

His moral precepts of a great number of these wise sayings, usually amplifying and improving them; and that He employed in His parables many of the "similitudes," or proverbs contained in the ancient Book; and lastly, that the broad lines of moral teaching, which appear in a somewhat fragmentary and incoherent form among the sayings of the wise, were brought into clear and connected significance in the Incarnate Wisdom Himself.

And now we may close with a suggestion, that even in the last scene of His life one of the Proverbs came up into His mind. When He said to His persecutors, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?" (John xviii. 23) did He not think of the old proverb, which His people ought to have remembered, "To punish the righteous is not good, nor to smite the noble for their uprightness" (xvii. 26)?

R. F. HORTON.

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*THE LAST STATE WORSE THAN THE FIRST.*

(MATT. XII. 38-45 AND XVI. 1-4.)

THE Pharisees had the shallowest conception of the function of miracle. They would quite have approved the devil's suggestion that Jesus could give a prompt and convincing proof of His messiahship by casting Himself from the pinnacle of the temple and landing unhurt on the pavement below—though why the possession of a mountain-sheep's capacity for jumping should prove any one to be the greatest spiritual blessing to mankind, they probably did not inquire. They seem never to have seriously set themselves to understand the deeper parts of Christ's character, or to ask themselves whether such an

one as they found Him to be, wise, calm, fearless, merciful, mighty, was not the best they were ever likely to see. They seem to have lost the faculty for recognising excellence when they saw it. They were totally unfit to choose a leader for themselves or follow Him when He called them. All they found themselves competent to do was to come with their silly tests, and measure Him by some irrelevant and external standard. They scorned and hated Him for doing those very things which revealed His Divine greatness; and they declared they would believe in Him, if He did such things as would surely have shown He had a poor conception of the functions of the Messiah and little competency to discharge them. Again and again they ask Him for a "sign." To John's instructed eye all the miracles of Christ appeared to be "signs." They seemed to picture forth in the colours and figures of the outer world the work of Christ in the spiritual world. Each miracle was to John a "sign," because it was to him the outward symbol of a like energy on the part of Christ in the unseen world of spirit. But to the Pharisees a miracle was a "sign" merely as evidence that here was some superhuman power; but whether beneficent or destructive, selfish or self-sacrificing, they did not care to inquire.

To all who seek a sign in this external sense, supposing that any superhuman feat is sufficient proof of the Divine presence, our Lord might say, as He said to these Pharisees: "Ye can discern the face of the sky; ye can read there the forecast of to-morrow's weather: but ye cannot read the signs of the times. You know the sequences of nature, and understand how certain results uniformly follow certain causes and appearances; but you have no eye for spiritual sequences, nor understand the relation of cause and effect in things spiritual. You do not see that a superhuman marvel which makes men stare has no natural connexion

with salvation from sin; neither do you see that the presence in the world of a person without sin, and exhibiting day by day Divine qualities of character, must result in a kind of weather altogether new in the spiritual world. You do not see that the entrance into the world of such love and holiness, and the identification of their possessor with humanity, portends more good to the race than any physical marvel could possibly portend. Suppose I did clothe the sun with a cloud as ye look at it in the bare heavens, or commanded a star to fall from the sky, or said to these hills, Be removed, and be cast into the sea—there is no infallible connexion between such prodigies and the salvation of sinners. You could not from your observation of such wonders predict what would follow; but if you could rightly read the signs of the times, you would recognise that a greater than Jonas, a greater than Solomon, the true spiritual marvel, the lowliest and holiest and most self-sacrificing of men, cannot be in the world without changing its course for ever.”

Some persons are fond of reading the signs of the times, and do so with no great profit to any one. But the interpretation of these signs suggested by our Lord is of another and more profitable sort. If it was impossible that such a Person as He could have joined Himself to the world's fortunes without bettering them in a fashion unachievable by any other person, it is impossible He should join Himself to any of us individually without bringing into our life an otherwise unattainable hope. If His presence in the world is the natural harbinger and augury of good to men, and more surely promises brightness and peace than the safest indications of fair weather predict it to the weatherwise, as certainly may we foretell true prosperity and lasting sunshine to ourselves if we are abiding in Christ. When we see the dust begin to whirl in suddenly formed little spirals on the road, when we see

pile upon pile of heavy, soft clouds gather on the south-west horizon, we know that rain is coming. Certain natural signs never deceive, because there is a rigid natural connexion between the cause and the consequence. As rigid is the connexion in the moral world; no man can accept Christ as mediating between God and men without receiving the utmost of human blessing. Christ cannot enter into partnership with a man without filling it with a new joy, setting it to new hopes, and forming it to the highest mould. Christ's connexion with us is the spring of life that promises infinite harvest.

But while our Lord flatly refused to work any sign as a bare and mere wonder and for the sole sake of proving His power, He in the same breath assured them that signs of sufficient potency would in the natural course of things be given them. So little were they prepared to interpret rightly His miracles of healing, and to see in them the loving signs of God's presence with them to heal and to bless, that they would actually judge Him to be endangering the ship, and throw Him overboard as Jonah had been thrown. And yet not so would they cut short His mission and His activity; but as Jonah's mission was expedited by that very occurrence which seemed to terminate it, so should His mission, by their final action against Him, receive its most convincing authentication and its truest furtherance. Their rejection of Him would result in the clearest proof that they should have believed in Him. This, the resurrection of the crucified Christ, with all its wondrous accompaniments, was to be the grand evidence of His mission.

But lest the Pharisees should justify themselves for disbelieving in Jesus until He should yield to their demand and grant the kind of sign they persistently sought, our Lord proceeds to show them that their condemnation was that they would not follow the light that shone before

them nor allow conscience to speak. What need of signs and wonders while they would not repent? The men of Nineveh had repented without signs and wonders. They had owned the nearness of God in the nearness of moral rebuke. They allowed conscience to speak, and acknowledged their sin, and repented. Even the wisdom of Solomon drew to his court those who in distant lands had a love of wisdom. They recognised in Solomon a kindred spirit and a true leader of thought. They needed no other inducement, no display of his power or evidence of his truth. The wisdom that was in him was itself the attraction. And so Christ was rightly interpreted by truth-loving men; His wisdom, His preaching of repentance, were the best evidences of His greatness: and while the Pharisees hardened themselves and would not admit the light they knew to be in Him, it was in vain that they sought to justify themselves by demanding signs.

Their state of mind is revealed to themselves by the little parable in which our Lord compares them to a man out of whom one devil had been cast, whose undefended soul was ultimately possessed by an increased number of devils. The generation of His own contemporaries was emphatically an empty-souled generation, animated by no grand positive truth, but trying to live upon negations and restrictions. The devil of idolatry had been cast out, the devil of Greek manners and Greek learning, and of gross and manifest breaches of the law; but the emptied house was guarded by no wise and strong affections. The great movement initiated by the Baptist had resulted only in some slight external reforms. The very result against which the Baptist had warned the people had arrived. They had accomplished the slight outward cleansing he required, but had not accepted that inward baptism of the Christ which would have filled their hearts with new and purifying forces. With all their profession of regard

for Jehovah, they proved themselves "an adulterous generation," for their heart was not His, and their obedience, such as it was, arose from no strong love of Him. But to put away evil from the life while the heart is not filled with any worthy enthusiasm or love, is the forerunner of worse evil than before.

For the individual this little parable is full of significance. It tells us we may be becoming worse when to all appearance we are growing better; just as in some diseases there are periods of relief from pain and of revived energy which excite much hope in uninstructed friends, but over which the physician shakes his head, well knowing they will be followed by severe relapse. The peculiarity of the case our Lord introduces is, that, first, there appears evil in the man; then an absence of evil; and, lastly, a vast increase of evil. It is not the common case of a man going steadily from bad to worse. That is easily understood. It is easily understood that the momentum of a man slipping down an ice slope should steadily increase so long as no effectual obstacle is met with. And it is as easily understood that so long as no effectual restraint is put upon a man's conduct, his evil habits tend continually to accelerate his downward career. But the peculiarity of the case adduced by our Lord is, that the downward career is not steadily progressive, but seems for a while to be checked, and is subsequently resumed with sevenfold violence.

The great principle thus pointed out is, that wherever an evil thing is not expelled by the invasion of a good that enters and dispossesses it, the expulsion is ineffectual and likely to be the beginning of disaster. Nature observes this law. An injured finger nail is replaced by the growth of a fresh nail, which allows no interval between the old and the new. To clear a room of bad air we do not get an air-pump and exhaust it, but open the window and let the pure air displace the impure. Every mother knows that

if she wishes her child to lay down some dangerous article it holds, the effective method is to offer the child some more attractive plaything. In the whole training men get in this world the same law holds good. The bad must be expelled by the entrance of the good, or it is not effectually expelled. If a lad is possessed with the devil of love of low company, or of polluting literature, or of any vicious habit, it is not enough to handcuff the devil and eject him by force, but the lad must be somehow inspired with higher and better tastes which expel what is bad and low.

To use religion only as a repressive or expulsive influence is fatal. If religion only serves the purpose of saving from gross sin or of making us respectable, and if it does so not by filling us with pure purposes and powerful enthusiasms, but only by curbing evil propensities, then it quite misses its mark, and leaves us worse than it found us. This is no fanciful or unimportant distinction. There are persons whose hearts are emptied rather than filled by religion. They go round all the rooms within, and where they find impurity they sweep it out. The strong devil who has possessed and used them, as a tenant his house, they summarily eject. They leave no obvious foulness that can offend the sense, they set everything in its place, and make all scrupulously clean: and the result is the stillness of death, the coldness, the rigidity, the uselessness of death. An unused room declares itself by its order, its curtains and covers all hanging at the right angle, every chair in its place, no book thrown carelessly on the table, but everything set down with care; and we should feel more at home and in greater comfort were there disorder enough to convey the impression of life. If we could visit some people's hearts, we should see a similar state of matters; everything studied and regulated with care, no great stain or soil, no dust and tumult, but no evidence of life, no proof that strong emotions and brisk activities are familiar there.

For many persons get nothing positive out of religion, no strong, impelling power, no new and abundant life, but only a death of their old life; all is restriction, repression, restraint. But absence of faults is not everything. You may have had a clerk or a workman, very bad tempered or not quite steady, but extremely smart and satisfactory with his work. His faults become too annoying, and you part with him, and in choosing a successor you are careful to get a steady or a good tempered man, one without the faults of his predecessor; but you soon learn that absence of faults is not everything, and the sloth and awkwardness and dulness of your new servant make you wish the old one back again, with all his faults and all his life and activity. So in religion, repression of sin is not everything: life is much more. And where it is not the new life that expels the old faults, worse faults, if more respectable, are sure to appear in the man. Indeed nothing is more fitted to fill us with dismay than to become aware that our religion has been merely a thing of repression and expulsion, that we have no burning enthusiasms, no love of God and man welling up in our hearts, nothing we can call life, nothing that gives us perennial interest in men and impels us to seek their good, nothing that would have made it a pleasure to us to take our place by the side of Christ, and aid Him in ministering to the diseased, the poor, the leprous, the lunatic. Nothing fills us with keener apprehension than this, for how can we live eternally if we have not in ourselves this spring of life?

And the result of using religion merely as an instrument for repressing great sin in ourselves is, that after an interval of apparent peace, the soul becomes possessed by far greater iniquities than ever. The new sins which are thus developed may not be so violent or so obviously immoral. They may be sins, as our Lord expresses it, that find their suitable dwelling in a house that is swept and garnished. Yet they



are worse than the original iniquity. They are sins of vanity, contempt of men, hypocrisy, formality, coldness of feeling, hatred of those who differ from us in doctrine and in outward forms of religion, though having more genuine love to Christ. These new tenants are prim, church-going devils, that adapt themselves to all the ways of respectable society. They do not court eviction by disturbing the neighbours, but all the while they are carrying on nefarious practices, which will one day overwhelm the house in disaster. For the man whose whole religious experience can be fairly summed up in the statement that he has cast out a devil, or, in other words, rid himself of one form of iniquity, has built his religion on regard for self much more than on regard for Christ, and therefore sees all things upside down. He cultivates his own character rather than fellowship with Christ; and he will thus be led to become external, formal, pharisaic in his religion, and will learn to denounce all who differ from him in the externals of which he makes so much. Hatred, envy and uncharitableness, supercilious bigotry, and sourness of spirit enter into him, and make him as unlike Christ as it is possible for a man to be.

It is possible then that attention to religion may rather damage than improve the character. There are persons who have been quite spoiled by their religion; who would have been more humble, sincere, truthful, affectionate, useful persons, had they never given any attention to religion than they are at the present moment. Their mode of dealing with religion has given birth to faults of which originally they showed no trace. Religion has in their case only served to make their last state worse than their first. It is so always, if religion does not fill the heart with genuine love for what is good, with a real hunger for righteousness, with enthusiasm for those for whom Christ died.

MARCUS DODS.

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