

1 "Promising without Doing"
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3 St. John Henry Newman
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5 "A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in
6 my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not; but afterward he repented, and went.
7 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, Sir; and
8 went not." Matt. xxi. 28-30.

9 OUR religious professions are at a far greater distance from our acting upon them, than
10 we ourselves are aware. We know generally that it is our duty to serve God, and we
11 resolve we will do so faithfully. We are sincere in thus generally desiring and purposing
12 to be obedient, and we think we are in earnest; yet we go away, and presently, without
13 any struggle of mind or apparent change of purpose, almost without knowing ourselves
14 what we do,—we go away and do the very contrary to the resolution we have
15 expressed. This inconsistency is exposed by our Blessed Lord in the second part of the
16 parable which I have taken for my text. You will observe, that in the case of the first son,
17 who said he would not go work, and yet did go, it is said, "afterward he repented;" he
18 underwent a positive change of purpose. But in the case of the second, it is merely said,
19 "he answered, I go, Sir; and went not;"—for here there was *no* revolution of sentiment,
20 nothing deliberate; he merely acted according to his habitual frame of mind; he
21 did *not* go work, because it was contrary to his general character to work; only he did
22 not know this. He said, "I go, Sir," sincerely, from the feeling of the moment; but when
23 the words were out of his mouth, then they were forgotten. It was like the wind blowing
24 against a stream, which seems for a moment to change its course in consequence, but
25 in fact flows down as before.

26 To this subject I shall now call your attention, as drawn from the latter part of this
27 parable, passing over the case of the repentant son, which would form a distinct subject
28 in itself. "He answered and said, I go, Sir; and went not." We promise to serve God: we
29 do not perform; and that not from deliberate faithlessness in the particular case, but
30 because it is our nature, our way not to obey, and we do not know this; we do not know
31 ourselves, or what we are promising. I will give several instances of this kind of
32 weakness.

33 1. For instance; that of mistaking good feelings for real religious principle. Consider how
34 often this takes place. It is the case with the young necessarily, who have not been
35 exposed to temptation. They have (we will say) been brought up religiously, they wish to
36 be religious, and so are objects of our love and interest; but they think themselves far
37 more religious than they really are. They suppose they hate sin, and understand the
38 Truth, and can resist the world, when they hardly know the meaning of the words they
39 use. Again, how often is a man incited by circumstances to utter a virtuous wish, or
40 propose a generous or valiant deed, and perhaps applauds himself for his own good
41 feeling, and has no suspicion that he is not able to act upon it! In truth, he does not
42 understand where the real difficulty of his duty lies. He thinks that the characteristic of a

43 religious man is his having correct notions. It escapes him that there is a great interval
44 between feeling and acting. He takes it for granted he can do what he wishes. He
45 knows he is a free agent, and can on the whole do what he will; but he is not conscious
46 of the load of corrupt nature and sinful habits which hang upon his will, and clog it in
47 each particular exercise of it. He has borne these so long, that he is insensible to their
48 existence. He knows that in little things, where passion and inclination are excluded, he
49 can perform as soon as he resolves. Should he meet in his walk two paths, to the right
50 and left, he is sure he can take which he will at once, without any difficulty; and he
51 fancies that obedience to God is not much more difficult than to turn to the right instead
52 of the left.

53 2. One especial case of this self-deception is seen in delaying repentance. A man says
54 to himself, "Of course, if the worst comes to the worst, if illness comes, or at least old
55 age, I can repent." I do not speak of the dreadful presumption of such a mode of
56 quieting conscience (though many persons really use it who do not speak the words
57 out, or are aware that they act upon it), but, merely, of the ignorance it evidences
58 concerning our moral condition, and our power of willing and doing. If men can repent,
59 why do they not do so at once? they answer, that "they intend to do so hereafter;" i.e.
60 they do *not* repent because they *can*. Such is their argument; whereas, the very fact
61 that they do not now, should make them suspect that there is a greater difference
62 between intending and doing than they know of.

63 So very difficult is obedience, so hardly won is every step in our Christian course, so
64 sluggish and inert our corrupt nature, that I would have a man disbelieve he can do one
65 jot or tittle beyond what he has already done; refrain from borrowing aught on the hope
66 of the future, however good a security for it he seems to be able to show; and never
67 take his good feelings and wishes in pledge for one single untried deed. Nothing
68 but *past* acts are the vouchers for *future*. Past sacrifices, past labours, past victories
69 over yourselves,—these, my brethren, are the tokens of the like in store, and doubtless
70 of greater in store; for the path of the just is as the shining, growing light [Prov. iv. 18.].
71 But trust nothing short of these. "Deeds, not words and wishes," this must be the
72 watchword of your warfare and the ground of your assurance. But if you have done
73 nothing firm and manly hitherto, if you are as yet the coward slave of Satan, and the
74 poor creature of your lusts and passions, never suppose you will one day rouse
75 yourselves from your indolence. Alas! there are men who walk the road to hell, always
76 the while looking back at heaven, and trembling as they pace forward towards their
77 place of doom. They hasten on as under a spell, shrinking from the consequences of
78 their own deliberate doings. Such was Balaam. What would he have given if words and
79 feelings might have passed for deeds! See how religious he was so far as profession
80 goes! How did he revere God in speech! How piously express a desire to die the death
81 of the righteous! Yet he died in battle among God's *enemies*; not suddenly overcome by
82 temptation, only on the other hand, not suddenly turned to God by his good thoughts
83 and fair purposes. But in this respect the power of sin differs from any literal spell or
84 fascination, that we are, after all, willing slaves of it, and shall answer for following it. If
85 "our iniquities, like the wind, take us away," [Isa. lxiv. 6.] yet we can help this.

86 Nor is it only among beginners in religious obedience that there is this great interval
87 between promising and performing. We can never answer how we shall act under new
88 circumstances. A very little knowledge of life and of our own hearts will teach us this.
89 Men whom we meet in the world turn out, in the course of their trial, so differently from
90 what their former conduct promised, they view things so differently *before* they were
91 tempted and *after*, that we, who see and wonder at it, have abundant cause to look to
92 ourselves, not to be "high-minded," but to "fear." Even the most matured saints, those
93 who imbibed in largest measure the power and fulness of Christ's Spirit, and worked
94 righteousness most diligently in their day, could they have been thoroughly scanned
95 even by man, would (I am persuaded) have exhibited inconsistencies such as to
96 surprise and shock their most ardent disciples. After all, one good deed is scarcely the
97 pledge of another, though I just now said it was. The best men are uncertain; they are
98 great, and they are little again; they stand firm, and then fall. Such is human virtue;—
99 reminding us to call no one master on earth, but to look up to our sinless and perfect
100 Lord; reminding us to humble ourselves, each within himself, and to reflect what we
101 must appear to God, if even to ourselves and each other we seem so base and
102 worthless; and showing clearly that all who are saved, even the least inconsistent of us,
103 can be saved only by faith, not by works.

104 3. Here I am reminded of another plausible form of the same error. It is a mistake
105 concerning what is meant by faith. We know Scripture tells us that God accepts those
106 who have faith in Him. Now the question is, What *is* faith, and how can a man tell that
107 he *has* faith? Some persons answer at once and without hesitation, that "to have faith is
108 to feel oneself to be nothing, and God every thing; it is to be convinced of sin, to be
109 conscious one cannot save oneself, and to wish to be saved by Christ our Lord; and
110 that it is, moreover, to have the love of Him warm in one's heart, and to rejoice in Him,
111 to desire His glory, and to resolve to live to Him and not to the world." But I will answer,
112 with all due seriousness, as speaking on a serious subject, that this is *not* faith. Not that
113 it is not necessary (it is very necessary) to be convinced that we are laden with infirmity
114 and sin, and without health in us, and to look for salvation solely to Christ's blessed
115 sacrifice on the cross; and we may well be thankful if we are thus minded; but that a
116 man may feel all this that I have described, vividly, and still not yet possess one particle
117 of true religious faith. Why? Because there is an immeasurable distance between
118 feeling right and doing right. A man may have all these good thoughts and emotions, yet
119 (if he has not yet hazarded them to the experiment of practice) he cannot promise
120 himself that he has any sound and permanent principle at all. If he has not yet acted
121 upon them, we have no voucher, barely on *account* of them, to believe that they are any
122 thing but words. Though a man spoke like an angel, I would not believe him, on the
123 mere ground of his speaking. Nay, till he acts upon them, he has not even evidence to
124 himself that he has true living faith. Dead faith (as St. James says) profits no man. Of
125 course; the Devils have it. What, on the other hand is *living* faith? Do fervent thoughts
126 make faith *living*? St. James tells us otherwise. He tells us *works*, deeds of obedience,
127 are the life of faith. "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead
128 also." [James ii. 26.] So that those who think they really believe, because they have in
129 word and thought surrendered themselves to God, are much too hasty in their
130 judgment. They have done something, indeed, but not at all the most difficult part of

131 their duty, which is to surrender themselves to God in deed and act. They have as yet
132 done nothing to show they will not, after saying "I go," the next moment "go not;" nothing
133 to show they will not act the part of the self-deceiving disciple, who said, "Though I die
134 with Thee, I will not deny Thee," yet straightway went and denied Christ thrice. As far as
135 we know any thing of the matter, justifying faith has no existence independent of its
136 particular definite acts. It may be described to be the temper under which men obey; the
137 humble and earnest desire to please Christ which causes and attends on actual
138 services. He who does one little deed of obedience, whether he denies himself some
139 comfort to relieve the sick and needy, or curbs his temper, or forgives an enemy, or
140 asks forgiveness for an offence committed by him, or resists the clamour or ridicule of
141 the world—such an one (as far as we are given to judge) evinces more true faith than
142 could be shown by the most fluent religious conversation, the most intimate knowledge
143 of Scripture doctrine, or the most remarkable agitation and change of religious
144 sentiments. Yet how many are there who sit still with folded hands, dreaming, doing
145 nothing at all, thinking they have done every thing, or need do nothing, when they
146 merely have had these good *thoughts*, which will save no one.

147 My object has been, as far as a few words can do it, to lead you to some true notion of
148 the depths and deceitfulness of the heart, which we do not really know. It is easy to
149 speak of human nature as corrupt in the general, to admit it in the general, and then get
150 quit of the subject; as if the doctrine being once admitted, there was nothing more to be
151 done with it. But in truth we can have no real apprehension of the doctrine of our
152 corruption, till we view the structure of our minds, part by part; and dwell upon and draw
153 out the signs of our weakness, inconsistency, and ungodliness, which are such as can
154 arise from nothing else than some strange original defect in our moral nature.

155 1. Now it will be well if such self-examination as I have suggested leads us to the habit
156 of constant dependence upon the Unseen God, in whom "we live and move and have
157 our being." We are in the dark about ourselves. When we act, we are groping in the
158 dark, and may meet with a fall any moment. Here and there, perhaps, we see a little; or,
159 in our attempts to influence and move our minds, we are making experiments (as it
160 were) with some delicate and dangerous instrument, which works we do not know how,
161 and may produce unexpected and disastrous effects. The management of our hearts is
162 quite above us. Under these circumstances it becomes our comfort to look up to God.
163 "Thou, God, seest me!" Such was the consolation of the forlorn Hagar in the wilderness.
164 He knoweth whereof we are made, and He alone can uphold us. He sees with most
165 appalling distinctness all our sins, all the windings and recesses of evil within us; yet it is
166 our only comfort to know this, and to trust Him for help against ourselves. To those who
167 have a right notion of their weakness, the thought of their Almighty Sanctifier and Guide
168 is continually present. They believe in the necessity of a spiritual influence to change
169 and strengthen them, not as a mere abstract doctrine, but as a practical and most
170 consolatory truth, daily to be fulfilled in their warfare with sin and Satan.

171 2. And this conviction of our excessive weakness must further lead us to try ourselves
172 continually in little things, in order to prove our own earnestness; ever to be suspicious
173 of ourselves, and not only to refrain from promising much, but actually to put ourselves

174 to the test in order to keep ourselves wakeful. A sober mind never enjoys God's
175 blessings to the full; it draws back and refuses a portion to show its command over
176 itself. It denies itself in trivial circumstances, even if nothing is gained by denying, but an
177 evidence of its own sincerity. It makes trial of its own professions; and if it has been
178 tempted to say any thing noble and great, or to blame another for sloth or cowardice, it
179 takes itself at its word, and resolves to make some sacrifice (if possible) in little things,
180 as a price for the indulgence of fine speaking, or as a penalty on its censoriousness.
181 Much would be gained if we adopted this rule even in our professions of friendship and
182 service one towards another; and never said a thing which we were not willing to do.

183 There is only one place where the Christian allows himself to profess openly, and that is
184 in Church. Here, under the guidance of Apostles and Prophets, he says many things
185 boldly, as speaking after them, and as before Him who searcheth the reins. There can
186 be no harm in professing much directly to God, because, *while we speak*, we know He
187 sees through our professions, and takes them for what they really are, *prayers*. How
188 much, for instance, do we profess when we say the Creed! and in the Collects we put
189 on the full character of a Christian. We desire and seek the best gifts, and declare our
190 strong purpose to serve God with our whole hearts. By doing this, we remind ourselves
191 of our duty; and withal, we humble ourselves by the taunt (so to call it) of putting upon
192 our dwindled and unhealthy forms those ample and glorious garments which befit the
193 upright and full-grown believer.

194 Lastly, we see from the parable, what is the course and character of human obedience
195 on the whole. There are two sides of it. I have taken the darker side; the case of
196 profession without practice, of saying "I go, Sir," and of not going. But what is the
197 brighter side? Nothing better than to say, "I go not," and to repent and go. The
198 more *common* condition of men is, not to know their inability to serve God, and readily
199 to answer for themselves; and so they quietly pass through life, as if they had nothing to
200 fear. Their best estate, what is it, but to rise more or less in rebellion against God, to
201 resist His commandments and ordinances, and then poorly to make up for the mischief
202 they have done, by repenting and obeying? Alas! to be alive as a Christian, is nothing
203 better than to struggle against sin, to disobey and repent. There has been but One
204 amongst the sons of men who has said and done *consistently*; who said, "I come to do
205 Thy will, O God," and without delay or hindrance did it. He came to show us what
206 human nature might become, if carried on to its perfection. Thus He teaches us to think
207 highly of our nature as viewed in Him; not (as some do) to speak evil of our nature and
208 exalt ourselves personally, but while we acknowledge *our own* distance from heaven, to
209 view our *nature* as renewed in Him, as glorious and wonderful beyond our thoughts.
210 Thus He teaches us to be hopeful; and encourages us while conscience abases us.
211 Angels seem little in honour and dignity, compared with that nature which the Eternal
212 Word has purified by His own union with it. Henceforth, we dare aspire to enter into the
213 heaven of heavens, and to live for ever in God's presence, because the first-fruits of our
214 race is already there in the Person of His Only-begotten Son.