

MORALITY AND RELIGION.

MORALITY is actual conformity to some human standard of goodness; Religion, at least in the Christian meaning of the word, is an unceasing effort after conformity to a divine ideal. If this distinction be borne in mind, it will meet many objections and remove many difficulties, to a few of which I wish briefly to apply it.

The first is one which has frequently proved a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. It is a fact which experience forces upon us, and which it is impossible, were it desirable, to disguise, that many men who profess to be Christians, and of whom there is good reason to believe that they are what they profess to be, are by no means distinguished by a very high degree of moral excellence; while others, who make no such profession, display qualities and perform acts of a far more admirable character. And yet the former, in spite of their manifold defects, are described as being acceptable in the sight of God; while the latter, with all their excellencies, are represented as being rejected by Him. Hence it comes to pass that the Christian doctrine of righteousness has seemed to some unreasonable and unintelligible, teaching the paradox that "goodness is not good except it have added to it some incomprehensible element which does not make those who boast of its possession visibly more noble and heavenly than others."¹

Paradoxical as it may at first sight seem, it is yet true that, in a most important sense, goodness,—real goodness,—is not good in the Christian meaning of the word, and does not render its possessor acceptable in the sight of God, except it have added to it another element, which to

¹ "F. W. Robertson's Life and Letters," vol. i. p. 157.

some may well seem incomprehensible—the element of dissatisfaction—the sense of sin.

The reasonableness of the Christian doctrine of righteousness can perhaps be best illustrated by an example. It is sufficiently established as a matter of scientific fact that moral dispositions and temperaments, no less than mental, tend to descend from parent to offspring. If we take a man born of a long line of virtuous ancestors, we shall probably find him the possessor of a moral constitution of superior quality, exceptionally strong to resist temptation to evil, and predisposed to much that is good. But it is clear that, in so far as this constitution was inherited, it cannot be called “moral” in the sense of implying merit in its possessor; it is a merely natural endowment; a man has no more praise for receiving it at his birth than he would have for being born with a healthy body or a ponderous brain. So again, on the other hand, we may suppose an opposite case—that of a man descended from an inferior moral stock, the son of parents who for generations have been vicious and degraded. Such an one would in all probability inherit a deteriorated, and in this sense a depraved, moral nature, one in which the impulses of sense were disproportionately strong and the spiritual forces weak and undeveloped. Yet, in so far as this nature was inherited, it cannot be called immoral in the sense of implying sin in its possessor; a man could no more be blamed for it than he could be blamed for his diminutive stature or for the colour of his skin.

Let us suppose two men, so differently endowed by nature, passing through life and playing their respective parts on the stage of temporal circumstance. The former displays many admirable qualities, performs many generous and gracious actions, and is necessarily and rightly approved and honoured by all with whom he has to do. But though moral, he is not religious; he remains satisfied with the

goodness which is his by natural gift, and does not aspire after and struggle towards a higher perfection. He does not win his way upward ; but rather, since in such a matter not to strive to rise is to fall, sinks slowly to a lower level, and leaves to his children a smaller portion of moral power than that into the possession of which he himself was born. The latter labours under natural disadvantages which embarrass him at every step ; it costs him much effort to be even a little good ; the flesh wars against the spirit with violent, and incessant, and sometimes overmastering, power. He is emphatically a sinner ; and is necessarily regarded with little admiration, and often justly condemned, by those around him. But he is conscious of and dissatisfied with his sinfulness. He has seen something of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ ; and, in a certain measure, however small, grows into likeness to it. And he leaves to his children a nobler nature than his own, a greater sensibility to spiritual influences, a faculty for more sustained virtuous effort, increased power (if the will be not wanting) to become the sons of God.

Now, according to the Christian doctrine, it is the latter who is justified in the sight of God rather than the other. The latter is a Christian, exceedingly imperfect, but still sincere ; the former is irreligious, unconverted ; highly gifted by the great Master, but not rendering to Him the usury which He requires in return for his gifts. And, so understood, the principle is no paradox ; it is perfectly intelligible and profoundly equitable. It is not the point from which men start, nor the position in which at any particular time they stand, by which they will be judged ; but the point at which they aim and the progress which they have made. It is not the ten talents, or the five, or the two which they received at the beginning which is the measure of their fidelity, but the amount which has been gained by their use. The Judge of all the earth *will* do right ;

He will decide our destiny by no arbitrary and unreasonable rule, but by a rule which will commend itself to every man's conscience: to whom little has been given of him will the less be required; and to whom He has committed much of him He will ask the more. But in all cases He will expect and demand "usury." In this respect He is a "hard" master; and, though He will liberally reward those who have been faithful but in a little, He will cast every unprofitable servant into the outer darkness.

This principle should always be borne in mind when we attempt to appraise the characters of men. We can only judge them by their works; we are bound to judge them by these. But the true moral worth of an agent depends, after all, not upon the utility or any other quality of the act considered in itself, but on the degree of moral effort which its performance involves; and this differs immensely in different individuals, and can at best be but very inadequately estimated by men. "What's done we partly may compute, but know not what's resisted." God only holds the balance in which natural power, and circumstance, and motive, and temptation can be weighed; and He alone can pass a sure judgment.

And the principle applies to the case of Christians as to all others. Their imperfections prove nothing against the divine efficacy of their religion; for they are justified by faith, and not by works—by the inward motive, by the moral effort, and not by the outward act. If indeed religion professed to be, as some seem to suppose, a sort of magical charm acting suddenly and once for all upon those who receive it, raising them sometimes from the depths of degradation and placing them always upon an assured height of excellence, it would be a fair objection to its claims that many who have embraced it, apparently in full sincerity, remain men of very defective virtue, no better—perhaps, when tried by external standards, even worse—than many

of their non-Christian neighbours. The objection would be fair, and it would be fatal. But Christianity makes no such pretensions. The faith which it imparts justifies its possessors, not by raising them to any particular *state* of righteousness, but by placing them upon the true *line* of righteousness, determining their progress along a path which in time, or in eternity, will make all who walk therein perfect. It does, indeed, claim to effect at once a radical change in every one who receives it. But then the change *is* radical, beginning with the root, and only by degrees improving the visible appearance of the foliage and the fruit. It does this also surely, but it does so by the operation of an influence which, like all divine influences, works gradually and for the most part without observation. Sometimes, it is true, the change seems startlingly sudden and complete; the whole nature of the man appears to be transformed as in a moment; the work of sanctification seems to be accomplished at once. But these are exceptions, and not the rule; and, if carefully examined, would probably be often found to be no real exceptions at all.

It must always be remembered that Christianity claims to be a universal religion. As such, it deals directly with men as they are, taking them at their worst and helping them to become better, and not waiting until they have become better without its help. It would consequently be unreasonable to expect that all its subjects, even those who are the most sincere, should have attained at any particular time to any determinate degree of improvement. The process is a gradual one, and the degrees are infinite. The ladder by which men must rise to God, though it reaches to heaven, rests upon the earth; the first step is so low that the weakest and most degraded can make it if they will; the last is too lofty for the strongest and most advanced to attempt. But though no particular stage of moral excellence can be fixed as that falling short of which a man cannot be a

Christian, the rule is absolute that the point at which all must aim shall be nothing less than the highest. Whatever the degree of attainment may at any time be, there must always be aspiration and effort upwards. The sense of sin, the consciousness of shortcoming, is a necessary condition to the first step, and to all after progress. If this element be absent, whatever may be our position in the sight of men, we cannot attain to the righteousness which is by faith in Jesus Christ. In his school there is room for all classes, except the self-complacent. An imperfectly good man may be a Christian; all men, and consequently all Christians, are imperfect. A man who is a great sinner may be a Christian, for he may be earnestly contending against sin. But a sinner who is content with his sinfulness can never be a Christian, and as little can a righteous man who is content with his righteousness.

Herein consists the great distinction between Morality and Religion. A true religion must impel all its subjects, however excellent they may be, to follow after something yet beyond them, to press towards the mark of a higher calling than they have yet attained; whereas a man may be moral, in the ordinary meaning of the word, with little effort and without aspiration. He has simply to compare himself with the standard of the age and country in which he lives—to conform to the *mores* of the time; and if, as often happens, his natural constitution and fortunate circumstances enable him easily to endure this test, his work is done and he may rest satisfied. He will be a righteous man, justified by his works in the sight of his fellow-men, and needing no repentance. But his righteousness, though good as far as it goes, will go comparatively but a little way. It will be to a great extent negative rather than positive, consisting rather in abstraction from evil than in energetic pursuit of excellence—the “stupid goodness” which Milton has, rightly enough, not hesitated to ascribe as a temporary

possibility even to the evil one.¹ At the best it will not exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees—sufficient for the practical purposes of earth, but not sufficient to lead men into the kingdom of heaven.

Christianity, as a divine religion, and which as such can be satisfied with nothing less than perfection, necessarily rejects all human standards of morality, not as intrinsically bad, but as infinitely insufficient. It describes the virtues, however excellent in themselves, in which men complacently wrap themselves, as “filthy rags.” It denounces the righteousness which is satisfied with itself, though it may be real righteousness as far as it goes, more vehemently than the worst sin which feels that it is sinful, placing the very publicans and harlots who cry “God be merciful to us!” before the moral Pharisee who thanks God that he is not as they. Better, far better, in its esteem is it that a man should stumble incessantly in the effort to advance than that he should make no progress, however high his position may be, or however apparently secure. To fall is comparatively a small thing, if it be indeed a fall and not a wilful grovelling; but to stand still is full of peril.

A clear apprehension of this distinction will remove all difficulty with respect to the Christian doctrine of imputed righteousness. As sometimes stated it is a very strange, when rightly regarded it is a very simple, matter. A man who is a true disciple of Christ, and who is faithfully following Him, is accounted as being like Him already; for he is so in purpose and moral aim, and must be so in very deed in due time. In the eyes of Him who seeth the end from the beginning, and will surely bring to pass that which He hath purposed, those who have attained to faith have attained to the end of faith, the perfection of the moral character, the

¹ “That space the evil one abstracted stood
From his own evil, and for the time remained
Stupidly good.” *Paradise Lost*, ix. 463.

salvation of the soul. They are not judged by Him as they must be by their fellows, by the place in which at any particular time they stand; but by the height at which they aim, to which they constantly tend, and to which He is pledged to bring them in the end.

It will explain also the profound sense of sin which all Christians feel in a greater or less degree, and which, strangely enough as it might at first sight seem, becomes not less but more intense in proportion to their advance in holiness. There is nothing strange in it when rightly considered. The more closely any man approaches to an ideal which deserves to be called divine, the more clearly must he perceive how high it towers above him, and the lower in his own esteem will he consequently be. There is nothing unnatural in this. It is but a form of that deep dissatisfaction, that "divine despair," which all true artists feel when they compare the fairest image which their hands have wrought with the unseen beauty which can never be expressed. And every man who would be religious, and not moral merely, is an artist; the only difference being that the material on which he labours, and which he strives to fashion into a perfect form, is not brass or marble, but his own character. A hard task indeed! Those who have laboured at it most faithfully best know how intractable the material with which they have to deal; those who have laboured most successfully feel most profoundly how imperfect the attainment, how infinite the shortcoming. The task is hard, and it would be hopeless if the effort ended with the life that now is, and were sustained by no influences other than those of earth. But it was to make it possible that Christ came with the revelation of immortality and the gift of the Holy Ghost. The Christian religion, with its Divine aids, its supernatural sanctions, its command of the powers of the world to come, was not meant for the production of men of merely moderate goodness. Its heaven of

endless life and infinite progress was ordained for those only who move "along the line of limitless desires," and tend towards a mark too lofty to be reached in time. Like Thorwaldsen, dejected and distressed because he felt satisfied with his statue of Christ, and saw in that satisfaction a sign that his genius was decaying,¹ the man who should feel satisfied with the image of Christ in his own character might well be dismayed, might well fear that his spiritual insight was failing, and that he was in danger of losing the "great idea" which alone could lead him on to perfection. If he could not rid himself of his self-complacency at the advance he had made by the contemplation of the immeasurable heights above him; if he could not attain to that inestimable spiritual possession, a sense of sin, which is but another name for aspiration after infinite excellence, it would be an evident sign that he had been wrong from the beginning; that he was one of the righteous men who "need no repentance," and have consequently no call to enter into the school of Christ.

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¹ "I have heard of a remarkable speech of his made to a friend who found him one day in low spirits. Being asked whether anything distressed him, he answered, 'My genius is decaying.' 'What do you mean?' said the visitor. 'Why, here is my statue of Christ; it is the first of my works I have felt satisfied with. Till now my idea has always been far beyond what I could execute. But it is no longer so. I shall never have a great idea again.'"—*Guesses at Truth*, 1st series, p. 83.
