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STUDIES IN TEXTS.

Suggestions for Sermons from Current Literature.

BY THE REV. HARRINGTON C. LEES, M.A.

IX. UNION IS STRENGTH IN THE PRAYER LIFE.

Text: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask for, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in Heaven, for where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them" (St. Matt. xviii. 19, 20).

[Book of the Month: JESUS AS THEY SAW HIM¹ by J. A. Findlay = F. Other reff. Bruce's *Training of the Twelve* = B. *Expositor's Greek Test.* = EGT. Peake's *Commentary* = P. Plummer's *St. Matthew* = PM.]

All through this chapter Jesus is occupied with the alternative possibilities of the number two. The dangers of rival parties, the strife for supremacy (ver. 1); the child who is welcomed and helped, and the one who is hindered (vers. 5, 6); the two hands that work, one for God, and one for the Devil; the two feet that walk, one heavenward, one towards destruction; the two eyes that look, one at life, and one at death (vers. 8, 9; cf. v. 28, 29; vi. 22, 23); the flock safe, and the sheep strayed (vers. 12, 13); two brothers at variance (vers. 15-17; and see 21, 23); the two attitudes towards debt (vers. 23-37). And here, in the heart of the chapter, the Power and the blessing of Two, whether eyes, feet, hands, brothers, or whatever else, where prayer is united and Jesus is invoked.

I. THE POWER OF A MAN TO REINFORCE HIS FELLOW.

"Unlimited value is assigned to the prayers of two of *them*, if they are in harmony. This passage strikes a note, it should be observed that is not heard even in the Third Gospel where such emphasis is placed upon the efficacy of prayer. Individual prayer 'in secret' is rewarded, but the common prayer of two lovers of their Lord and

¹ *Jesus as they saw Him*, Part III, St. Matthew. 3s. 6d. J. A. Sharp. The Epworth Press. Two parts already noticed in these columns. Mr. Findlay continues in the same fresh, helpful vein. This is a mine for every expository preacher.

of each other is invariably successful in its particular object—' about any and every matter concerning which they shall make request.' There is no such explicit statement anywhere else in the first three Gospels, though Mark xi. 24 perhaps approaches it closely, and it deserves our closest attention ; there faith, here love, is said to be the condition of effectual prayer ; compare Ignatius to the Ephesians, ' for if the prayer of one and a second have such strength ' " (F. 259). So also " the smallest possible congregation is certain to be heard when it unites in prayer " (PM. 54). It is an immediate offer of blessing. " Jesus deals in small numbers, not from modesty in His anticipation, but because they suit the present condition " (EGT. I. 241). And as Dr. Bruce says, " The promise avails for the smallest number that can make a meeting—even for two or three " (B. 207). It will develop into a larger matter by and by. It is " not the measure of Christ's expectation of agreement among His disciples, but of the moral power that lies in the sincere consent of even two minds. It outweighs the *nominal* agreement of thousands who have no real bond of union " (EGT. I. 240). But it will lead to the thousands notwithstanding (Acts i. 14 ; ii. 1, 46 ; iv. 24 ; v. 12. " one accord " as a Church principle, and see i. 15 ; ii. 41 ; iv. 4). " For we must not fancy that God has any *partiality* for a little meeting, or that there is any virtue in a small number " (B. 208).

This is of great importance in dealing, e.g., with Plymouth Brethren, whose principle only succeeds so long as their growth does not succeed ! It is unworkable for two or three hundreds or thousands. It is harmony that is in Christ's mind. " He did not wish His Church to consist of a collection of clubs having no intercommunion with each other, any more than He desired it to be a monster hotel, receiving and harbouring all comers, no questions being asked. He made the promise . . . to encourage the cultivation of virtues which have ever been too rare on earth—brotherly-kindness, meekness, charity " (B. 208). So we consider

2. THE POWER OF LOVE TO MAKE UNITY OF DIVERSITY.

Christian music is not unison, but harmony. Not one note, or one idea, but love blending differences into perfection. " Harmony is so all-important to Christian prayer (' are agreed ' is a musical term ; cf. Luke xv. 25, ' a symphony,' a closely related word) that the Christian must be endlessly forbearing with his brother " (F. 260).

“ The agreement He requires of His disciples is not entire unanimity in opinion, but consent of mind and heart in the ends they aim at, and in unselfish devotion to those ends ” (B. 208). “ Mark xi. 25 implies, ‘ Where two of you are disagreed, nothing good is possible ’ ; Matt. xviii. 19 asserts that where ‘ two of you are agreed, nothing good is impossible ’ ” (F. II. 121). “ The promise made to consent in prayer comes in appropriately in a discourse delivered to disciples who had been disputing who should be the greatest. In this connexion the promise means : ‘ So long as ye are divided by dissensions and jealousies, ye shall be impotent alike with men and with God ; in your ecclesiastical procedure as church rulers, and in your supplications at the throne of grace. But if ye be united in mind and heart, ye shall have power with God, and shall prevail ; My Father will grant your requests, and I Myself will be in the midst of you ’ ” (B. 207). But of course this is not meant to stultify the workings of God’s great laws, only to secure harmony with their principles. “ The saying in Matthew does not mean that God is pledged to grant whatever any two persons agree to ask. His will is to grant what is best for them, and what two agree about is likely to be good, especially if Christ is with them ” (PM. 255). “ In the passage in Matthew there is manifestly a rising note ; we pass from power on earth (xviii. 18) to power with God (ver. 19) while in verse 20 heaven comes down to earth. With verse 20 should be compared 1 Cor. v. 4 and Matt. xxviii. 20 (‘ I with you ’) ” (F. 260).

3. THE POWER OF CHRIST TO CORRECT LONELINESS.

Loneliness has been normally corrected by family life (see Gen. ii. 18 ; Ps. lxviii. 6). “ The ‘ two ’ of xviii. 19 become in xviii. 20 ‘ two or three.’ Clement of Alexandria makes the delightful suggestion that the ‘ two or three ’ are ‘ father, mother, and child ’ ; notice how the third party slips in as the child becomes part of the home, almost without the parents’ knowing it—he has not to pay his footing ; he is just there—and the presence of this welcome third party is not necessary, for it may be ‘ two or three,’ but it helps wonderfully ; the ‘ two ’ are the believing husband and wife ” (F. 260). There is in a sense a compelling power in the united voice, which is not found in the single person. “ Jesus adopts the O.T. idea of the mystic presence of God in Israel (cf. Joel ii. 27 ; Mal. iii. 16 ; and Pirke Aboth, iii. 8, ‘ Two that sit together and are

occupied in the words of the Law have the Shekinah among them ') ” (P. 716). There is therefore a privilege which a soul may miss through no fault of its own. Suppose a man is alone, then what happens? We find a possible answer in a saying of Christ outside Scripture, “ the saying found in the famous Oxyrhynchus papyrus and restored by Blass as follows: ‘ Wherever there are two, they are not without God, and where one is alone, I say, I am with Him ’—so making the requisite two. Perhaps the most natural and satisfying explanation of the words which follow the sentence just quoted, ‘ Raise the stone, and you shall find me; cleave the wood, and there am I ’ can be found in the suggestion that Jesus is here pronouncing His blessing on the lonely missionary, church-builder, and path-finder, parted by the very conditions of his pioneer work from Christian fellowship.” (F. ii. 120).

“ ‘ Something we knew of what he first had felt,
Who walked alone with God, and had no higher
Of humankind to be a help to him.’ ”
(*The Disciples*).

“ It provides us with the counterpart of Matt. xviii. 19, 20 ” (F. II. 120). “ This unwritten saying provides for the lonely soul, for ‘ where one of you is alone, I am with him,’ said Jesus—He must have said it—and that makes two; in John xiv. 23 this pair—Christ and the Christian—becomes a trio, for where Christ is God is, and that makes three—‘ we will come to him,’ etc.” (F. 260). And if any one is lonely because his brother is holding aloof in anger, as in the context, then “ mutual hindrance can be robbed of its power to hurt and thwart by mutual prayer; where the other will not or cannot pray with you, as Peter could not with his Master, you must pray alone, for the Lord will make the second; where He is one of the two, the third will not be long in coming in ” (F. 304).

OUT TO WIN. by the Rev. Guy Thornton, ex-Chaplain to the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. London: S. W. Partridge. 3s. 6d. net.

This book contains one hundred new illustrations from real life, and is dedicated to all Christians who are out to win souls to the Saviour; and is intended to be a help to young Christians, as well as an assistance to workers of all classes and creeds, by providing them with experiences from the writer's own ministry. There are twelve chapters, which more or less group the spiritual conditions. The pages are always interesting and very often stimulating. There is no doubt as to the earnestness of the writer's zeal and simpleness of his purpose. These illustrations possess a quality which is not always evident in such collections: “ No illustration found in these pages has been untested.” May God speed the effort.