

A GROUP OF PARABLES.

I.

THE parables of our Lord above referred to, and which I have spoken of as a group of parables, are those in chapters xvi. and xvii. of the Gospel of St. Luke: the Unfaithful Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Unprofitable Servant. The first of these I have called the "Unfaithful," rather than, as it is commonly called, the "Unjust," Steward. It is true that unfaithfulness is injustice, or that, at all events, where there is unfaithfulness to any trust that has been put into our hands by God, it leads to injustice towards our fellow creatures, and to a declinature on our part of the obligations under which we lie to them. But, when we take injustice in the natural and strict sense of the term, we think of something different from what is brought before us as the particular offence of the chief character of the first parable, or even of something marked by more aggravated sinfulness than his. Besides this, the *unfaithfulness* of the steward is obviously that which our Lord has mainly in view in warning us against his conduct, and in inculcating the opposite virtue. We see that it is so in the simple fact that the man was a *steward*, for "it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. iv. 2). We see it still more in our Lord's words when He applies the lesson of the parable, "He that is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and he that is unrighteous (that is here, in the way of unfaithfulness) in a very little is unrighteous also in much. If, therefore, ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" (chap. xvi. 10-12). Unfaithfulness is that which our Lord condemns; faithfulness

is that which He commends. The parable would be better described as the Unfaithful than as the Unjust Steward.

In a similar way objection might be taken to the name usually given to the third parable—The Unprofitable Servant. But as the propriety or impropriety of so naming it depends upon the interpretation, and that interpretation must be immediately explained for a more important purpose than the correction of the name by which the parable is known, more need not be said of it at present.

I have spoken of a group of parables, thus implying that there is an intimate connexion between each and the other two members of the group. That this is the case with the first and second parables is generally allowed by commentators. Nor is it easy to deny it. No sooner has the first parable closed than we read, "And the Pharisees, who were *lovers of money*, heard all these things; and they scoffed at Him" (ver. 14). The verbs are in the imperfect not the aorist tense, showing clearly that the scoffing was not confined to the moment when the parable of the Unfaithful Steward was delivered, but that it was frequently repeated at the time. It naturally, therefore, drew forth more teaching from our Lord, and that a teaching which had reference to His hearers as "lovers of money." This, accordingly, leads first to the thought of the means by which they gained their respectable standing, and had come to think themselves entitled to despise and domineer over the poor. As the recognised guardians and interpreters of the law of Moses they had increased their influence, and with their influence their wealth, by magnifying the finality of the law, instead of seeing in it a temporary dispensation, which was to give way to the higher dispensation introduced by Him to whom John the Baptist pointed (ver. 16). Had they felt themselves, with their knowledge and power, to be stewards of God and servants of their nation, they would have penetrated to the truth that a kingdom of God was

come in Jesus worthy to be sought with all eagerness by every man (ver. 16). A recognition of that kingdom would indeed have diminished their own importance, and have taught them to be, like its King, poor. They could not tolerate the thought. They cast away the fulfilment, they clung to the letter, of the law (vers. 17, 18). They justified themselves in the sight of men. Under the guise of reverence for religion they were really advancing their own selfish ends. They were using that revelation of God which they possessed as a trade by which to prosper in the world. They were, in short, "unfaithful stewards," diminishing the obligations which they had been commissioned to enforce, in order that they might make their own path easy, and might have, whatever came of eternity, "friends" for time (ver. 15).

It is not necessary to suppose that all this passed at one special instant, or that the words of ver. 15 to ver. 18, and no others, were then spoken by Christ. For aught we know some time may have elapsed, and much more than is here recorded may have been said. What we have to do is to try to discover whether there is any distinct line of thought in the mind of the writer of these verses which leads him by an easy transition from the parable of the Unfaithful Steward to that of the Rich Man and Lazarus. I urge that, looking carefully at these intervening verses, we may without difficulty see that there is. When St. Luke comes to ver. 19 he has still in his mind the same general subject which had occupied him in the first thirteen verses of the chapter.

Not only, however, may this be said. We reach the same conclusion by comparing the two parables of chap. xvi. with one another. They are not so different as we might at first imagine. At the very first blush of the matter *Dives* is an unfaithful steward. Had he been merely a rich man, there would have been no need to lay down

Lazarus at his gate in the miserable condition in which we find him. It would have been enough to set the Rich Man himself before us, in the splendour of his estate and in his luxurious living. The presence of Lazarus adds an entirely new feature to the scene. The Rich Man is now not merely rich: he is a *steward*. That clothing in purple and fine linen, that sumptuous fare which he partakes of every day, and which is so splendid that it attracts the attention of all who pass by his house (*λαμπρῶς*), the opportunities which he so abundantly enjoys for leading an easy life, and last of all what, in contrast with the silence maintained as to the burial of Lazarus, is evidently intended to be thought of as his imposing funeral,—all these things testify to the abundance which God had given him, and which, by the very fact of giving it, He had shown was intended to be used in His service, and for the relief of others less favoured than himself. But *Dives* is not only a steward: he is unfaithful in his stewardship. No Jew could have heard the description of Lazarus laid at the rich man's gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table but not obtaining them, without the feeling that he who permitted all this, when he could have so easily prevented it, was an unworthy son of Abraham, selfish, worldly, irreligious, and faithless to his gifts. Whatever may have been the case with the Scribes and Pharisees, who "devoured widows' houses," the Jewish people as a whole were deeply alive to the claims of the stranger and the poor. They felt that the goods of this world were a sacred trust. Their whole economy, their institutions, their psalmists, and their prophets had taught them this. At their entrance into Canaan they had been commanded to take a basket filled with the firstfruits of their land, and to give to the priest at the place which the Lord their God should choose; and then, recalling the fact of their own great deliverance from Egypt, they were to

rejoice in every good thing which the Lord had bestowed upon them, giving in their turn to "the Levite and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, according to all God's commandments which He had commanded them" (Deut. xxvi. 1-13). When settled in Canaan they had been forbidden to gather the gleanings of their harvests or of their vineyards; they were to leave them for "the poor and stranger" (Lev. xix. 9, 10). Their interest in the stranger, so that they should not oppress him, had been deepened by the touching memory that they had themselves been "strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. xxii. 21). It had been among the most beautiful of the recollections of the patriarch Job, as he compared the days of his former prosperity with those of his present desolation, "When the ear heard me then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me it gave witness to me; because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy" (Job xxix. 11-13). David had sung, "Blessed is he that considereth the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble" (Ps. xli. 1); and, in passages far too numerous to quote, prophet after prophet had denounced in the severest terms everything like indifference to, or oppression of, the poor. The whole Old Testament is full of sympathy for the poor; nor is there in it any aspect of the Divine character more frequently or more earnestly dwelt upon than that in which it is said of the Almighty, that He will arise for the oppression of the poor, and the sighing of the needy (Ps. xii. 5). The natural effect of all this had been produced upon the Jewish mind, and that to such an extent that, when our Lord related the parable of the Good Samaritan, and asked, "Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbour unto him that fell among the robbers?", the lawyer, who had given occasion to the

parable, though he could not bring his lips to pronounce the word "Samaritan," was constrained to answer, "He that showed mercy on him" (Luke x. 36).

Let us now remember all this; and, placing ourselves for the moment in the midst of a Jewish audience listening to the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, let us ask in what light will the rich man appear to them? Is there a single person who will hesitate as to the answer? He is an unfaithful steward.

There is another interesting trait in the second parable showing its connexion with the first that ought not to be passed over. When the rich man is in Hades he cries and says, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip his finger in water and cool my tongue," to which he receives as part of Abraham's answer, "And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, that they which would pass from hence to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from thence to us" (vers. 24, 26). What is this but the direct contrast to the words of our Lord in the first parable, "And I say unto you, Make yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they (*i.e.* those whom you have thus made friends) may receive you into the eternal tabernacles" (ver. 9). Precisely what *Dives* had not done; and the novelty of the expectation suggested by the words makes them the more remarkable. We seldom think of it. We seldom sing,—

There are little ones glancing about in my path,
 In want of a friend and a guide;
 There are dear little eyes looking up into mine,
 Whose tears might be easily dried.
 But Jesus may beckon the children away,
 In the midst of their grief or their glee—
 Will any of them, at the beautiful gate,
 Be waiting and watching for me?

There are old and forsaken, who linger awhile
 In homes which their dearest have left ;
 And a few gentle words or an action of love
 May cheer their sad spirits bereft.
 But the Reaper is near to the long-standing corn,
 The weary will soon be set free—
 Will any of them, at the beautiful gate,
 Be watching and waiting for me ?

In their utter want of appreciation of this novel but beautiful conception the unfaithful steward and the rich man closely correspond. The one had made himself friends in the worldly, but not in the heavenly sphere. So also had the other : and each, when he died, found himself separated from the beautiful gate and the happy spirits within whom he might have made, but had not made, " friends."

It is unnecessary to say more. The first two parables are evidently connected by a very intimate bond with one another. Let us turn to the third in chap. xvii.

That chapter begins with six verses which, like those intervening between the two parables of chap. xvi., appear at first to discredit the idea of any connexion with what follows. Godet, referring to chap. xvii. 1-10, even goes the length of saying, " This piece consists of four brief lessons placed here without introduction, and between which it is impossible to establish a connexion." Such a view must be utterly dissented from, and it hangs together with what seems to be the very doubtful interpretation of the third parable generally adopted. Let it be remembered, as before, that we are by no means bound to believe that every word interchanged by our Lord with His disciples is here recorded. What we have to ascertain is, whether there may not be enough to enable us to trace the thread of St. Luke's thought as he gathers together what he does. It would seem as if there were, notwithstanding what Godet and Hofmann (who in this particular supports Godet) have said to the contrary.

The Evangelist represents our Lord as speaking of *σκάνδαλα*: "It is impossible but that the (mark the definite article leading to the thought of something already in the mind of the disciples) occasions of stumbling should come; but, woe unto him through whom they come! It were well for him if a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble" (vers. 1, 2). Now in New Testament usage a *σκάνδαλον* appears always to refer to some inner truth of our Lord's Divine kingdom which His disciples failed to make manifest, while by their failure they weakened the power of that kingdom over such as might otherwise have owned it. Not so much actual disciples, as those who might be disciples or were only in some initiatory stage of discipleship, are affected by it. Here the occasion of stumbling is not given by disciples to disciples, but by disciples to "little ones," and it is supposed to be given by the fact, that some disciples might not exhibit that spirit of self-denying love which forgets itself in others and which is ever ready to sacrifice itself for others' good. Of that love the unfaithful steward had had none. He had been concerned about himself alone, and about himself alone only in regard to his worldly interests. The same thing might be said of *Dives*. But there is a natural tendency to such a disposition in all men. The "disciples" therefore must be warned against it. It is one of the great laws of the kingdom of Christ that Christian love exhibited in action shall be its chief convincing and converting power; and that the want of this shall be the main stumbling-block alike to the world and to those little ones, whether they cannot yet break with the world or have just begun to break with it, in whose hearts a faint consciousness has begun to dawn, that there is a brighter light than that of earthly suns, and better riches than those of earthly treasure-houses. Well

may our Lord with all sternness warn against it. But that same self-forgetfulness, that same indisposition to dwell upon our obligations to others rather than our rights, is to be seen not only in our throwing no obstacles in their way, but in our heartily forgiving offences, whether against God and the Christian standing of those who commit them, or directly against ourselves, however often they may be repeated, "Take heed to yourselves; if thy brother sin, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him; and if he sin against thee seven times in the day, and seven times turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him" (vers. 3, 4).¹ The thought, in short, of that self-denying love which the Unfaithful Steward and *Dives* had failed to exhibit lies at the bottom of all the words of our Lord quoted by St. Luke, till we reach the end of the fourth verse of chap. xvii.; while at the same time the Christian propriety of a course of conduct marked by love of this truly Christian kind is positively enforced.

The "Apostles" who heard the discourse, and who, we may easily suppose, were more susceptible than the general body of the disciples, felt this; and, struck with a certain beauty in the words of their Master, they said, "Lord, increase our faith" (ver. 5). The answer of Jesus, however, in the next verse shows that they either did not well know what they asked, or that they asked for a faith wholly different in character from that true faith which they ought to have, and which ought to show itself in such love to God and man as had just before been spoken of, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye would say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou rooted up, and be thou planted in the sea; and it would have obeyed you" (ver. 6). There

¹ The interesting remarks of Hofmann on the difference between ἀμάργη in ver. 3 without εἰς σέ, and ἀμαρτήσῃ with εἰς σέ in ver. 4, tend to confirm the interpretation here given, the first of these leading to the thought of sinning against Christian duty and dishonouring the Christian name. (See Hofmann *in loc.*).

still clung to them for the moment at least, even while they were carried away by the words of Jesus, those outward and carnal ideas of His kingdom and of the rewards offered in it which it needed the gift of the Spirit after the day of Pentecost to dispel. When Jesus therefore replies to them in the words of ver. 6, it is as if He had said, "You have asked for an increase of faith, and you thereby show your belief that you already have some measure at least of that faith which I require. Yet by the manner in which you have asked for more I see that your minds are dwelling upon great deeds that you will then be able to accomplish, upon great impressions which you will then make upon worldly men, though leaving them still worldly, upon great honours to which they will exalt you. Such is not the faith of which I speak; such are not the rewards that I would bid you anticipate. If indeed you had the smallest measure of the true faith which I require, the greatest difficulties would be easily overcome; you would accomplish far harder things than you at present dream of; and you would gain a reward which, though its real nature be hidden from you now, will yet in the experience of it be richer, sweeter, than all the honours that earth can bestow upon its votaries. You have less need, therefore, to pray, 'Lord, increase our faith,' than to pray for a deeper, more inward, and more spiritual faith than you are thinking of." Then follows the third parable of our group. What does it mean?

The facts are simple enough. A master has a bond-servant whom he sends out to the field to plough or keep his sheep. After a time the servant returns, having obviously executed his task with fidelity and success. No fault is found with him; he had done that which it was his duty to do. Yet he does not return home to rest. On the contrary he returns to additional work. His master seems to take no thought that after his day's toil he needs

refreshment, but with a sharp word of command tells him to make ready wherewith he himself may eat, and to gird himself and serve him : after that his turn will come to eat and drink. The lesson, it is said, is that however diligently and faithfully we work, we have no ground of complaint if, instead of our work being acknowledged, we are put to more work ; if, after our best and most continued efforts, we are told that we are unprofitable servants, meriting no reward. If this be the lesson, it can hardly be denied that it is somewhat gruffly taught, that it contradicts the instincts of our nature, and that we should hardly like to deal thus with any servant of ours. Nor does it seem to make any difference that the servant of the parable was a "bond-servant," instead of one on hire, that he was in no sense and to no extent his own master, but that he owed everything to him who had purchased or inherited him as a slave. Rather would the opposite appear to be the case. Though as a slave he could claim nothing by law, he could claim all the more by grace ; and St. Paul is never more convinced of his own high standing within the Christian covenant than when he applies to himself the epithet *Χριστοῦ δοῦλος* (Rom. i. 1 ; Gal. i. 10). This consideration therefore, though urged by one (Von Gerlach) surpassed by few for his insight into Scripture, does not help the matter.

The key to the explanation of the parable seems to be given by our Lord Himself in an earlier and remarkable passage of this Gospel. At chap. xii. 35 He is engaged in exhorting and encouraging to preparation and patient waiting for His coming, and He exclaims, "Let your loins be girded about, and your lamps burning ; and be ye yourselves like unto men looking for their Lord, when He shall return from the marriage feast ; that when He cometh and knocketh they may straightway open unto Him. Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall

find watching; verily I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat, and come and serve them" (chap. xii. 35-37). It is impossible to mistake the similarity of the two passages, or to doubt that the very peculiar expressions of the one must be taken advantage of in order to interpret the similar and equally peculiar expressions of the other. In the earlier passage then we find our Lord describing Himself as one who, in the moment of His own greatest reward and highest glory, girds Himself as a servant to serve those who have waited for Him, at the banquet which He has prepared for them in His heavenly kingdom. In other words, at the moment when His work is done, when His sufferings are ended, when His Church is gathered to Him in glory, His reward is *service*! It had been so upon earth. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. xx. 28). It is so in heaven. The Son of man seen in vision by St. John, and who says of Himself, "I am the first and the last, and the living one; and I was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore," was beheld by the apocalyptic seer "clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle" (Rev. i. 13); that is, He was clothed like a priest engaged in active service. The glory of our Lord in Heaven therefore is still the glory of service, and in promoting the happiness of all whom He has redeemed He finds His own most blessed reward.

Let us transfer this, as transfer it we must, to the parable we are now considering, and the whole description of what is said to the ploughman or shepherd who returns from well-done work assumes a different aspect from that in which we commonly regard it. It is not the unthanked work of a menial, all whose work the master represents himself as entitled to claim, and which is at the best "unprofitable." It is work so faithfully and well done

that the master will bestow upon it His best reward,—the reward of progress in the line of things to which it has belonged, the reward of further service. This making ready, therefore, his master's supper, after the servant comes home expecting rest, is not humiliation but exaltation, is not depreciation of his day's work, but its recompense and reward. In the kingdom of Christ labour is rewarded with further labour and one cross well borne with another to be equally well borne; and no one who has entered into the spirit of that kingdom complains.

Labour is sweet, for Thou hast toiled;
 And care is light, for Thou hast cared;
 Let not our works with self be soiled,
 Nor in unsimple ways ensnared.
 Through life's long way and death's dark night,
 O gentle Jesus, be our light!

If what has now been given as the interpretation of the third parable of our group be correct, it will follow that, instead of being designated the Unprofitable Servant, it ought rather to be known by some such title as The Reward of Faithful Service, or Service the Reward of Service.

The relation to one another of the three parables with which we have been dealing will now be seen. So far from being unconnected there is among them a very close bond of connexion. They relate to one subject, which is presented to us in different aspects and from different sides,—the odiousness of unfaithfulness and the value of faithfulness in the stewardship with which we have been put in trust by God.

At this point we may pause for the present. The use to be made of what has been said in vindicating the Gospel of St. Luke from hasty and inconsiderate charges will appear in another paper.

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