

Twenty Misused Scripture Texts.

VI.

‘Which is your reasonable service.’—Rom. xii. 1.

It is not surprising that the English reader should understand these words as meaning ‘the service which it is reasonable for you to offer.’ Even if he have a smattering of Greek, he might think that the λογικῆν of the original bore out this view; and showed that the apostle meant to suggest that the presentation of our bodies a living sacrifice was a logical inference from the ‘mercies of God’ he had been rehearsing. But this is a most unlikely meaning of the word in such a context. St. Paul declares the sacrifice to which he exhorts to be a service of God as truly as were the offerings of old, but unlike those not fleshly—material, physical—but rational, just as the bodies we are to present are ‘living’ in contrast with the slain victims which smoked on the altars of old. The ‘spiritual’ of the R.V.’s margin suggests this, and in the only other place in which the word is used in the New Testament—1 Pet. ii. 2—appears in that version to express it.

VII.

‘Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.’—Rom. xiv. 23.

The meaning of this saying in its context is very obvious. St. Paul is writing of certain brethren ‘weak in faith,’ who had scruples as to the propriety of eating animal food. While laying down firmly the broad principles of Christian liberty in things indifferent like this, he nevertheless recognises that conscience may give such things a real moral quality. ‘I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.’ And accordingly he sums up: ‘Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned (condemned) if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.’ Clearly the ‘faith’ here is the belief that a given action is right, or at anyrate not wrong. Eating meat without this is condemnable, is sin: that is what the apostle says.

But it is as old as Aquinas, or even Augustine, to quote this saying apart from its context, as

meaning that all action done prior to or without justifying faith is sinful, that ‘omnis infidelium vita peccatum est’: which it certainly does not mean. If the error were one only of the ancients, it might be left with them. I have come across it, however, in one of Whitefield’s printed sermons, where he actually inserts after ‘faith’ the words ‘in Jesus Christ’; and in still later writings. It may not be needless, therefore, to show what is its true meaning, and to rescue it from this grievous misapplication.

VIII.

‘I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’—1 Cor. ii. 2.

How many preachers have taken this text for their sermons, and have proclaimed its limitations as the norm of their own teaching! I remember reading not long ago of a newly-inducted vicar of a great London parish so inaugurating his ministry. But a little consideration will show that St. Paul is expressing himself thus with regret, not with satisfaction; that he was restraining himself within these bounds from no approval of them, but because of the scant capacity of his hearers. ‘Howbeit,’ he immediately goes on, ‘we speak wisdom among them that are perfect,’ *i.e.* of full age, mature. . . . ‘I could not speak unto you as spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?’ This is the explanation of what he said: ‘I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’ For any preacher, still more any pastor, to announce on his part a similar limitation now, is to make St. Paul’s exception into his own rule, and to do permanently with content what the other consented to temporarily only with sorrow. M. D.

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