

SERMON OF THE MONTH.

The Turning-Point.

By J. E. GIBBERD.

Neh. i. 9: "Turn and keep My commandments."

Lam. v. 21: "Turn us unto Thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned."

Acts xi. 21: "A great number believed and turned to the Lord."

WE have now seen how sin passes from a latent defect of the fabric of our nature to a troublesome agent in the deterioration of our character. We have seen, that is, that the knowledge of God which Christ has turned like a searchlight on the world has altered the unknown poverty of heart and character into known poverty, and thus brought into play a strenuous sense of evil and of obligation to aim and aspire after the higher type of life of which Christ is the standard rule and measure.

We have seen how known sin, in conduct or condition, provokes deep sorrow in any heart that is well adjusted towards the Father of spirits who, by His love, sent His Son to redeem us. Such grief is worthy and far better than horny unconcern and lifeless inaction.

Our passage from the barren and unresponsive heart to the newborn spirit that is happy in God is made by a turn of the most distinct kind.

By the roadside an untenanted house long stood looking bald, dearth-like, inanimate. To-day blinds and curtains are up, windows are clean, the whole building looks inhabited, and says by its signs that the stir and life of a family is within its walls. The look of life indicates the fact of life. Interest is quickened. A knock at the door would be answered. It is turned from an empty house to a tenanted house. If within it there is a living soul that once had no bright, fervent care about God, and now trusts Him, and loves Him, and feels His presence, there is the larger turn from the empty soul to the soul that is a

Divine dwelling-place. One who turned unto the Lord recorded that after it "God was not afar off: He was my Father, and Christ my Elder Brother." Another said: "Fear of God was gone. I saw He was the greatest Friend one can have." A greater change could hardly be conceived than this inward change.

There is no new and improved word for a change of heart that is as old as the human race. No word is better than the old word "converted." The Latins put "cum" or "con" before a word to intensify it. The prefix gives "cum-ulative" force to the root "vert," which means "turn." So conversion is the most intense and thorough turning. The old heart becomes new; the former man becomes a new man; the soul that always doubled back upon itself to please itself, and never got that way out of grovelling, sets its face away from self to God to please God. The comfortless, unspirited, boneless character becomes new in its content, its feeling, its appearance, its powers, its expression. "Old things pass away; all things become new."

We are concerned now with the turning-point. If a worldly life on a low level, low enough for the swamps to be unable to drain themselves, be in possession—if a spiritual life on a high level, whence there is fall enough to carry off all the drainage, is to be in possession—it is manifest some drastic change must occur. If a heart full of temporal aims and objects is to be turned into a heart full of eternal purposes, it is clear there must be a turning-point. If the centre-seat of the heart has been held by self, and the character has been commanded thence into servile and pitiful poverty of plan and poverty of filling in, and henceforth the centre-seat of the same heart is to be held by Christ, and the whole plan and filling in is to be enlarged and enhanced, it is unquestionable there must be an inward end of one reign and beginning of a new reign. The subtle revolt of the heart against God, and removal of the heart from God, of which the sinner against his own soul is unconscious; the latent bent of thought and feeling and will away from God, and from all heroic and self-sacrificing duty, from all the nobler

phases and outgrowths of character by which the sin-smoked heart is unwittingly stifled; the delicate, fancy, affected poise of inward life that bows the Heavenly King out as an inconvenient caller, and wears politely the insignia of utter worldliness under a delusion that the observance of religious forms is religion—all these inferior types of soul have to be regenerated by the operation of the Divine Spirit who enters like a wind and changes the breath. A life that is unworthy from centre to circumference—that is, sin in its very composition—has to be converted into a life of different substance—that is, godly in its very composition. “Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.”

“Repent.” The cry of the prophets was “Repent.” The behest of the Lord was “Repent.” The Lord’s echo in Apostles was “Repent.” “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke xiii. 3). Godly sorrow for sin, whether sin in action or sin in condition, issues properly in renouncing sin of thought, word, and deed. Sin is so reprehensible, it should be hateful. We are without excuse, having Christ’s revelation of God, if we curl our lives round ourselves and our worldly concerns, and do despite to God’s Spirit in the reluctance of our hearts to obey His inward monitions. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John i. 8). This is no made-up warning from a conceit of religiousness. It is the true interpretation of the currents of our own spirits. Our own hearts attest its truth. Godless lives are failures. Judged by any honest criterion, they fall short of ordinary honour. “Repent and be converted.” The turn cannot be too real, too intense, too sure. God has the first claim on us. God’s claim is transcendent. The majesty of His law is violated. His truth is neglected, and His gift of His Son is put aside as an inconsiderable and negligible trifle. “Repent and be converted.” Let it be whole-hearted. Let it be soul-full. Let it carry a new turn of the stream of life. The little stream of our individuality has to flow into the greater stream of God’s life, and mix with it till it is, not lost, but absorbed. Turn out of the small channel of self; turn into the greater channel of God. Christ calls.

Christ leads. Christ bids. Repent and be converted. Find the turning-point. Be sorry at heart till it be found. Tread not the path of sloth or false conceit. Tread not the uncertain path of treacherous furrows. Seek the right way, paved with truth, leading to eternal life.

“Father of all, to Thee
Our contrite hearts we raise,
Unstrung by sin and pain,
Long voiceless in Thy praise.
Breathe Thou the silent chords along,
Until they tremble into song.”

Concerning the momentous importance of the turning-point of life being reached, one thing has to be said which embraces all other persuasions. Its vital importance is expressed in the atoning sufferings of our Saviour Jesus Christ. God's sense of the deadliness of sin could have no stronger witness than the gift of His Son to redeem us. Christ's sense of the necessity of release could have no greater attestation than His willingness to be the sacrifice for sin. For while Christ's sacrifice provides us with the means of reconciliation to God, it also reflects God's thought of sin, and the measure Christ took of its enmity to God.

Now much careful thought and inquiry have been applied in our own day to this change that is called "Conversion." The inquiry has been made as an inquiry into the growth of plants would be made. Actual testimony from the best available sources has been acquired and carefully compared. The results of such inquiry are too valuable to overlook.

In the first place, it is shown that every girl and boy should earnestly seek to have a godly foundation laid by the age of fourteen, and on no account to allow it to be postponed when sixteen to eighteen years of age is reached. There are many who find the blessed change in later years, but very few find it with as much facility who leave it till a less impressionable age. Besides, if the turning-point is pushed forward into later life, there are fewer years in which to reap the holy advantages of a godly course. You do not choose old boughs for planting out

to get young trees. The earlier you stock your grounds with saplings, the longer do you expect to enjoy the fruits. Let Christ have all young hearts, that He may impress Himself on them.

In the next place, there are two lessons from experience.

One lesson is, that in a great many persons conversion simply came to them. This does not mean that it came mystically on those who had no previous teaching, no earnest training, no regard for religion—in fine, no preparation. It came as seeds come up that have long lain buried in the ground too deep to sprout, but ready to sprout if the plough should bring them nearer the air. It came as close affection and sweet alliance sometimes comes to those who were boy and girl together and meet afresh in later years. God's seed springs up from depths of the heart and blossoms. Decision is formed by a steady growth. It is well known that some who have grown up under religious shelter have found their turning-point by beginning to take some work for others. The happy day that *fixed* their choice was when they began to teach the Bible-story to a class of children; or when they began to offer a word of consolation to the feeble and the dying; or when they first made a brave stand for righteousness in a hailstorm of bad influences.

It speaks volumes for the value of public worship and Christian exercises, of daily prayer and reading of the Bible, of efforts to do good, and of every arrow of life aimed at the target of piety, that these preparations often bear gracious results, which come without any paroxysm or drastic crisis—come as healing often comes, even as the sun climbs from its rising low in the east to its noonday zenith—smoothly, naturally, unostentatiously. It says to all, Put yourselves in the way of Christ, so that even as He passes by His spell may catch you in God's spell. Let no one demur to a soul's awakening because it has been modest and apparently spontaneous. God is in the still small voice and the soft summer shower, in the noiseless growth of the babe, in the gentle expansions of the faculties. So that

the awakening comes, so that the turning-point be reached, so that the high choice be settled, it is not for us to say how God's Spirit shall do His work. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

But though the turning-point is sometimes reached without effort the duty remains, wherever it is not reached, to strain all the activity and ardour of the soul after it. A writer tells of a music-teacher who says to his pupils, "Just keep on trying, and some day you will find yourself playing." "The agonizing to enter in may often be the only way to the new insight, and a definite cause in bringing it about."

"Perhaps the longing to be so
Helps make the soul immortal."

So "strive to enter in at the strait gate, for narrow is the way that leadeth unto life." It may be that one has to strive to apprehend God's forgiveness of sin. Perhaps the need of forgiveness has not been observed in all its urgency, and the meaning of Christ's sacrifice has not dawned on the soul. The mind must be bent on knowing the truth about sin and salvation. Perhaps there has been a vein of fatalism poisoning the springs of energy, and suggesting that one has to be what he is, or that if God means to save one He will do it. So resolute aim and endeavour have been kept at bay. And the soul needs arousing—even a shaking, to awaken it. Perhaps the effort has been made, but made with too much agitation, and anxiety, and loud pleading, like an attempt to take the kingdom of heaven by force. And it may be that, instead of so much striving to acquire better feeling, what is needed is to cease from assault and take to self-surrender. "I give myself to Christ," may express as sound an act of faith as, "I will strive to find Christ." Still one may not rest on a lounge of indifference—one may not let his will drift—one may not take his chance. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve."

Whatever be the turning-point of a soul's course—whether

it be an awakening that comes without striving, whether it be the comfort of forgiveness easing the sense of sin and guilt, whether it come with a service that implies Christian feeling, whether it seem a reconciliation after estrangement, whether it occur in self-surrender, whether it result from set and steady determination, whether it arise as a distinct act of God in the soul aiding a helpless child—the particular type of experience is less of moment than the experience itself. Beyond the turning-point lies the whole province of a life in peaceful union with God. Beyond the turning-point lies the entire usefulness of a Christian life in all its branches. Beyond the turning-point lies the triumphant assurance of glory, honour, and immortality. Beyond the turning-point lies the fellowship with Christ, through His Spirit, which is the fulness of life and the active evidence of eternal life. Turn ye ; turn ye : why will ye die ? Perchance there is a toll-gate between your present situation and the turn to God and heaven. Refuse not to pay the toll. Reach the right turning at all costs.

In the life of Duncan Matheson there is the story of a young man who was “awakened at a meeting and began to inquire the way of life.” Days and nights passed, but he found no rest for his soul. One evening Duncan took him aside, and said, “Now, are you willing to have this awful business settled? Christ is willing ; are you ?” The young man said he was. They prayed together, and as they prayed light and peace dawned, and the young man “started to his feet in a tumult of joy and praise.” How often do anxious souls stop sorrowing on the bank of the road, short of the turning-point, but so near it, because they will not shed the pride that keeps them from acknowledging their anxiety to one who will pray with them and lend them a hand on the way to God ! Let none of us stop short. Make sure of the turning-point. It is the way to make sure of the way of life.

