TWO PARABLES.

THE PRODIGAL SON (*Luke* xv. 11–32).

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD (*Matt.* xix. 27; xx. 16).

THERE is very little resemblance between the external form and imagery of these two parables, except that both are taken from the relations of men in common life; and they were spoken on very different occasions. The earlier of the two, that of the Prodigal, was mainly addressed to the Pharisees, in reply to their complaint against Jesus that "this Man receiveth sinners and eateth with them"; though it was spoken to a mixed audience, consisting both of Pharisees and of those whom they denounced as sinners. The later of the two parables, that of the Labourers in the Vineyard, was spoken to the disciples alone, in answer to Peter's question, when, referring to the young ruler who had refused to give up all for Christ, he said, on behalf of the rest of the Twelve as well as himself, "Lo, we have forsaken all and followed Thee; what shall we have therefore?"

There is also this contrast, that while the parable of the Prodigal has probably impressed men more than anything else in Christ's teaching, and in its most impressive point seems, and is, perfectly clear, the parable of the Labourers has impressed mankind comparatively little, and is regarded by most readers as a perplexing parable. Nevertheless, we think it can be shown that the teaching of the two is closely similar.

The lesson of both is double. In the latter there are the cases of the first hired and the last hired labourers, in the former those of the two sons; and in each parable there is equal emphasis laid on the two cases. It is indeed perhaps to be regretted that the former is universally called the parable of the Prodigal; because the lesson which

Christ means to teach through the elder brother is as important as that taught through the younger, though much less obvious. It would be better to call this the parable of the Two Sons, were not this title already appropriated to another and later parable, also spoken to the Pharisees and rulers (Matt. xxi. 28, 32).

The three parables in Luke xv., the Lost Sheep, the Lost Piece of Money, and the Lost Son, were evidently spoken about the same time, and form a series. But the words, "and He said," at the commencement of the third, indicate a transition of some kind; and it may be that our Lord, at this point of His discourse, meant, and was understood by His audience to mean, "I have till now been addressing the Pharisees in defence of My action in receiving sinners and eating with them. I have yet more to say on the subject; and to this I ask the attention of the publicans and sinners also. I have been speaking of the action of God and His Son in seeking and saving the lost; I have now to speak, not only to those who think they are righteous, but at the same time to those who know they are lost."

This lesson, that God will receive repentant sinners, and that man ought to receive them, is the most prominent lesson of the parable, and for most readers it appears to be the only one. Most readers probably think that the conversation where the Father justifies Himself to His elder son for receiving the returned prodigal with rejoicing, is only meant to heighten the effect of the whole. To which view we think it may be replied, that, on a first reading at least, it does *not* heighten the effect; and we suspect that those who think thus would, if they were to speak their real minds, like the parable better if it had ended with the reception of the prodigal by his Father. But if we understand the elder son to be a mere Pharisee, and, as our Lord tells us the Pharisees generally were,

a hypocrite, we shall lose half the worth of the parable. Such a view of his character is refuted by the clear statements of the parable itself. He said to his Father, "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, and I never transgressed a commandment of Thine"; and so far was his Father from contradicting this, or treating it as mere pharisaic self-righteousness, that he replied, "Son, thou art ever with Me, and all that is Mine is thine." Compare with this St. Paul's assertion of the blessedness of God's children: "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. viii. 17). "Whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours" (1 Cor. iii. 22). If Stier is right, that this reply of the Father is only ironical, God's most gracious promise may be without meaning;

> "And if this fail,
> The pillared firmament is rottenness."

Who then are they that are represented by the elder son? and what is the teaching of that part of the parable? We reply, that the elder son, who had served his Father all his life, is nearly identical with the labourers that had toiled in the vineyard from early morning; and the murmuring of the elder brother at seeing the prodigal received with festivity, and restored, without a word of reproach, to a son's place in the Father's house and the Father's love, is parallel to the murmuring of the labourers who had borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat, when they saw those who had worked but one hour, and that in the evening, paid as much as themselves. And the answer to both is the same. God's service differs from man's in this, that mere length of service does not count in the apportioning of reward. When the repentance of the returning prodigal is sincere, he is restored at once to the place which his sins had forfeited; and when the

service of the late engaged labourer is honest, he receives an equal reward with those who have toiled all day. "God giveth (and forgiveth) liberally, and upbraideth not" (Jas. i. 5).[1] We are accepted, not according to what we have done, but according to what we are.

Though the imagery of these two parables is taken from the relations of ordinary human life, yet the lesson is drawn by representing men as acting as they do *not* act in ordinary life. It never was the custom of any country to pay a day's wages for an hour's work; nor to let a young man take his inheritance before his father's death, and then go away and waste it. And though the Father's action in welcoming the returned prodigal does not seem so strange to us who have been taught by Christ, it probably appeared strange, and almost monstrous, to the Pharisees who heard it.

Among careless readers, the impression left by the parable of the Labourers is, that it is possible to enter the service of God at any time of life, and at the end receive an equal reward with those who have served Him all their lives. This view however is contradicted by the parable itself. To the question, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" the answer was, "Because no man hath hired us." But if any of the labourers had, in the middle of the day, or even early in the morning, refused the offer of work in mere idleness and in reliance on the kindness of the owner of the vineyard, we cannot think he would have permitted them to come in at the eleventh hour at all; or if he had, he would not have paid them a day's wages for an hour's work. From the language and imagery of this parable alone, it would be much more reasonable to infer that God's call to work in His vineyard, if once disregarded, will never be renewed. But no parable is meant to provide

[1] The Epistle of James contains so many allusions to Christ's recorded teaching, that it is probable this may be one of His unrecorded sayings.

for all cases. The case of those who disregard God's call and their own privileges is not touched on in this parable, but that of the Prodigal reveals a degree of longsuffering of God with sinners which man could not have dared to hope for. And such an inference as that God's call, if disregarded once, is necessarily withdrawn for ever, would also be contrary to our Lord's express teaching in the parable of the Two Sons (Matt. xxi. 28), where a son who at first refused to work in his father's vineyard afterwards changed his mind, and was permitted to go to work.

The doctrine of the equality of all rewards also is doubly contradicted, both in the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard itself, and in the conversation that led to it. In answer to Peter's question, "What shall we have therefore?" (Matt. xix. 27) Christ replied, "Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed Me, in the regeneration (or restoration of all things: cf. Acts iii. 21) when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." We cannot tell the exact meaning of these mysterious words, but they evidently point to some high and peculiar honour which in the future world will belong to those who in this world have been first in the service of Christ's kingdom; and if to the Twelve, then also to St. Paul and all others who have done the most in His service. The same truth is clearly hinted at in the parable of the Pounds (Luke xix. 12–27), where one servant of a nobleman who had been made a king is rewarded with the government of ten cities for the service of earning ten pounds for his master, and another servant with five cities for earning five pounds. But having promised this reward—the highest which the imagination of an Israelite could conceive—of being viceroys over Israel in the kingdom of the Messiah, the Lord changes His tone, and warns His disciples that the expectation of such glory has its own temptations, and

must not be too highly esteemed. In nearly the same spirit, He said on another occasion, "In this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke x. 20). And in a similar spirit, when speaking of the signs and wonders that were to be wrought in answer to the prayer of faith, He adds the caution, apparently without anything to suggest it except the necessity for it, "Whensoever ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any one; that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mark xi. 25). In the passage before us He illustrates His meaning by the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard, and both introduces and sums up His parable with the warning, "Many shall be last that are first, and first that are last" (Matt. xix. 30, xx. 16): showing that the highest rewards—including in the reward the Master's approval—do not necessarily belong either to the longest service or to the greatest quantity of work, or even to the most steadfast endurance of the "scorching heat" of persecution; and in the parable itself He implies that the highest place in His kingdom can only be given to those who show an unselfish, ungrudging, and unmurmuring spirit. The same words—"the last shall be first and the first last"—might have occurred at the end of the parable of the Prodigal; the elder son was first, but with his unloving, pharisaic spirit he was in danger of becoming last. It is the same teaching as that of St. Paul, in a passage which is perhaps seldom thought of in connexion with this parable: "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned (a harder thing than to toil under the scorching noonday heat of a Syrian summer) and have not the charity which envieth not, seeketh not its own, is not easily provoked, and thinketh no evil, it profiteth me nothing" (1 Cor. xiii.).

It is now time to consider the question, how we are meant by our Lord to understand the position of the elder brother of the Prodigal, and of the earliest hired labourers; and it is our opinion that whatever difficulties belong to these questions are produced by the attempt to read meanings into these parables which do not properly belong to our Lord's words, and are inconsistent with them.

First, as to the elder son. There is, at first sight, a real difficulty in the case. He is introduced solely for the purpose of rebuke and warning; and yet his Father's saying, "Son, thou art ever with Me, and all that is Mine is thine," briefly and simply describes a state of privilege and blessing equal to the highest which man or angel can ever hope to attain. How is this apparent inconsistency to be reconciled? Very simply, as it seems to us. Our Lord was addressing the Pharisees in reply to their objection to His receiving sinners. He might have replied by denouncing their own sins; but on this occasion He preferred, for the sake of argument and illustration, to take them at their best, and to describe a man who had attained to their own ideal; one who, like St. Paul before his conversion, was "as touching the righteousness which is in the law found blameless" (Phil. iii. 6). This, it is true, was not and could not be the Christian ideal, for "the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John i. 17); but it was the ideal of righteousness held up before ancient Israel;—and He so framed the parable as to show them the special errors and temptations of such a character: ignorance of the gracious purposes of God towards sinners, and ignorance of the root of sin contained in that desire for some degree of independence of the Father which prompted the complaint, "Thou never gavest me (even) a kid that I might make merry with my friends." In modern language, we may imagine the Father answering: "You are most unreasonable. You serve Me these many years!

No doubt; you are My heir, and in serving Me you best serve yourself. You never transgressed a commandment of Mine! No doubt; and are My commandments grievous? I never gave you a kid wherein to feast with your friends! You have always been at liberty to invite them to My table; and if they do not like to dine with Me, they are no fit company for My son." Such a reply would have been deserved; but the Father made the gentle and gracious answer, "Son, thou art ever with Me, and all that is Mine is thine"; which, if the son had ears to hear, was a keener rebuke. In his desire to feast sometimes with his own friends, apart from his Father, was contained the germ of that love of independence which, in its full development, brought his brother to riotous and wasteful living (probably, though not certainly, with harlots), and afterwards to the service of the stranger and the herding of swine. This root of sin is in us all; but in him it was not so full grown as to bring forth death (Jas. i. 15). The purpose and meaning of this conversation between the Father and the elder son is to show what are the special dangers and temptation of those who, like that son, live all their lives in the habitual observance of the commandments of God; and, further, to show the safeguard against these dangers: namely, to appreciate as they deserve the privileges and blessings of such a life. The Father's answer, "Son, thou art ever with Me, and all that is Mine is thine," was no new revelation; it might have been introduced with "remember": and had he rightly remembered it, he would not have wished to feast with his own friends apart from his Father, and would have loved the Prodigal for the Father's sake, if not for his own.

But neither here, nor in the very similar conversation between the Owner of the vineyard and the first hired labourers, is there the slightest hint at final or eternal condemnation; except only the hint addressed to the

Pharisees in the words, "And the elder son was angry, and would not go in," intimating that if they persisted in their rejection of Christ's teaching, they would be self-excluded from the marriage supper of the Lamb. I do not mean to deny that there have been, and may be still, many who regard themselves as careful observers of all Christ's commandments, and yet are the spiritual children of those who slew the prophets and crucified the Christ. And it is also true, and it is the chief lesson of the parable of the Ten Virgins, spoken by our Lord not long after to the disciples alone (Matt. xxv. 1), that profession of Christianity before the world, symbolized by the lamps, and legal purity of life, symbolized by virginity, will not avail to save without the true spirit of religion in the heart;—without which what was meant to be the light, not only of the Church, but of the world, may "burn dim like a lamp with oil unfed," and what was meant to be the salt of the earth may lose its savour (Matt. v. 13, 14). But no one parable, and no one discourse, can teach all truth; and our Lord in the two parables now before us is not speaking of such cases. The words, "many are called but few chosen," are now admitted to be spurious, where the old text has them at the end of the parable of the Labourers; and it is not in the least like the teaching of Christ to hold that those who habitually keep all God's commandments, like the elder son, or spend a long life in the honest and unbroken service of God, like the earliest hired labourers, are in danger of losing their eternal reward for a fit of anger or sullenness, caused by misunderstanding a manifestation of Divine grace *which they had not been taught to understand;* for they had received their training under not the Gospel but the Law. Such dissatisfaction was, no doubt, of the nature of sin even in them, and in men trained by Christ's teaching it would be decidedly sinful; but "there is a sin not unto death" (1 John v. 17). The penny—the day's wages in the latter

parable—is eternal life, the reward of a lifetime spent in the service of God; and the saying of the Householder to the murmuring labourer, "Take up that which is thine, and go thy way," has nothing to do with "Depart, ye cursed,"[1] but only means, "Cease this useless disputing, and go home to supper with thy well earned wages." There was no harshness in bidding him go away when he could gain nothing by remaining, for the imagery of this parable does not include any invitation to a dinner or supper. It is true that Judas, who, being one of the twelve, was among the first, fell away altogether; but there is no allusion in this parable to such a case. The crime by which Judas fell was not a deficiency in the charity taught by Christ, but a treason which would have been judged worthy of death by a merely human and worldly tribunal. In giving the warning, "Many that are first shall be last, and the last first," Christ had not in His thought anything like, "Have not I chosen you Twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John vi. 70.) He rather meant the same as when, on an earlier occasion, the disciples, in the same spirit as Peter when he inquired, "What shall we have therefore?" asked who—meaning which of the Twelve—was to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven; and He replied, "Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. xviii. 1, 4). And when the two sons of Zebedee asked for the chief place in the kingdom of Christ, He told the disciples, "Whosoever would be first among you shall be (that is to say, *let him be*) your servant" (Matt. xx. 20, 28).

To sum up our conclusions. In each of the two parables before us there are two distinct lessons: one of them

[1] The saying which Stier quotes with approval from Luther, "They take their penny and are damned," seems to us perversely wrong.

primary, simple, and obvious; the other secondary, and more recondite and hidden.

In the parable of the Prodigal, the primary lesson is that God is willing to welcome repentant prodigals, and that men ought to welcome them;—that God forgives freely and without upbraiding, so that when repentance is sincere restoration is complete. In that of the Labourers, the primary lesson is the kindred one, that those who enter the service of God late in life shall notwithstanding, if their service is sincere, be placed on an equality, in the final distribution of rewards, with those who have served God all their lives;—that mere length of service does not count at all in the apportioning of heavenly rewards.

The secondary lesson of the parable of the Prodigal is a warning against the special dangers of a life spent, from its beginning, in the habitual service of God;—the danger of trusting in one's own righteousness rather than in the grace of God, and of permitting the beginning of an alienation of the heart from God to go on, unchecked because unnoticed. And the secondary lesson of the parable of the Labourers is the kindred one, that those who have served God all their lives, or in any eminent way, are in danger of trusting in their own services rather than in the grace of God, and regarding with jealousy those who are placed on an equality with them after a shorter period of service, or after services which from a human point of view appear but small. These two errors are the same in kind, and the proper counteractive of both is the same; namely, a truer appreciation of the privileges and blessings which are theirs as God's children, by His grace:—not on condition of works, but of faith. The elder son is told by his Father, "Thou art ever with Me, and all that is Mine is thine"; the first hired labourers go home to their eternal rest with the well-earned wages of a lifetime of toil and endurance in the Master's service. No further blessing is needed, or possible, except a right

appreciation of that which they already enjoy, and more love and confidence towards their heavenly Father and Master. Although in the heavenly kingdom the principle of reward is recognised, and eminent services shall be eminently honoured, yet even in the apportionment of reward there is no place for boasting: we "are not under law, but under grace" (Rom. vi. 14); and the Lord looks chiefly, not to the service done, but to the spirit in which it is done. If they learn rightly to understand this, their trust and love towards their Master and Father will make it impossible to have any feeling of jealousy towards those whom He has set on an equality with them. But if such feelings, natural as they are, are not overcome, those who are the first in length or amount of service may be the last in their Lord's favour;—not excluded from the kingdom, but last and least in it.

But are patient toil and endurance in the Master's service to have no reward of their own? are they to be, in the eternal kingdom, as though they had never been? It cannot be so. There will be no comparing and balancing of claims;—

> "Heaven rejects the lore
> Of nicely calculated less or more";[1]

but God will turn all to good in His own way, which is not ours.

In conclusion, we must consider some objections which may be made to the ideas here expressed as to the nature of the character indicated by the elder brother and the first hired labourers. Their view of things is certainly natural; so natural that, notwithstanding our Lord's teaching in these two parables, it is still a common, and perhaps we may even say the preponderant, view among His followers;

[1] Wordsworth's Sonnet on King's College Chapel, Cambridge.

and it will perhaps be said by some of our readers that we are arguing in its favour.

We certainly do not mean to take the part of the elder brother against the prodigal, and of the first hired labourers against the last. This would be to take their part against the Teacher who spoke these parables in order to refute their errors. But we think that readers of the gospels—perhaps even some who themselves fall into the same errors when occasion arises—are generally too hard on them. It seems to us a total misunderstanding of Christ's words to say that the elder son and the first hired labourers are for their murmuring excluded from the kingdom, and have their portion among the unfaithful and the hypocrites. This is contradicted in the case of the elder son by the words of his conversation with the Father; and in the case of the first hired labourers by the fact that the parable was spoken to the Twelve, immediately after the promise of the highest honour in the Messiah's kingdom which an Israelite could imagine. The purpose of these parables is not to threaten condemnation, but to warn the hearers against the errors to which those are specially liable who spend their lives in the service of God. But so far from agreeing with the notion that the elder son, who has never transgressed his Father's commandments, is rather worse than a prodigal; or that the labourers "take their penny and are damned" for their displeasure with an action on their Master's part which would displease any man who had never heard of the like, it is our belief that the faults of temper displayed by them, and by very many disciples of Christ since then, are not by any means faults of wickedness, but are chiefly due to deficiency of imagination. These persons are typical men of the old moral world. Christ has introduced new and higher principles of thought and action, but the Gospel must be based on the Law. Such men are certainly not typical Christians, but neither are the labourers who were

hired at the eleventh hour, and still less the returned prodigal;—the typical Christian is the elder brother when he is reconciled to the returned prodigal, and the labourer who, after bearing the burden of the day and the scorching heat, learns graciously to acquiesce in his Master's action in placing on an equality with him the labourer who entered at the eleventh hour.

JOSEPH JOHN MURPHY.

PROFESSOR HUXLEY AND THE SWINE OF GADARA.

PROFESSOR HUXLEY'S article on Agnosticism in the February number of the *Nineteenth Century* is one of uncommon interest. The bits of mental autobiography with which he favours us are both instructive and captivating. He champions moreover the position of a much-read novel, and assumes that belief in Christianity is entirely a question of the worth of a group of historical records that have hitherto been supposed to reflect its origins. He also restates some of the old difficulties arising out of the triple narrative of the Gadarene demoniac, and ventures to stake the credibility or otherwise of the gospel traditions upon the truth or falseness of the psychology that underlies the narrative. In conclusion, he tells us that "the choice then lies between discrediting those who compiled the gospel biographies and disbelieving the Master whom they thought to honour by preserving such traditions of the exercise of His authority over Satan's invisible world."

Without word-wasting preamble the professor throws down the gage before the theologians in the following clear and candid terms: