

SERMON OF THE MONTH.

The Altered Decision.

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Mark i. 15 : "The kingdom of God is at hand : repent."

Luke xv. 7 : "There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth."

Matt. xxi. 28, 29 : "A man had two sons ; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard. And he answered and said, I will not : but afterward he repented himself, and went."

" **A** CERTAIN man had two sons ; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard. And he answered and said, I will not : but afterward he repented himself, and went." For in the meantime he thought things over. When he thought about it, he knew he owed something to his father. When he knew what he owed, he knew his father's request could not be lightly set aside. In a sound mind other considerations came into conflict with his first inclination. Good purposes do overflow bad ones. Obedient resolves do exclude disobedient ones. The good and obedient purposes and decisions have a force of their own which, like a healthy breeze, imbued with sunshine, undoes the ill that gusts of wild weather have done. The first impulse of self-will would have set up a division between father and son. The work in the vineyard would not wait on a wayward man's convenience. The unhappy and injurious moods of a soul, which set it against duty, against filial feeling, against noble aspiration, declare themselves in active defiance of the will to which obedience is due. The father is set second to the son. The unity of the family, the prosperity of the holding, is marred by the son who eats his food off the produce of the vineyard, and finds his comforts in the protection of the home. He takes all he can get, and gives as little as he can. "I will not" stands for the wilful, defiant, eruptive temper. It is the barrier against welfare, the assailant against peace.

But when this son repents himself and turns "I will not" into "I will" he is a new man. The former disposition is changed; the old attitude is abandoned; a new mind is at work; new actions come of it. A hindrance changes to a help. Refusal is reversed by consent. Defiance is converted to amiability. The idle hand becomes a worker. The listless heart becomes busy in loving service. Even the countenance changes. For everyone knows what a willing heart can do which the unwilling cannot. "Except ye turn and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. xviii. 3).

But to turn "I will not" round to "I will" needs works behind the hands of the clock. The "works" of the mind are motives, inducements. "I will not work" yields to "I will work" when the mind perceives a distinct and definite boon to be refused or won. Repentance turns on motives. Christ gives repentance because He gives all the motives for godly living.

What is the motive for repentance? The Gospel *is*; the kingdom of God *is*; the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord *is*. The prodigal son failed to discover any motive for repentance till he came down to husks and bethought himself of the pantry at home. Even at that he was better off than a prodigal who grows luxurious on a prodigal's pantry and leaves an unhealed sense of wrong at home. For a prodigal at ease is far from enviable. In himself he suffers the loss of the marrow of worthy manhood.

Now, repentance implies that one attraction will counteract another, one force overcome another, in the mind as well as in material things. We are told of fields in France where lilies grow so profusely that their scent destroys the scent of the deer and frustrates the hunt. The deer feed among the flowers in safety. So, too, we know of an innumerable company of men and women of many nations who are no longer a prey to the world, the flesh, and the devil, because they have themselves been drawn away from the dry and barren places where they were easily overtaken by the hounds of temptation and have

found peace and security among the perfume of the life in the influence of Christ. The higher attraction of the spirit of life in Christ has counteracted the attraction of inferior things. If the better life in them be incomplete, it is, nevertheless, real.

Does one think to himself that his bluntness of feeling towards God and the Saviour is blameful? Does he have occasional uneasiness about the great Hereafter? Does he have qualms about the character of his influence at home and abroad? Does it sometimes occur to him that religion has a vitality, and has claims on him that may have to be faced some day? Does he know that a lack of power is manifest in him to think and feel, to act and be, what he would wish—a lack of prevailing moral mastery, of inward peace, of generous consideration? Is he sensible of inward unsettlement as of a life without reliable foundations, and of an inward strife as of a life in which no fine influence has gained dominion? If a soul have these sentiments or feelings, or, not having them, has the still worse torpor and toughness, the need is palpable of a strong motive to throw off by strong effort this poverty, this deadness, this paralysis of inward life; to terminate this oppression of conscience and suffocation of the higher feelings, this estrangement of mind from God and the eternal issues of life; and to grasp some strong tow-rope which may draw him into a more happy, exalted, energized state of mind, and a more refined character. If it be so with one, he has the witness in himself of his need to repent. He is a child who in the knowledge that he has become offensive to his father imagines his father is offended, and fails to perceive that his father's displeasure has no other root than love and the desires which love begets.

To him Christ comes, invested with authority from God, teaching at the outset, as the beginning of better things, "the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent ye, and believe the Gospel" (Mark i. 28).

Repent; shut the valve from which the old ways of thinking steamed; forsake the dry indifference; give thought to loftier aspirations; open the lock-gate of your heart that the stream of

thoughts of God and eternity may flow. You have been walking with your back to the sun, and the shadow of self always fell in front before your eyes ; your own fancies led you. Turn and face the sun. Your own shadow will fall behind you. Before you the way will all be light. Turn the face towards Christ. Let all the winning grace of His great heart, exalted character, heavenly thoughts—all the wondrous revelation of Divine truth in His words, come as the spreading rays of sunlight on you. Turn from the pleasures of sin, from a life of mere self-pleasing, to a life in which pleasing Christ and carrying the yoke of Christian service is the choice boon. The reason and incentive for reversing your life is, The kingdom of God is at hand. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." "You are not your own, you are bought with a price." Your King is God ; your province is the whole area of the will of God, made known to you by Jesus Christ ; your law is Christ. The kingdom of God is among you. So far are you from having to seek it that it encompasses you. From it comes all the impact of good desire, and elevated thought, and fine instinct of truth, and noble outline of character, that invests you. Surrender to Christ. In such surrender you will find full repentance.

A youth leaves his home and emigrates. He gets engaged with many interests, having a home and occupation different from those he left in the old land. By degrees he drops his communications with the old home. His forgetfulness is felt. Strong love could not forget. Another emigrant meets him who has knowledge of the old home. After greetings the talk naturally turns to the place of mutual youthful interest, and in the course of conversation it comes out that good fortune has come to his father, and there is a much pleasanter home than the one he left. "I should write if I were you," says the companion. And do not we all know how the opulent home is an incentive to the forgetful man ? He repents of his neglect because a happier state of things is in store should he ever want to return. A new motive is in force that overcomes his indifference. And there is

joy at home because the son who was estranged has put himself in the way of restoration.

The good news of the grace of God towards transgressors, attested by Jesus Christ and magnified by His sacrifice, is the great motive for repentance. Fear of the consequences of sin, than which no worse "wrath to come" could well be imagined, is a motive that appeals to our frailty. And it is well that we have a wholesome shrinking from harm and destruction, and are deterred by it from sins of vice and violence. Better, however, and more exalting, is the appeal to our affection and aspiration in the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And one wonders how he may repent—how the right feeling and action may come to his soul. How may he draw water from a well? Even as he lowers a vessel into its water and turns a windlass to raise water, so let him "draw water from the wells of salvation." Let him put his mind into the resources of saving thought, saving belief, saving sentiment. Let him have discernment quickened by practice into the contention between truth and falsehood, selfishness and kindness, exaction and grace, quarrelsomeness and peace, heavenly-mindedness and worldly-mindedness. Let him ask help of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not—except, indeed, He upbraideth us for not asking and not trusting, as Christ upbraided the cities of Galilee because they repented not (Matt. xi. 20). Let a man examine himself reasonably—not to make himself moody nor to deprecate himself unduly, but sufficiently to know whether he be of God or evil hath the mastery of him. Let him know the value heaven sets on repentance, for He that came from heaven and knew heaven in His own spirit declared, "There is joy in heaven, among the angels of God, over one sinner that repenteth," as a shepherd rejoices over one sheep saved from the perils of the wilderness, and the woman over one piece of silver she finds after she had lost it. Repentance is the passport into the kingdom, because the kingdom of God is within us, and its shrubs and trees, its flowers and songs, are righteousness, peace,

and joy in the Holy Ghost. We clothe to suit our climate, and change our clothing for a different climate. Our mind and temper, our disposition and propensities, are to be changed to suit our heavenly family and station. And the outfit for heaven-born hearts must needs be of heavenly make. No amount of repentance could be like changing a carnation into a rose. But true repentance is like changing a wild rose into a cultured rose. The infirm, inferior soul is changed into the capable, superior soul. The numb, unresponsive soul is changed into an attentive, alert soul. The ungodly becomes godly, the unbelieving becomes believing, the undevout becomes devout ; the pivot on which life turns is moved ; the old centre of resources is given up for a new centre, the things that pleased once are superseded by things that used not to give pleasure. For he that is after the flesh minds things of the flesh, and he that is after the spirit minds things of the spirit.

There is, no doubt, a heavy obstacle of natural disinclination to finding ourselves in the wrong and falling out with ourselves. The son who said, " I will not go," and afterwards repented and went, had to contend with the pride of spirit which will hold by a wrong resolve rather than exchange it for a right one. And it is not merely the change of mind which baffles us, but its confession. If one could change and no one know it, change might seem easier. It could not actually be easier, because it is precisely someone else knowing it that is a help to us in maintaining the altered resolution. Whosoever will hide his good resolves sets himself a double task. One soldier cannot at the same hour man the rampart and the trench. If one mount the ramparts of good resolve, he may well consent to another keeping the trench. The prodigal of Christ's parable took his first step towards restoration when he " came to himself, and said, How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger ! I will arise and go to my father." But he took a longer step when he settled to say, " Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." For in this confession

he took his father with him into the compact of restoration. One need never fight shy of owning himself in the wrong. The wrong has been visible to others long enough ; it conciliates their good-will to acknowledge it. Forgiveness is turned to waste, however rich and comfortable it be, when it is not sought. Forgiveness is always ready in the heart of the heavenly Father ; its great breadth and depth, its thoroughness and intensity, are shown in the sacrifice of His Son. And with our confession we go with open hands to our Father for our acquittal, and find how fully justified we are in seeking His mercy. Such grace answers from heaven to the penitent heart that it brings with it peace and joy to the recovered child. The joy of God's angels has its echo in the joy of earth's sons.

Therefore, count it all honour to repent. Build no ill-constructed house, to pride yourselves on a few white bricks turned up on end to decorate it, while the inside is inconvenient and common. See first to the convenience and comeliness inside. Let repentance be full and sincere. The time past may suffice to have done the will of the flesh. God's will has too long waited its turn. Let His sovereign will have respect and submission. Repent, because God rules in love. Repent, because God bestows unmeasured grace on child-like spirits. Repent, because Christ died for the remission of our sins.

“ O God, with whom renewing is,
Add to Thy mercies manifold,
That my life from its sombre grey
May get some light and gold.”

