemed. All of God's commands are important. He expects us to obey His commandments.

Every Christian knows the Saviour, but every Christian does not know Him as Lord. Are you saying, "Not so, Lord"? If so, He is saying to you, "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Until this matter is put right, nothing can be right. It is not for the subject to dictate to the King. It is not for the servant to disobey the Master. You do not believe any command until you have obeyed it. You do not believe any truth until you have committed yourself to it. You do not believe any promise until you have trusted it. You do not really believe anything until you incarnate it in terms of character and conduct.

Is Christ your Lord? The tests for knowing the answer to this question are very simple. Are you living a life of obedience to Him? Does He direct your life? Do you relate everything to Him? Do you seek to follow His guidance in all things? Do you consult Him about your reading, your friendships, and your career? If you read, and choose, and earn, and spend just as those who are not professing Christians, what difference is there between you and them beyond the fact that you have made a profession? There are such things as Christian standards and such things as worldly standards: such things as Christian

motives and such things as worldly motives. If a Christian just accepts the standards and follows the practices of the world, without referring to the rightness or the wrongness of them, he is simply saying, "Not so, Lord." One does not have the right to call Him "Lord," and then deny that He is by his daily walk and habits of life. If He is our Lord, we should obey His commandments and follow when He points the way.

Christ said, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you." In the light of this fact, every professing Christian is not a friend of Christ. Are you one of Christ's friends? He wants you to be. The proof of your friendship is obedience. The Saviour longs to be the Lord of your life. He asks not only to be trusted, but also to be obeyed. His main charge against His people today is that they are disobedient. Many are disobedient to Christ because they are afraid of what others may think or say or do. Behind disobedience is fear, and behind fear is distrust. Many trust Christ with their souls for eternity who will not trust Him with their lives for time. Many are saying to Christ, "Yes, Saviour," but "No, Lord." Remember that profession must be followed by practice. If Christ is not Lord of all, He will not be Lord at all. Peter recognized this fact, and never repeated the mistake that he made in saying, "Not so, Lord." After this incident, he came to have a Lord as well as a Saviour. He cut out the "Not so" and underlined "Lord." Are you following His example, in this regard? If so, you will emerge a different and better person. The call of Christ to you and to me is a call to a prompt, cheerful, and complete obedience, and such obedience will bring all of the other needed blessings in its train.