

Atonement and Character.

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IT is not the purpose of this article either to formulate a theory of the Atonement or to define the essential elements of Christian character. It simply attempts to show the connection of the doctrine of Atonement with the formation of character and to illustrate this connection at several important points. The current of religious thought to-day is flowing in practical channels. It is constantly said that character and conduct are more important than faith. And the tone in which it is said often betrays impatience with doctrinal religion. Clearly, then, if the doctrinal position of Christianity is to be maintained, the utmost care must be taken to present doctrine in the closest possible connection with ethics.

There is no point in the whole range of Christian doctrine where this connection is closer than in the doctrine of Atonement. The reason is plain. The doctrine of the Trinity is very largely veiled in a cloud of mystery, into which the human mind can only penetrate a very little way. But the Atonement can, to a much greater degree, be intellectually understood, for it is that part of revelation where God discloses Himself in direct answer to man's present need. It is true that even here our knowledge is very limited, and we constantly need to correct our theories of the Atonement by the great guiding truths of God's sovereign love and man's moral freedom. But there is no interpreter like a felt need—in this case the twofold need of forgiveness and life. And the urgency of this need, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, led the varied minds of the New Testament writers to think out for all time those main lines of truth, along which we may feel our way towards the fulness of the doctrine of Atonement. In fact, Holy Scripture is much more explicit about the Atonement than about any other part of the Christian Revelation, and for this reason only it ought to be possible to

present this particular doctrine in close relation to practical life. But besides this, the more we insist on the importance of Christian character, the more we are driven back upon the Atonement as its foundation and essential condition. "The conquest of sin," says Dr. Illingworth, "is the first condition of Christian life. Sin is the disease that is killing us, and it must be removed before we can live. Hence the primary place which is occupied in Christian ethics by the consideration of sin. It must come first. Everything must be postponed to it. It is a flaw in the foundation of human nature, which must be dealt with before any moral superstructure can be begun."¹ How God deals with this flaw and remedies the disease the doctrine of the Atonement seeks to explain. There is, therefore, a direct connection between atonement and character, and this is seen particularly in three points: first, the Atonement deals with the one great hindrance to moral progress; second, it awakens the strongest and most enduring motive of moral effort; and, third, as the revelation of Divine ethics, it furnishes the highest moral ideal.

1. Every man is more or less conscious of some great hindrance to moral progress. "The good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." We do not all feel the hindrance in the same way or call it by the same name. To some it is the sense of burden—the burden of sins committed in the past; to others it is the sense of being under a cloud—the cloud of God's displeasure; while many are only conscious of a vague feeling of unrest, and that, it may be, only when physical weakness or some sudden sorrow stills the noises of the world around us. It matters not how we feel it, the hindrance is the same. We cannot climb the upward path of moral progress until we have been set free from the burdening sense of guilt. We cannot be "imitators of God as beloved children" until we have recovered the sense of the Divine Fatherhood by restoration to Divine favour. And we can make no real moral progress until the heart is at peace. But in Christ's

¹ Illingworth's "Christian Character," p. 9.

Atonement we find the answer to this threefold need. We turn to the sufferings of Christ, utterly inexplicable except as the willing bearing of the sin of the world, and we see that our burden has been borne, and therefore borne away from us, by One who had a right to take our place, because He was "the Son of man." We turn to the living and ascended Christ, who identified Himself with us in His birth and in His experience, and "is not ashamed to call us brethren," and we see in His acceptance before the Father the pledge and assurance that we too are "accepted in the beloved." Thus the work of Christ on the Cross removes the burden of guilt, and the fact of Christ's presence at the throne restores the sense of God's favour; and from these two things there flows as a natural consequence that inward peace which is so absolutely essential to moral progress.

2. Thus the first effect of the Atonement is the removal of a hindrance. But this is only the negative aspect of salvation, and its whole worth lies in opening the way for positive moral progress. The assurance of forgiveness and acceptance with God through Christ sets the spirit of man free—but only that he may set out unhindered on the way towards holiness of character. Here arises the second practical need of our spiritual life. The spirit is weak, slow to respond to the "upward calling of God," and easily daunted by the difficulties and hardships of the way. We must have a strong and enduring motive. Experience in general shows that the strongest motive is not expediency, and not fear, but love; and Christian experience, in particular, shows that the only sure secret of love is the revelation of God's love to us in Christ. "We love because He first loved us." The clearest revelation of that love is in the Atonement of Christ. It touches us at that point most deeply, because it is love suffering and love working out our forgiveness. So the Atonement answers our second need, awakening within us that motive of love which "never faileth" and "fears not pain or death."

3. The third need of the spiritual life is a perfect and attractive moral ideal. We are accustomed to look for this in the

Incarnation, because we believe it to be the revelation of the character of God. And so it is. But the Atonement, always presupposing and, in a sense, including the Incarnation, carries us a step farther; for it is a revelation of God's character in its activity. And, as real human goodness is tested and revealed in our dealings not only with "the good and gentle, but also with the froward," so the most profound disclosure of Divine goodness is in God's dealings with human sinfulness and self-will. In fact, the Atonement has something to teach us about our relation to our fellow-men, as well as about our relation to God. And this ethical significance of the Atonement may be seen in three things: first, in the love of the Father; second, in the sympathy of Christ; and, third, in the Divine method of salvation.

The love of the Father is the initiating cause of the Atonement. But it is often misunderstood and misrepresented. St. Paul, in defining the Gospel, says that "therein the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. i. 18). And yet in the same epistle he says that "God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. v. 8). Evidently, therefore, the love of the Father, so far from being that easy-going disposition of mind which can lightly overlook sin, is a love which must express its wrath against sin, while it is striving to redeem the sinner. There is a perfect harmony between the Divine wrath against sin and the Divine love towards the sinner. The only reason why it presents a difficulty to many minds is that in ordinary experience we know so little of the love that can discriminate between a wrong done and the wrongdoer. But this is just what the Atonement can perfectly teach us. Human love is seen at its best in a parent whose righteous indignation is roused to punish a child for some wrong done, and yet whose love for the child is so tender and so unwavering that he feels the shame and pain of it all more than the child. But such instances are rarely seen, and always point us onward to the only really perfect

example of discriminating love—the love of the Divine Father, who hated sin as no human parent could, and yet so loved the sinner that He gave His only-begotten Son. The ethical lesson is easy to see, but hard to learn. We are to persevere in love to the wrongdoer, though his actions are revolting to our moral instincts, remembering that our sins are still more revolting to the Father who loves us. And—hardest lesson of all—we are to learn to be patient in our love towards those who wilfully do wrong to us or to someone dear to us, remembering in our judgment of others that our sins slighted God's love, crucified God's Son, and yet He loves us. We can only learn it in God's presence. There, in the recollection of the Cross, we come to view things more dispassionately, and gain the power of discriminating between wrong done and the wrongdoer. We do not hate sin less, but rather more, because we have learned to love the sinner more truly, more penetratingly, and more as God loves.

If the Father's love is the initiating cause of the Atonement, the sympathy of Christ is its operating principle. It is the explanation of the vicarious character of His death and of its power to put away our sin. But what do we mean by the sympathy of Christ? As the disciples watched Jesus going in and out among the sufferers at Capernaum, the impression left on their minds led them to see the meaning and reference of Isaiah's words, "Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses" (see St. Matt. viii. 17). Christ's sympathy with others was the bearing of their sufferings and their sins. By His perfect, penetrating, all-embracing sympathy,

. . . "hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity."¹

He came to feel, and so to bear, the burden of our sin and suffering, as if it were His own. This has a profound ethical lesson. It is a revelation of the perfect solidarity of humanity and of the wonderful saving power of true sympathy. Of

¹ Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey."

course, the perfect holiness of Christ's manhood and the power of His Divine nature gave the sacrifice which He offered a potency and comprehensiveness to which we can never approach. But when we call to mind the extraordinary power of sympathy and patient love, in the parent, who wins back the wayward child; in the philanthropist, who purifies and uplifts the outcasts of society; or in the missionary, who civilizes and evangelizes peoples once hostile to him and to his message; and when we recollect that in each case the sympathy and patient love derive their power from a self-emptying, which is the very essence of true sacrifice, then we can in some measure understand what St. Paul means when he speaks of his sufferings as a filling up of "that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ, for His body's sake, the Church" (Col. i. 24). In fact, true sympathy is the same in us as it was in Christ. It is the inner principle of sacrifice. And, though in us it can never have the power to redeem others, it may exercise the power to lighten sorrow and to sweeten and ennoble character.

I have spoken of the Father's love as the initiating cause of the Atonement and of the sympathy of Christ as its operating principle. In conclusion, let me call attention to its method of activity—justification by faith—as also affording an ethical lesson. It is a curious fact that this very doctrine has been criticized as immoral. Tell people that they are saved not by their own righteousness, but by their faith in Christ, and they will despise the goodness of God, and think more lightly of sin in the future. Such is the criticism, and it rests on a complete misconception of justification by faith. The reason why we cannot earn salvation is, not because it is such an easy thing, but because it is so difficult that it could only be obtained by the perfect righteousness of Christ acting for us. Moreover, the faith by which we are justified is not, as the objector thinks, a merely formal acceptance of certain truths, but the awakening of the soul in response to the touch of the Spirit of God; and, when this takes place, the soul abhors

the sin that crucified Christ and thrills with a new desire for holiness. A faith that has not these characteristics is not the faith that justifies, and the criticism falls to the ground. Rightly understood, justification by faith is a glimpse into the ethics of redemption and a wonderful revelation of the wisdom of God. He treats us as righteous because He looks on us as identified with Christ by that faith which at once claims Him as substitute, representative, and example. And, discerning the end from the beginning, God sees in the soul's awakening faith the promise and prophecy of a real personal righteousness which shall gradually unfold from that tiny germ. Is not the method capable of imitation in human life? Surely in our moral training of the young, in the evangelistic appeal from the pulpit, and in the exercise of personal influence in social life, there is a practical wisdom in appealing to the best side of the nature and in treating others as if they were what they ought to be and what they probably long to be. If the truth were known about the reclamation of those who were once social outcasts, we should probably find that the most potent force had been faith. Someone dared to believe in them, and gradually that faith awakened an answering faith within them. They began to believe they could be pure and good; and that was the first step in their regeneration. The same principle applies all through life. We must believe in others if we are to do them good. This is the ethical lesson which underlies the old doctrine of justification by faith. And the more we work out the ethical lesson in common life, the more shall we realize the essential truth of the old doctrine.

