

THE CHRISTIAN RITUALISM.

JAMES i. 27.

THERE is no more surprising and unfortunate defect in the Revised Version of the New Testament, admirable as it is in many respects, than its treatment of the keyword of this Verse. Not even in the Margin does it give us a hint that the word here rendered "religion" does not mean what we commonly mean by religion. And yet no scholar has any doubt that what St. James is here defining is not "religion," but "ritualism." The Greek word he uses (*θρησκεία*) is never used to denote that which is inward and spiritual in religion, but that which is outward and formal, that which is liturgical, ritualistic, ceremonial. What he means is that the true ritual, the true service, the true *worship*, consists of charity and holiness, and not in a punctual and accurate observance of ordinances and outward forms. It is not enough that we pray, and preach, and sing; it is not enough that we are baptized and that we partake the Supper of the Lord. These are only means to an end—means of grace to an end of grace. The end is that we rise into and exhibit a loving and an unworldly spirit.

We must understand, then, that St. James is not speaking of "religion" in its most inward and deepest sense, but only of religion as it shews itself in worship. He does not teach us that our God and Father requires nothing more of us than kindness to those who are in distress and a heart uncorrupted by the world. He is speaking of the outward service, the outward forms, in which a true religious faith in God as our Father and Redeemer will infallibly exhibit itself, and not of the interior motives and affections by which we are moved to render Him that service.

But what a noble and spiritual conception of the Christian faith it gives us that its very ritualism should be so large and gracious and pure, that its very body should be "a spiritual body!" And what a rebuke is administered by these inspired words to those who contend for vestments and postures, for rites and ceremonies, for Church furniture and ecclesiastical symbols, as if *these* were of the essence of that ritualism which even St. James declares to consist in charity and a blameless life!

I say "even St. James;" for St. James was, by nature and habit, the most ritualistic of the Apostles. Although an apostle and a brother of the Lord, he remained a Jew to the end of his days, and was revered by the Pharisees as more exact, scrupulous, and devout in all the exercises of the Jewish religion than they themselves. Yet even *he* could see that the very morality illustrated and enforced by the Jewish ceremonial was simply the worship, the service, the exterior cultus of the Christian Church. A Jew who, from devotion to God, was both kind and pure, both separate from sinners and yet compassionate of the sinful, had kept the whole law, had imbibed its very spirit, had learned all that it had to teach; but for a Christian to be kind and pure shewed no more than that he had mastered the ritualism of Christ,

that he was like his Master in his outward life, even though he were not one with Him in motive and spirit and aim. For a man may be both charitable and unworldly, and therefore a very good Christian so far as he goes, and yet he may be far from having possessed himself of the entire loyalty to truth, the fervent and abiding devotion, the unwavering faith, the burning zeal, the self-sacrificing love, by which Christ was animated, and by which Christ would have *him* animated and inspired.

All this is implied in the words of St. James ; and as we listen to him we cannot but a little wonder at his breadth. Had we heard it from St. Paul, who was fierce against the law which had so long held his fervent and generous spirit in cruel bondage, and who was never so severe as when rebuking his converts for lapsing under the yoke of legal prescription and ceremonial observance from which Christ had set them free, we should have felt no surprise. But that St. James, the most legal and Jewish of the bishops of the Primitive Church ; that St. James who worshipped in the Temple to the day of his death, and who outdid the very Pharisees in the austerity of his life and the length and frequency of his prayers,—that *he* should speak so largely and nobly, that he should account the innermost sanctuary of the Temple to be but the porch and vestibule of the Church, and admit the morality which was the soul of Judaism to be the mere body of the Christian Faith, can hardly fail to astonish and impress us.

Yet even in these large and noble words we find some traces of Jewish training and habits of thought. For when we read, "Pure and undefiled ritualism is to *visit orphans and widows* in their affliction," we instantly recognize a Jewish tone of thought and speech. Among the Jews, as among most Oriental races of the ancient world, widows and orphans were of all classes the most liable to plunder and oppression. Their inheritance was often filched from them under forms of law, now that they had no strong arm to protect them, by an unjust judge whom they were unable to bribe, or even forcibly wrested from them by some rapacious kinsman or neighbour. Hence it was that the Prophets constituted themselves the champions of the defenceless orphan and widow, denounced the curse of Heaven on all who wronged them, and even, by a bold figure of speech, declared God Himself to be the Husband of the widow and the Father of the fatherless. St. James, therefore, simply carries on the Hebrew tradition when he bids us, as part of the service, or worship, we owe to God, "*visit orphans and widows in their affliction.*"

Nay, the very word "*visit*" has a Hebrew tang in it. For, to the Jew, this word meant much more than to us. God *visited* his people when He redeemed them from bondage, or gave them abundance for want, joy for mourning. God *visited* Job when He cleansed him from his leprosy and gave him "twice as much as he had before." And, in like manner, we *visit* orphans and widows, in St. James's sense of the word, not when we call upon them, or say a few kind words to them

which cost us nothing, but when we defend them from insult or wrong, when we effectively minister to their wants or comfort them in their sorrow.

Even so, however, we do not get to the bottom of these words. There is a *principle* in them which we have yet to lay hold of. St. James specifies widows and orphans simply because in his time they were of all classes the most defenceless, needy, and oppressed. The principle of his injunction is, therefore, that, if we truly worship God and our Father, worship Him in the Christian way, we shall habitually range ourselves on the side of the needy, the wronged and oppressed classes of our own time, whoever they may be, and even though their interests should seem to clash with our own. Our first feeling is to be for *them*; our first thought how we may most effectually help them. According to him, charity and unworldliness are the two main constituents of Christian worship. And, assuredly, if we act on the principle of this injunction, charity and unworldliness are the very qualities we shall have to cherish and display. For, right in the teeth of both the spirit and the law of the world, we shall shew ourselves the friends of the poor rather than of the rich, of the servant rather than of the master, of the toilsome many rather than of the untoiling few, of the weak rather than the strong, of the sorrowful and wronged rather than of the prosperous and the merry. And to do *that* will tax our unworldliness to the utmost.

Nor will it fail to strain our charity, as well as our unworldliness. For the poor, the weak, the wronged, the sorrowful, are not always wise or just in their expectations and demands, nor thankful for the help we render them. They often exaggerate their claims, often suspect and distrust those who help them most wisely. Yet St. James says not a single word to warrant us in withholding our sympathy and help until we are convinced that the whole claim put forward by any wronged or distressed class is just, or that they are urging that claim in a wise and temperate tone. There were many widows and orphans in Israel; and we have no ground, either in history or experience, for believing that *their* claims were always just and reasonable, or that they were always temperately urged. And yet, reasonable or unreasonable, temperate or intemperate, the Christian disciples were to *visit* them, *i.e.* to feel for them, help them, defend them, comfort them. Who can doubt, then, that we are bound to defend, assist, and comfort all who are now weak, wronged, afflicted, however impatient they may be, however intemperate or unthankful? If they are unwise, they do but need the help of our wisdom the more. They do but need our sympathy the more if, for lack of sympathy, their minds are angry and inflamed. They are but the more in need of comfort if they add to their real wrongs fancied wrongs and slights and offences. It may be, and is, part of our duty to shew them, if we are able, where their claim is excessive or unjust. It may be, and is, part of our duty to protest against any folly or intemperance of spirit of which they may be guilty. But it is also our duty,

and our *first* duty, to feel for them, to stand up for them, to minister to them and comfort them.

This is the Christian rule or rite—that we *visit* the wronged and oppressed. Is it not a reasonable rule, a rule which commends itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God? What is a generous man's first instinct? Is it not to make a stand for the wronged and defenceless? What was the rule of knightly chivalry? Was it not to espouse the cause of the weak, and to succour the distressed, without any too nice investigation into their claims or into the consequences which might ensue if their claims were taken up and enforced?

Such a rule as this, however, demands a nobler spirit than that of the world, which is apt to sympathize with wealth rather than with poverty, with strength rather than with weakness, with success rather than with failure. And hence, by a simple logical advance, St. James, after bidding us visit orphans and widows, bids us keep ourselves "unspotted from the world." There are those who speak as if the world had so changed of late that we no longer need to resist and overcome the world. But no man who has seen much of the world, or kept watch over his own life, can well doubt that the spirit of the world is still as adverse as ever to the spirit of Christ. We have only to read any newspaper that falls in our way, in order to see that, however its customs may have changed, the world is as immoral and unspiritual in heart as of old; that wealth, power, fashion, sport, self-seeking, and self-indulgence—all that holds men down in the visible and temporal elements of the world—have lost none of their attractions; and that he who would keep himself unspotted by the world must maintain a constant struggle against its law and spirit. To go into the world and be untainted by it, to keep a pure and single heart amid its snares and temptations, is still the most difficult of all adventures. Yet this is the adventure to which St. James summons us—*calling us to it as part of our worship.*

And here, in the fact that he regards, and teaches us to regard, unworldliness as an essential element of the worship we owe to God, there is a gleam of light for us. For, surely, it should help and encourage us in the hard and perilous enterprise to which we are called to know that, when we resist the temptations of the world in which we live and throw off its taints, we as truly serve God our Father as when we study his Word, or engage in prayer, or take a sacrament. All forms of worship reach their end only as they make us more kind and more pure, only as they strengthen us for the struggle with evil and the pursuit of goodness. What do we go to Church for, and hear his word, and ask his grace, but that we may carry the spirit of the Church into wrangling mart and busy street, but that we may make his word a light to our path and a lamp to our feet, but that we may live by and use the grace which we have sought and received? Our occasional worship is not real worship, it is not even sincere, if it does not help us to a constant worship, if we are not the kinder for it and the purer in our daily life, if it bring us no strength to overcome the world and to love our neighbour as ourself.

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