

*THE GOSPEL AS A LAW OF LIBERTY.*

JAMES ii. 12.

THIS expression, "the law of liberty," is characteristic of St. James, and is remarkable as indicating his sympathy with St. Paul in the very point in respect to which the two sacred writers have been often represented as at variance. It occurs also in the first Chapter of the Epistle; and in both places it is so used as apparently to convey a comprehensive description of the Gospel, regarded as the law of life. "Whoso," says St. James (Chapter i. 25), "looketh into the perfect law of liberty and continueth therein, . . . this man shall be blessed in his deed." There are many points of sympathy between the Epistle of St. James and those of St. Peter, as might be expected from a certain similarity in the character of the two men, and from their intimate relations in the early history of the Church; and we find accordingly in the Epistles of St. Peter a similar apprehension of the liberty which is one of the characteristics of the Christian. In his first Epistle, he bids (ii. 16) those whom he addresses live "as free," though "not using their liberty for a cloak of maliciousness; but as the servants of God." In his second Epistle (Chapter ii. 19), he represents the false teachers, who would fain imitate the message of the Gospel, as promising men liberty. Our Lord, as is recorded in the Gospel of St. John (Chapter viii. 31, 32), had described his work in a similar manner. "If," He said to the Jews who believed on Him, "ye continue in my word . . . ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." In language which offers a striking parallel to that which St. Paul subsequently used, He proceeded (Chapter viii. 34-36): "Verily, verily, I say unto you, whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but

the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." Combining these expressions, and bearing in mind the simple, and almost casual, manner in which some of them arise, it seems evident that Liberty was, from the first, one of the most characteristic words of the Gospel. One of the chief blessings which Christians enjoyed was that of freedom ; their very law was a law of liberty. This was so much the case that it was necessary, from the first, to warn them that their liberty was not an emancipation from all obligations whatever ; and one of the earliest dangers of the Church was a transformation of liberty into licence.

As has just been said, these observations indicate an interesting point of harmony between those who have been called the three pillar apostles,—James, Peter, and John,—on the one side, and St. Paul on the other. To them, no less than to him, the Gospel was a Gospel of freedom. But, while thus bearing in mind the essential harmony of the apostolic writers on this subject, it is to St. Paul that we must look for the deepest apprehension, and the fullest exposition, of this characteristic privilege of the Christian. It was in great measure the mission of his life to vindicate the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free ; and the idea seems sometimes, in his mind, to embody the whole substance of the Christian revelation. Thus, when predicting the ultimate deliverance of all creation (Romans viii. 19–23), he speaks of the creature as being "delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty," or rather the liberty of the glory, of the children of God. This liberty seems equivalent in his mind to redemption. "Ourselves also," he proceeds, "which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption, of our bodies." On the one hand, in the natural condition of man he sees bondage, corruption, death ; on the other hand, liberty,

redemption, life. The very objections which he refutes enable us to judge how his whole teaching must have been imbued with this thought. He finds it necessary to protest, with earnestness and reiteration, against what has since been termed the Antinomian tendency of his teaching. "What shall we say then?" he exclaims (Romans vi. 1) "shall we continue in sin: that grace may abound?" "Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid" (Romans vi. 15). It would seem evident that the Apostle's teaching was thus misconstrued, even in his lifetime; and from such a fact we cannot but conclude that there was something peculiarly broad, emphatic, and comprehensive in his proclamation of Christian liberty. It may well have been one of those points on which, as St. Peter says in his second Epistle (iii. 16), St. Paul was sometimes hard to be understood, and on which his language was wrested by those who were unlearned and unstable, unto their own destruction. But, for that very reason, we may be sure that a full apprehension of his meaning, and a hearty sympathy with it, are of cardinal importance for a due realization of the character of the Gospel; and an attempt to offer some elucidation of it may not be unprofitable.

Now that which startled the Jews of St. Paul's day was his use of language which seemed to imply the emancipation of Christians from obligation to the law, the word "law" being used in a general sense, and without any apparent attempt to distinguish between the moral and the ceremonial law. Nor, in fact, can such a distinction be, without violence, imported into the Apostle's language. There are some passages, particularly in the Epistle to the Galatians, where the ceremonial law may seem more especially in view, and where the Apostle is arguing more immediately against the attempt to impose the whole Mosaic system upon Christians. But when, in the Epistle

to the Romans (Chapter iii. 21), he declares that "now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested," the law of which he is speaking must needs be the moral law, on which he had been insisting in the two previous Chapters. "Therefore by the deeds of the law," he had concluded in the preceding verse, "there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." That must be a moral law; and it is from this, and from all its consequences, from its power alike over the body and the soul, that the Christian is emancipated. "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law;" and it is over this that God gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is this which the Apostle has in view when he declares, with such emphatic reiteration, that we are not under the law, but under grace; that we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held. To the mass of his countrymen, to whom the law was the ultimate expression of the very will of God, it is no wonder if this seemed startling language; and in greater or less degree, and in one form or another, it has always been something of a stumbling-block to the world, and even to a considerable portion of the Christian Church. The story is well known of the Pagan priests, who, when some Christian missionaries had been allowed to announce to the king of their country the nature of their message, advised him that it was a dangerous doctrine, since it taught that men could escape the consequences of their evil deeds. In another form, that is the very objection which St. Paul tells us was raised against his teaching in his own time. That is the objection which was raised against the characteristic teaching of the Reformation; and the same objection is still heard at the present day, urged alike by Roman Catholic divines against Protestant teaching, and by unbelievers against the whole Christian scheme. Even to some minds which are in sympathy with the Church, there seems something para-

doxical about the doctrine. Let it be supposed, they say, that a man has been forgiven, and has been received into God's favour; yet, if he falls away again, the law takes its effect upon him, and he is again under its condemnation. He had not, therefore, escaped it entirely. It was simply dormant; and every Christian remains bound by it to this extent—that he is sure to suffer for violating its provisions. Whole systems of Christian thought, and the theology of a large part of the Christian world, have been coloured by this difficulty; and for centuries the interpretation of the truth, "Ye are not under the law, but under grace," has divided the Christian world in the West.

Nevertheless, the most elementary principle of our faith must always rest upon the broadest possible acceptance of the Apostle's proclamation. The central message of the Gospel is that of pardon, of the blotting out of our sins, and of our ultimate salvation. But this message must be admitted to be a standing supersession of the moral law, considered as an operative force. So far as that law is left alone to work its full effect, the blotting out of actual sin is inconceivable. If it be admitted, the law practically ceases to have that sanction which alone constitutes it law in the proper sense of the word. Its penalties may be avoided, and offences against it will not necessarily receive the punishment it assigns to them. But the Christian minister is authorized and commanded to convey this assurance to every sinner, however grievous. He is bound to declare to every such person that, on his repentance, God will not impute his past iniquities to him, and that the spiritual and moral consequences which would have fallen upon him under the natural operation of the moral law will be averted. That is an assurance of which the sinner often appreciates the magnitude and the wonder far more than those who proclaim it to him. He feels himself in the grasp of the law. In proportion

as his conscience and moral sense are awakened, he feels how that law penetrates to his inmost soul, and reveals to him the ruin of his spiritual nature. But no matter how great the wreck which may have been brought about, no matter how vast the moral ruin a man may have incurred, the Gospel proclaims to him—at least with only one terrible exception—the possibility of deliverance, the possibility of a reversal of the dreadful doom which the law would pronounce upon him, and of his spiritual emancipation. In this respect alone the Christian dispensation must be regarded as inherently miraculous—even more miraculous with respect to the moral than with respect to the physical nature of man. To say to a sinful man, “Thy sins be forgiven thee,” and to say to the paralytic, “Arise and walk,” are utterances similar in character, and differing only in the spheres of man’s nature to which they are applied. The one is a supersession of the ordinary operation of physical laws; the other is a supersession of the ordinary operation of moral laws.

We cannot, therefore, without forfeiting the most necessary of all the blessings of the Gospel, forego the bold and comprehensive language in which the Apostle declares our deliverance from the law. Nor, on the other hand, unless we learn to enter into it, can we possibly rise to the height of our privileges, powers, and even responsibilities. We must not be content to use it as if we were afraid of it, and had to guard and qualify it in order to avert mischievous consequences. No such consequences can ensue if we bear in mind the positive as well as negative side of the Apostle’s proclamation. It is, first of all, to be borne in mind that he is not using the word “law” in the vague sense in which it is often used among ourselves, as though it meant a mere rule or guide. In that sense, as “a directive rule unto goodness of operation,” the use of the law can never cease. But the Apostle uses it

in the sense of an operative power "over all persons and in all causes supreme." It is that operative supremacy which, under the Gospel, is abolished, and it is from bondage to that supremacy that we are freed. That is the negative side of the proclamation. But what is its positive side? Is the law swept away so as to leave us to ourselves, uncontrolled and irresponsible? By no means. It is simply superseded by a higher authority, and that authority is no other than God Himself, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. "Now the righteousness of God," says the Apostle (Romans iii. 21, 22) "without the law is manifested, . . . even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe." "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand" (Romans v. 1, 2). To Christ all power has been given in heaven and earth; it is He that is ordained of God to be the judge of quick and dead; and, under the Gospel, instead of being confronted with a moral law, we are confronted with Him—with a perfect moral and spiritual Being. No law could adequately express his infinite will, his infinite power, his infinite holiness, his infinite mercy. He, and He alone, is the Lord, the Ruler, the Guide of our souls; and the grand work of the Gospel is to bring us into direct relation with Him, and subject us to the free and ever varying determinations of his perfect will. It is here that St. Paul was so directly in opposition to the current of Jewish thought in his day, and to so much of the thought of our own. The characteristic of Jewish thought was to suppose that the law had been laid down as eternally governing the course of life and the destiny of men; until at length it impressed itself on the Rabbinical mind with such overpowering stringency as practically to banish the apprehension of God Himself. Men

ceased under such teaching to be directly dependent upon God. They were dependent upon the law; and, so long as they observed its prescriptions, they supposed that, by what we should now call a sort of law of nature, their blessedness was assured. The law being thus the sole, paramount, and final authority in life, the minuteness with which it was interpreted and applied by the Rabbis was not merely natural, but necessary; and the Talmud is, in principle, as reasonable a development as the vast mass of our judicial decisions, or so-called case-law. If any law, of whatever kind, is to be supreme over every circumstance of human nature, it must, in course of time, become infinitely elaborated. But St. Paul's grand argument is directed to overthrow this apparent domination of impersonal legal force, and to bring every soul into free and direct personal relations with its God and Saviour. Under the Gospel, personal promises are held out by God, on the one hand; by man, on the other, they are responded to by personal faith and personal trust; and these become the main influences in the course of life.

Now, from this point of view, it is evident that the position of Christians, as transformed by the message of the Gospel, exposes them to far severer obligations than before. Men may make some sort of attempt to satisfy themselves in the observance of a law, however elaborate or burdensome. They can formulate it, or they can minimise it, or they can pay it sufficient outward respect to soothe their consciences. But no such illusions or evasions are practicable in relation to One who is perfect God and perfect Man; and if, as the Apostle puts the case in his forcible imagery (Romans vii. 4), we "are become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that we should be married to another, even to Him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God," there is henceforth no escape for us from the most

complete, minute, and penetrating judgment. The moral law, as understood by the light of nature, or under the revelation of the Old Testament, is sufficiently terrible to our consciences; the Sermon on the Mount is severer still. But what must it be to be in direct relation with the Author of the Sermon on the Mount, and to have his eye continually upon us? It can only have been in complete forgetfulness of the new relation thus proclaimed and revealed by St. Paul, that his declaration of the supersession of the law can have had so much as the appearance of Antinomianism. The law is replaced by the Author of the law; we are brought into direct personal relation with Him; and our peace depends upon our complete surrender to Him, and ultimate harmony with his will.

But, at the same time, it will now be seen with what propriety the new order of things thus established is called the "law of liberty." In the first place, by being thus brought under the influence of a Person, and a perfect Person, instead of under that of a law, complete freedom is afforded to all the emotions, the varying impulses, the changing circumstances of our souls. As in the water face answereth to face, so does the heart of man to man, and still more does the heart of man to a perfect Man. No laws, no rules, no code, however elaborate, could be free enough to act as an adequate standard, test, and guide of the infinitely varying characters of mankind. But in proportion as we familiarize ourselves with the Gospel, and submit ourselves to the influence of the Saviour's spirit, do we feel the complete sufficiency of that Spirit to direct, to chasten, and to guide us in every circumstance and in every difficulty. When, moreover, we speak of the Saviour's Spirit, we do not merely mean a tone or a tendency; but we mean that sacred Person, who is one with the Father and the Son, who interprets to our hearts their words and their influences,

and who aids us in our endeavours to follow his guidance. "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities : for we know not what we should pray for as we ought : but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us" (Romans viii. 26). This is, indeed, a "law of liberty"—a law as free, and as elastic, as the will and the mind of God, independent of all forms, but ever true to the same Spirit ; one amidst an infinite diversity, and diverse in its manifestations of a perfect unity. In proportion as this position of the Christian was realized by the Apostles, his liberty could not but impress itself upon them as his distinguishing prerogative ; and they would feel, as St. James says, that "he that looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and so continueth," this man shall be blessed in his deed.

But there remains another truth, not less potent, which is illustrated by this noble expression of the Apostle. As we have seen, St. Paul declares our relation to mere law to be abrogated, and substitutes for it a relation to persons. We are dead to the law ; but we live to Christ and to God. The consequence is that moral obligations, which before wore the character of duties, to be performed under peril of penalties, assume the character of willing acts of devotion to loving and beloved Persons. The extent to which the whole aspect of morality is transformed by this change of view cannot adequately be expressed by any imagery short of that used by the Apostle. We are "dead to the law" in proportion as we realize this condition. In true personal relations "there is no law." In proportion as the relation between father and son, husband and wife, friend and friend, is true and healthy, there is no law between them. It is a pleasure to each of them to indulge the free play of affection, regard, and devotion. It is in this sense that there is no law to the Christian ; and he must rise to this view of his position before he can enjoy the benefits which the Gospel has conferred upon him. It is the sense of being confined

and restricted by laws, which, as St. Paul shews so forcibly, actually incites to sin. The soul rebels against the restriction, and asserts itself, and snatches at a pleasure which it deems denied it. But let the case be apprehended in the full breadth of St. Paul's bold language; let a man feel that it is not a question of rendering obedience to a restrictive law, but of living in harmony and union with the perfect will of a perfect Being, of becoming one with absolute goodness, peace and beauty—let him, in a word, feel that the law, if it be a law, is a law of liberty; let this apprehension be distinctly before his mind, and it is hardly conceivable that he can fail to yield to such a gracious influence. Undoubtedly the method which St. Paul pursued is that which inspired the grace and virtue of the early Church. It was not in terror, but in joy, not under the bondage of a law, but in the freedom of personal guidance, personal love, and personal trust, that the saints and martyrs of the early Church rose to such noble heights. If we examine our own hearts, we shall probably see that our failures, and our lack of spiritual energy, have been in great measure due to our regarding the Gospel, consciously or unconsciously, as a law of bondage; and we shall find it more and more easy to throw off the sins that beset us in proportion as we regard it as a law of liberty. We shall thus learn that there are no limits, either to our responsibilities on the one hand, or to our capacities on the other. The former are measured by the exhortation: "Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect;" the latter by the promise: "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name"—in submission, that is, to Me, and in sympathy with my Spirit—"He will give it you." Thus may we speak and thus may we act, as those who shall not only be judged, but be guided, protected, and saved, by the Law of Liberty.

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