

This Psalm then, will be a true morning hymn to us if it teach us to draw auguries of large future good from the common and apparently trivial gifts of the passing hour; if it teach us to turn our confidence in the infinite and inalienable goodness of God into prayers that his good will may be done, in and by and for us, in his own way, *i.e.*, in the best way; and if it also teach us to ask for and to seek the welfare of all men, even of those who have most wronged us, as we seek our own: for to have learned these lessons will be in very deed to turn the night of life into a new and happy day.

S. Cox.

MAN'S POWER TO FORGIVE SINS.

ST. MARK ii. 10.

It seems not unreasonable to suggest a doubt whether the somewhat trite interpretation of this passage which passes current among commentators can be fairly maintained, or yield a result which quite satisfies the notable peculiarity of our Lord's words. Does the ordinary acceptance of this clause fairly and fully represent its logical connexion with the circumstances? And as, in the slightly varied narratives of the Synoptical writers, this saying of our Lord alone is repeated with literal accuracy, is it not probable that some special significance may be latent in its exceptional form,—a significance which the ordinary interpretation fails to recognize? It is the purpose of the following pages to attempt an answer to these enquiries.

The reasoning of the Scribes, "among themselves," or "in their hearts," which our Lord perceived and rebuked, had been to the effect that the word of forgiveness uttered by Christ implied a blasphemous claim, on his part, to

exercise a power which belonged exclusively to God. There were two ways of replying to such a charge as this. One was for our Lord to admit the principle assumed, and to assert his own claim to be divine. The other was to allege that the power of Forgiveness was in some sort committed to men, and to justify his own claim, as man, to exercise it. Which of these two answers does He make ?

It is commonly understood that, in the words before us,—“the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins,”—He asserts his own divine nature, and so claims, as God, to exercise the power of forgiveness; and that, by way of proving that, being divine, He had the power in question,—“that ye may know,” etc.,—He referred the Scribes to the miracle which He immediately performed. With a view to this interpretation, it is taken for granted that the title “*Son of man*,” as applied to Himself, would necessarily convey to the Scribes his claim to be divine; this, says Dean Alford, being “an expression regarded by the Jews as equivalent to *ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ*, v. Matt. xxvi. 63.”¹

But it is not observed (1) that, if the Scribes had been prepared to understand the phrase “*Son of man*,” thus applied, as a divine title, their rejection of such a claim by Him as blasphemous would in all probability have been far more eager and violent than their offence at his claim to forgive sins. And, (2) that, if they had actually so understood the title, it would have been altogether superfluous to perform a miracle, in order to prove to them the very fact which their objection had asserted,—namely, that *God* could forgive sins !

If, then, it could hardly be gathered from the passage, that the Scribes understood the expression “*Son of man*” as a divine title, or that they received it as implying our Lord's claim to be God, there seems good reason to doubt

¹ Alford's “Gr. Test.,” on Matthew ix. 6.

if our Lord could have meant them so to understand it ; while, if He did not, it creates a hopeless confusion in the narrative for us so to interpret his words.

Neither can it fail to occur to the thoughtful reader, that, if our Lord's object in this saying had been to assert his divinity as the ground of his claim to forgive sins, it would have seemed more likely that He should attain it, by saying "the *Son of GOD* hath power" to forgive sins, *because He is God*. But in that case, as has been above remarked, there could have been no occasion to offer any proof of that which his hearers already knew.

It is not for a moment lost sight of that the title "Son of man," as adopted by our Lord, did actually bear a divine application. But the Jews, although they knew it as a title of the Messiah, not only did not attach to it any divine significance, but subsequently charged Jesus with blasphemy for doing so ; in that He identified the Son of man, the Messiah, with the Son of God (Matt. xxvi. 65, 66).¹ How far the Jews were from regarding it as a divine title may perhaps be gathered from their disrespectful question, "Who is this Son of man?" in John xii. 34. Nor can it be questioned that our Lord had a special reason for using this expression in this place, as also for using it in a general form in the third person, rather than of Himself in the first. But, if it were allowed to suggest this reason, it would certainly not be in order that He might covertly assert that which none of his hearers denied ; but that He might emphasize and bring to the front the *humanity* to which He was related, and claim for *that* specifically the possession of the power of forgiveness. And it seems as if He had thus insisted upon the human side of his nature, notwithstanding that He knew He would be understood to affirm that the power attached to humanity *per se*, and not as being in association with Deity. And using this expres-

¹ See art. "Son of man," in Smith's "Dict. of the Bible."

sion here, with the certainty of its being so understood, it is a reasonable inference that He meant it to be so understood.

The difficulty attending the common interpretation is not lessened by reference to the qualifying or limiting clause,—“*on earth.*” It cannot be necessary to point out that, if the Scribes had recognized a divine power as being exercised by our Lord at all, they would have found no difficulty in admitting its exercise *on earth*, as well as *in heaven*. The meaning of this qualification cannot well be divined in reference to the ordinary application of the words. And its apparent want of significance is as evident whether the ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς belong, as Grotius regards it, to ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας, or, as later critics, to ἐξουσίαν ἔχει; although the former association seems in itself the more natural, and is indeed rendered more probable by an alternate reading of no little authority in this Gospel, of ἀφιέναι ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἁμαρτίας.¹ To state the matter plainly, there could be no purpose in announcing to the Jews that the Messiah, if they recognized Him *as God*, had power to forgive sins *upon earth*, or that He had power on earth to forgive sins. They would not dispute it. And, in addition, it is to be noted carefully how the attention of the hearers is represented by the Evangelist as being fixed by the words before us, not on any claim therein supposed to be alleged by the Miracle-Worker to be divine, as if *therein* were the answer to the objection of the Scribes; but upon the fact, supposed to be asserted, that *to men* belongs a power to forgive sins. This is more evident in Matthew's Gospel where we read (ix. 8) that, “when the multitude saw it (the miracle), they marvelled and glorified God who had given such power *unto men!*” It can hardly be a satisfactory explanation of this, to adopt Bengel's ingenious construction of the words τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, as a “*dativus commodi,*” and to read “*hominibus, tam diu*

¹ Dean Alford adopts this reading in the text.

cum peccato conflictatis.”¹ Nor, as Meyer remarks, can *ἀνθρώποις* be taken as “the plural of category, so that only Jesus is meant (Kuinoel), but *men* generally, the human race. In one individual member of the human family they saw this power actually displayed; and they regarded it as a rare gift of God to *humanity*, for which they gave God praise.”²

No stress is here laid upon a matter that has been much insisted on, and much disputed, that the power to perform a miracle implies the power to forgive sins. On the question whether the possession of the latter power is in this case supposed to be evidenced by the exercise of the former, something will have to be said in the sequel.

What has already been advanced is intended to shew reasons for doubting if the words in question can be rightly construed as only an assertion that Christ, the Son of man, being God as well as man, had the power on earth to forgive sins. Of course the writer has no design to question the truth of this assertion in itself. His object has been to shew that the particular words before us do not make, and were not intended to make, this assertion.

And if not this, does it not seem as if the whole logic of the case required the words to be interpreted as conveying the alternative reply above suggested to the question of the Scribes, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” After rebuking them for their readiness to impute to Him the evil of blasphemy, our Lord repudiates the blasphemy by saying, as it were, “God does *not* absolutely reserve to Himself alone the prerogative to forgive sin, for the *Son of man* has power to forgive sins on earth. And, that you may know that He has this power, I, whom, claiming as I do to be the Son of man, you only know as a member of the human family; I, whose distinctly human relation

¹ Bengel's Gnomon in Matthew ix. 8.

² Eng. transl. of Meyer's Commentary on Matthew ix. 8. T. & T. Clark.

is by this title specially, if not exclusively, displayed before you, thus exercise the power of forgiveness by performing this miracle of healing." There can be no doubt that this was the way in which this saying and its attendant miracle were understood, and received by the hearers; and therefore it was that they "glorified God who had given such power *unto men*."¹

It is noticeable that our Lord does not speak of the power of forgiveness as being a matter of special delegation to the Son of man, nor as being newly acquired; but as being *possessed* by Him: "The Son of man *hath* (ἔχει) power." And although, in the current interpretation, this may be represented as implying that the power of forgiveness as exercised by our Lord was no delegated power, but essential to his divine nature,² yet it scarcely seems as if an exclusively *divine* power would be thus asserted as essentially inherent in Christ, as *the Son of man*. And, in the interpretation now suggested, such a mode of statement is consistent with the hypothesis, that a power of forgiveness of sin is *inborn* in man; that it is a natural endowment of humanity, to which, neglected or misunderstood hitherto, He, the Son of Man, the Representative of the race, being, whatever else He was, *essentially human*, now called the attention of the brotherhood of humanity, by shewing how it was to be exercised.

And from this, too, an obvious advance may be made to the remark that the power, here assumed to be asserted for humanity, has nothing to do with the special priestly or official remission authorized by divine enactment under the Jewish dispensation, and alleged in modern times to have equal authority among ourselves. It does not seem to have been much noted that the Scribes in the narrative before us, to whom the powers of the Levitical priesthood to absolve and to retain sins, must have been a matter of

¹ Matthew ix. 8.

² Alford, on Matthew ix. 6.

familiar recognition, plainly shew by their question, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" how very decided was the limit within which those priestly powers could alone be wielded. In their minds it is plain that there is no difficulty in adjusting what they regarded as God's sole prerogative of forgiveness to their entire acceptance of the ecclesiastical remission of sins by the Levitical priest. Possibly from this consideration an instructive light might be thrown upon the question of modern priestly claims of this sort. But, in respect of the subject before us, it is only necessary to gather from it that the words of our Lord certainly do not refer to any special official or ecclesiastical powers; but that, if they do not, as it is assumed they do not, refer to Himself exclusively, they are asserted of humanity at large, and announce the power of forgiveness as a natural endowment which humanity, as such, possesses, and is called upon, after the example of its Representative, to exercise.

The general bearing of the words before us to which, in accordance with what has preceded, we seem to be exegetically constrained, may be stated as follows: "Although, in a large and divine sense, it is undoubtedly true that God alone can absolutely forgive sins, yet there is a forgiveness on earth which man can exercise, and which, therefore, I, as the Son of man, the Representative of humanity, and especially as the leader and example of all those who desire to tread in my steps, now exercise in my human nature. And, that you may know that such a power really belongs to me, in the only character in which you know me, I, in that character, as the Son of man, grant to this poor sufferer that earthly forgiveness of sins which consists in the removal from him of the bodily suffering which is the earthly consequence and penalty of sins; a release, of the reality and completeness of which you yourselves are perfectly competent to judge.

And, in doing this as the representative Man, I announce to you the principle which as yet men have never recognized, that, so far as you yourselves relieve the suffering and sorrow which sin has caused to your brethren, you are in fact granting to them an earthly forgiveness of sins. The exercise of this power is a privilege with which every man in his degree is endowed, as inherent in his social nature, but which may be so enlarged and extended in its application as to approach nearer and nearer to the miraculous exercise of this endowment, of which this cure is an example, until it is manifested as a power of doing on earth the work which, in its spiritual sphere, is the special prerogative of my Father in heaven."

Now it is submitted that here was the enunciation of a principle eminently characteristic of the Gospel, and in full harmony with its teachings—not only sufficiently important, but also (at that period at least) sufficiently novel, to justify the peculiar emphasis of its announcement, and fully capable of satisfying the remarkable form of its expression.

A brief examination of the circumstances and words which are narrated as having led up to this saying will shew that they are certainly not less consistent with the proposed, than with the ordinary, interpretation.

There is no reason for doubting that our Lord's first utterance to this paralytic was the announcement of a *plenary divine pardon* of his sins. And, to the murmured question of the Scribes, whether any but God Himself could bestow such a pardon, our Lord vouchsafes no direct reply, because his hearers were not able to receive it. He simply rebukes their readiness to think evil of Him. But He, as it were, continues: "You think it is very easy to give utterance to such words, of whose effect, from the nature of the case, it is impossible that you should have any direct evidence. But is it equally easy to utter words of healing, and, as I do this, to make their effect manifest to you in

the cure of this paralytic? I leave aside the question of God's exclusive prerogative in the forgiveness which I have just declared. *This* you are not able to apprehend. But, that you may know that *man* (in Me) has power to bestow an *earthly* forgiveness of sins,—a forgiveness which is no usurpation of the divine prerogative, but its normal adumbration and pledge, I hereby bestow an earthly forgiveness upon this man; and, that you may have no doubt of the reality of the gift, behold it in the form of a visible relief of his suffering." Here, therefore, is no need to raise a question of the connexion of the power of spiritual forgiveness with that of miracle-working; since the work of healing which our Lord performed was *itself* the forgiveness on earth of the sins which had caused the paralytic's suffering, seeing that it remitted for him their earthly penalty.

Lest it should be thought that by this interpretation (necessary as it seems) our Lord is represented as asserting for human nature too high a claim, the following considerations are briefly suggested.

Acknowledging, as we do, the general principle that in sorrow, and suffering, pain, disease, and death, we see the earthly consequence and penalty of sin, and, in multitudes of cases, even specifically, the earthly consequences and penalties of sins, we cannot but recognize that any relief from those consequences and penalties, or any of them, is, to that extent, a relief from the evil effects of the sin which has caused them. The most absolute forgiveness of sin does not imply the annihilation or extinction of the fact of sin, but simply the cancelling of all its consequences, whether moral or physical, spiritual or temporal, both in this life and in the life to come. And, of course, that which cancels any of these consequences, if it be the expression of the good will of an intelligent being or agent, is *to that extent* forgiveness. If it be limited only to the temporal or earthly consequences of sin, or, so far as it does so ex-

tend, it is rightly characterized as a forgiveness *on earth*, or an *earthly* forgiveness, as distinguished from a *divine* or *heavenly* forgiveness. As far as it goes, however, if it be effected by the ministry of a moral agent, it is a real forgiveness.

It is true that such reliefs from the consequences of sin may be and often are both received and conferred by those who have no regard for the moral nature of the agency. In such cases, it is of course an abuse of language to insist on their relation to forgiveness. But, in proportion as the moral conditions involved in the reception and bestowal of such benefits are considered, the idea that in them the effect of some previous wrong is being neutralized, by a voluntary and personal, not a necessary and mechanical, agency is brought to the surface; Love is vindicated as capable of superseding Law; and the simple act of instinctive benevolence or of mutual helpfulness is lifted into a spiritual atmosphere, and becomes an earthly human expression of the divine forgiveness of sins.

Briefly to illustrate this. A man is cured by a physician of a painful disease; and the common-place relations of life may no doubt be satisfied in such a case by the grateful acknowledgment of kindly medical skill and care in the usual way, and there an end. But if both the physician and the patient should be thoughtful Christian men, striving to see their experience of life and the events of every day on their spiritual side, and to realize for themselves the attitude in which Christ would have stood to them, they might, as it is contended on the teaching of this passage, regard themselves, the one, as having received from God through his servant an earthly forgiveness of some special sin, in himself or others, which had caused his suffering; and the other as having used a power of earthly forgiveness, with which God had endowed him, in the way in which Christ had used it; in order to commend to the sinner the

great love of God in forgiveness, an earthly reflection of which He had thus been enabled to bestow.

To develop the moral and spiritual uses to which the passage thus interpreted may be applied, belongs rather to the office of the preacher than to that of the exegete. Still it may be allowed to the writer very briefly to point out how much is gained, by such an interpretation of our Lord's words as he has advocated, in power to raise the common charities and benevolences of life on to a definitely spiritual ground, and to link the daily ministries of Christian love to the great work which our Lord came to earth to accomplish. A clue is here given whereby can be discerned the great plea of the forgiveness of sins twined into every thread of the entire texture of the Gospel life and teaching, and the love which Christ enjoined to his followers is set forth as a manifestation not only in word but in deed, not only in form but in fact, of the love wherewith God has loved us; so that the exercise of the earthly forgiveness of sins, by us, on behalf of God, may not only enhance the attractions of his kingdom, but render ourselves daily more and more the "children of our Father in heaven."

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THE TWO ACCOUNTS OF OUR LORD'S INFANCY.

THE difference between the two accounts of our Lord's birth and infancy, given in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke, must strike even the most careless reader of the New Testament with surprise; and it is no wonder that to many it has proved a serious stumbling block, so serious as to lead them to reject one or other of the accounts as legendary or mythical, or to set down both narratives as the various traditions current in different parts of the Church, each