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UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS.

LUKE XVII. 7-10.

THE word here translated by "unprofitable" (*ἀχρεῖος*) occurs in only one other place in the New Testament; namely, in Matthew xxv. 30, where it is spoken of the "wicked and slothful servant," who was condemned to be "cast into outer darkness" for burying the talent which his master had entrusted to him, instead of turning it to the best account by trading. In the passage before us, on the contrary, it is spoken of God's servants at their very best: our Lord tells us, "When ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do." How are we to explain these two applications of the same epithet: in the one place to the servant of Christ who had made no attempt to perform his duty at all; in the other, to His servants when they have done—what no man has ever perfectly done—all their duty?

The answer appears to be, that in the passage in St. Luke our Lord is asserting the impossibility of men being profitable to God in any absolute sense; while in the passage in St. Matthew he speaks the language of parable, and illustrates the relations of men as servants of God by the relations of servants to human masters, some servants being profitable and others unprofitable: teaching that He will reward "good and faithful servants" as if their services were indeed profitable to Him.

The truth, that in any absolute sense man cannot be profitable to God, is a truth of what was formerly called natural religion; that is to say, it is, or may be, known independently of express revelation, as a necessary and obvious inference from the creative omnipotence of God: for an infinitely powerful God cannot need the services of

His creatures, nor can they be profitable to Him, because He could, if He pleased, do as well without them as with them.

“ Merit lives from man to man,
And not from man, O Lord, to Thee.”¹

This truth was seen by Job's friend and “comforter” Eliphaz: “Can a man be profitable unto God?” (Job xxii. 2.) But Eliphaz failed to see that, though man cannot be *profitable* to God, yet man may be *pleasing* to God. He has stated his belief on the subject in the almost immediately following words: “Is it any pleasure to the Almighty, that thou art righteous?”² meaning, of course, that it is no pleasure to Him. But we believe, not as a truth of natural religion, but as a truth expressly revealed through the prophets and by Christ, that it *is* a pleasure to the Almighty that we should be righteous; and for this saying, as well as for their slanders against the innocent and saintly Job, and for their foolish and stupid attempt to exalt the holiness and wisdom of God by the sayings that “the heavens are not clean in His sight,” and “His angels He chargeth with folly” (Job xv. 15 and iv. 18), the Lord, at the end of Job's trials, said to Eliphaz and the two other “comforters,” Bildad and Zophar, “My wrath is kindled against you: for ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right” (Job xlii. 7). These two doctrines, that man *cannot* be profitable to God, and that man *can* be pleasing to God, are equally true and equally needful to remember. The false belief, that man *can be profitable* to God, is the root of superstitious and practically faithless and impious notions about human merit and “works of supererogation”; the

¹ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*.

² It does not appear that in Luke xvii. 10 there is any allusion to Job xxii. 2. The word in the LXX. version of Job which we translate by *profitable* is not etymologically connected with our Lord's word under consideration which we translate by *unprofitable*.

false belief, that man *cannot please* God, is the root of indifference to His service and of practical atheism of the heart and life.

But, further, though God does not part with His omnipotence, and in any absolute sense has no need of our services, yet He condescends to have need of them. Christ, at His final entrance into Jerusalem, condescended to have need of a young ass, which no doubt belonged to a disciple of His (Matt. xxi. 2); and He has told us that He regards any kindness done to "one of the least of His brethren" as done to Himself (Matt. xxv. 40).

These two mutually complementary truths—the truth that God needs not our services, and the truth that He nevertheless condescends to need them, and is pleased with them—are respectively brought out in the two parables, partly parallel and partly contrasted, of the Pounds and the Talents. In the parable of the Pounds (Luke xix. 12), a nobleman, who was going away into a far country in order to be invested with royalty, left with each of ten of his servants a sum of money equal to about three pounds sterling; and, on his return with royal power, rewarded the servant who had earned ten pounds for him with the governorship of a province containing ten cities, and the servant who had earned five pounds with the governorship of a province containing five cities. The money wherewith he entrusted his servants, and any money that they could earn, was a matter of no importance to a king; his purpose was not to increase his own riches, but to make trial of their ability, industry, and honesty in serving him. Every detail in Christ's parables has its own lesson of truth, and this is meant to show us the infinitely small value of our highest endowments and our best services when compared with the infinite riches of God. In the parable of the Talents (Matt. xxv. 14), on the contrary, the master is not described as a king or a nobleman, but only a private

person of great wealth, having many servants; among whom, when he was leaving his own country for a considerable time, he distributed his money in charge; giving to different servants different sums of one, two, or five talents, equal respectively to about one hundred and eighty, three hundred and sixty, and nine hundred pounds of our money. It is implied that these were but small portions of the master's riches; for he said to each of those who by careful trading had doubled the money entrusted to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things." But though he calls it "a few things," we cannot suppose that a sum equal to nine hundred pounds of our money could be a matter of no account to him whatever, or of no more importance than the few pounds entrusted to the servants were to the king in the other parable; on the contrary, these comparatively large sums are mentioned in order to teach us the great importance of the interests wherewith the Lord entrusts His servants. We are told, moreover, that the master delivered to the servants his goods, evidently meaning all his goods. This is quite unlike what is implied in the parable of the Pounds, and means that Christ has committed the care of His kingdom on earth to His servants; primarily to the apostles and those who succeed them in the ministry of the Word.

And lest the importance of the position and the responsibilities of His servants should not be esteemed highly enough, Christ has added the very remarkable incident, that of the three servants concerning whom He relates the account of their stewardship and the consequent judgment upon them, the "wicked and slothful" servant was that one to whom the least had been entrusted; signifying that one of the chief dangers to be guarded against, is the tendency to underrate the importance of our stewardship;—to think it not worth while to make the most of comparatively

small endowments and small opportunities. Arnold of Rugby, who had a right to speak on such a subject, says in a letter to one of his old pupils: "I am satisfied that a neglected intellect is far oftener the cause of mischief to a man, than a perverted or over-valued one."¹

To return to that saying of our Lord with which we begin:—it no doubt at first sight appears almost harsh, and much less gracious than His words generally are. But the truth which it asserts is one of which men need to be reminded, though, as we have endeavoured to show, it is, when understood, seen to be self-evidently true; indeed, the idea of God thanking man is as absurd as the blasphemy of the Persian agnostic Omar Khayyam (if he is fairly represented by his translator) in offering, on man's behalf, to forgive God. In order to see the real graciousness of this saying of our Lord, it is not necessary to read between the lines; we have only to consider the words "after that thou shalt eat and drink." There is neither niggardliness nor upbraiding in this: "God giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not" (Jas. i. 5). How much is meant by the words "thou shalt eat and drink" is shown by the saying of the Psalmist, "They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house; and Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures" (Ps. xxxvi. 8). And Christ Himself says in another parable (Luke xii. 37), "Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat, and come and serve them." And lest we might fear that His words had been mistaken;—lest we might fear that it is impossible for the Master to serve His servants and for God to serve man, we are told by another evangelist (John xiii. 4) that at the farewell supper the Lord

¹ Stanley's *Life of Arnold*, vol. ii., p. 83.

girded Himself, and did the work of a servant by washing the feet of His disciples.

Thus the parable under our consideration (for it is a parable in reality, though not quite so in form), not only teaches that all our service is due to God, so that when we have done all that was our duty to do we are still unprofitable servants;—but it also clearly suggests the further truth, that if we honestly make it our first aim to serve God, He will provide us with all that we need. The lesson is the same as that which the Lord has taught, without a parable, in the Sermon on the Mount: “Be not anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. vi. 31–33).

The same truth—or rather, the still more spiritual truth, that the service of God ought to be foremost, not only in our aims, but in our thoughts and our prayers—is taught in the structure of the Lord’s Prayer. If we had not this before us as a model of prayer, and if the best men were asked the question, What ought to be foremost in our prayers? it is likely that one would answer, Daily bread, both bodily and spiritual; another, Forgiveness of sins; a third, Guidance through the perplexities of life; and a fourth, Deliverance from evil. But our Lord teaches differently from all these; He teaches us first to pray that the name of our heavenly Father may be hallowed, His kingdom furthered, and His will done; and after that, to pray for the supply of our own wants; trusting God, that if we ask aright in faith, He will give us all that we need.

JOSEPH JOHN MURPHY.
