

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM.

III.

THIS paper will discuss some of the objections which have been urged against the ethical teaching of Jesus.

I. It has sometimes been objected that Christian morality is one-sided, giving undue prominence to the feminine virtues—humility, resignation, obedience; too little place to the masculine qualities—courage, public spirit, personal honour. This objection may best be given in the words of John Stuart Mill: “What little recognition the idea of obligation to the public obtains in modern morality, is derived from Greek and Roman sources, not from Christian; as even in the morality of private life, whatever exists of magnanimity, high-mindedness, personal dignity, even the sense of honour, is derived from the purely human, not the religious, part of our education, and never could have grown out of a standard of ethics in which the only worth, professedly recognised, is that of obedience.”

This seems to me partly wrong as a statement of fact, and wholly wrong in its assignment of a cause for the fact. Unquestionably, we have derived some impulse towards public spirit and personal honour from those races which have also handed down to us their ideas of law, government, and art. But it is also undeniable that the heroism and devotedness which had, up to that time, been the distinguishing mark of exceptional men, became, during the early centuries of the Christian Church, the common property of women and of slaves. It could not be otherwise, because even more impressive than the courage of a Socrates or the

honour of a Regulus were the dignity and self-possession of Jesus. From His person and life there flowed a continual stream of inspiration to conduct and to deeds surpassing in magnanimity and in heroism anything which was possible to the ancient world.

It is, however, true that in the verbal teaching of our Lord emphasis is laid upon the virtues of holiness, submission, obedience. But why? Mainly because Jesus was not a philosopher elaborating a system of morals, but a practical teacher, applying Himself to the circumstances in which He found Himself. His teaching, both as to the motive, the contents, and the criterion of morality, implies a system, but He is at no pains to develop it. His teaching has regard to the previously existing Old Testament code; and He does not go over that code point by point, either to abrogate, confirm, or amend it. He merely gives specimens of such a procedure. The virtues which already had become hereditary among the Jews He is not careful to inculcate. Imagine a teacher inculcating patriotism on a Jew. He might as well go to Ireland or to Scotland with such a lesson. It was a bringing into prominence of the balancing virtues which was needed, the virtues of self-abnegation, forgiveness of injuries, and meekness. Vices which did not exist there was no need for a practical teacher to condemn; it was the vices which did exist which prompted most of His teaching. And in order to exhibit that teaching in its completeness, we must be careful to set in due proportion and perspective all that He found already accepted and did not need to inculcate, as well as all that He emphasized and set in the foreground. Neglecting to do so, many good critics have given a distorted, lop-sided picture of Christ's teaching.

II. Another misapprehension of the kind of character and conduct inculcated by Christ arises from the neglect of a very obvious consideration. This consideration is, that the

life of Jesus was spent in conditions materially differing from those of modern European society, and that therefore it is impossible identically to reproduce everything which characterized Him. The great law for Christians in all times is, no doubt, given in the words, "Follow Me." But following Christ will produce in one age characteristic phenomena which it does not produce in another. We cannot now follow His visible presence, but only His Spirit. This regulates all our following. It is not the detail of His life or the external manifestations of His Spirit that we are to imitate, but through these we are to discern the guiding principles, the motives, the spirit itself of His life, and this we are to make our own. All beginners in any art are apt to look to detail, and to imitate that, but gradually they learn that it is not the external form, but the inner principles they must imitate. The young painter studies the masters, not that he may reproduce their pictures, but that he may find out how they looked at nature. It is not their paintings but themselves he is to imitate. If any learner does otherwise, and imitates only the results and not the principles which produced the results, he acquires only some trick or mannerism of method, and, besides, stunts his own individuality. To reproduce what is of value in any copy, model, or pattern, we must imbibe and assimilate the principles and ideas, the very life and spirit, which went to the original production. We need not live in Palestine, and speak Aramaic, though Christ did. We need not be celibates, though Christ was. We need not die the death He died. But we must partake of the spirit which led Him to do all that He did, and which made Him all He was in His humanity.

III. But the most serious charge brought against the ethical teaching of Christ is that it appeals to self-interest. "It holds out the hope of heaven and the threat of hell as the appointed and appropriate motives to a virtuous life; in

this falling far below the best of the ancients, and doing what lies in it to give to human morality an essentially selfish character, by disconnecting each man's feelings of duty from the interests of his fellow-creatures, except so far as a self-interested inducement is offered to him for consulting them." Mr. Cotter Morison quotes Paley's unfortunate description of the end of revelation: "If I were to describe in a very few words the scope of Christianity as a revelation, I should say that it was to influence the conduct of human life by establishing the proof of a future state of reward and punishment. . . . The great end and office of a revelation from God is to convey to the world authorised assurances of the reality of a future existence." "In other words," adds Mr. Morison, "the purpose of the mission of Christ was to make men fit for a future state of reward, and to supply sanctions which would deter them from conduct which would make them fit for a future state of punishment. . . . Salvation in the next world is the object of the scheme, not morality in this." Another writer quite truly says, "To secure heaven and escape hell awakens the same sort of anxiety which possesses a man who would escape from a crowded theatre when a cry of fire has been raised. His concern for his personal safety overmasters every other consideration, and his neighbours are trampled under foot and crushed to death in his frantic efforts to save himself." Certainly no language can too strongly condemn the mere selfish craving to escape punishment, when accompanied by no honest desire to escape sin, and every assailant of Christianity does it the best service when he exposes the poverty of such motives.

Disregarding what is erroneous in such accusations, let us endeavour to understand the function of reward in the Christian scheme. And, first of all, it is to be remarked that all difficulty about reward is solved when it is apprehended that Christ requires that all moral action should

spring from love. This is the new commandment which revolutionizes morals. When love rules, the hope of reward vanishes. The man in whom love is the motive, cannot ask himself what reward he shall have for seeking the good of others. Love cannot ask, What good return in the world to come will compensate for all self-sacrifice here? No such questions and calculations can be entertained, any more than the husband can ask what he shall have for loving his wife. The joy of life is in such unrewarded affections. The man who loves cannot think of a fulness of life that is to be: he already lives in loving. This is the key to the Christian morality. Christ brings all life within the scope of love; and he who loves has the reward in himself. Love is fulness of life.

Reward, however, is still spoken of and still offered; and that for several reasons.

(1) The object for which labour is spent is sometimes spoken of as the reward of labour. No sane person will toil and spend himself without an object. If he spends himself on Christ's kingdom, it is because he sees that something can be accomplished by such expenditure, and the attainment of this object is his reward. But in no case can this object be in Christ's kingdom purely selfish. In the Epistle to the Hebrews (chap. xii.) Christ Himself is spoken of as being upheld in His endurance by "the joy that was set before Him"; but this joy was not the mere exemption from suffering which death brought, nor the entrance on selfish enjoyment, but the accomplishment of the redemption of men, the achievement of the object to which His love had prompted Him. This is the type of all Christian reward.

(2) Similarly, the nature of the reward offered by Christ furnishes no ground for selfish hope. In the Parables of the Talents and the Pounds, faithful servants are rewarded by increased capacities for work. The man who understands

life measures his success not by what he is able to get, but by what he is able to do ; so in every world, the possession of value is power to help things forward. "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." This is in finest harmony with Aristotle's perfect definition of happiness, that it is a kind of energy. The happiest man is he who has most in himself to spend, and who most energetically spends it. Man's blessedness consists not in that which righteousness brings him, but in righteousness itself. The reward of righteousness is more righteousness.

(3) A condition, however, in which no appeal made to fear, or the hope of reward, is ideal. Dealing with men as they are, our Lord does not scruple to appeal to motives less than perfect. But the manner in which our Lord eradicated selfish and earthly hopes is most significant. In Matthew xix. 28, 29, the Lord lays down what may be called the Law of Recompense. To His immediate followers, the twelve Apostles, He promises that "in the Regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of His glory, they also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel"; while He adds, as the law for all: "every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life." It is possible and even likely that the Apostles might gather from these words that Jesus meant to establish in Palestine a new form of government, and that they should share in the revolutionary triumph, receiving from Him a tribe each to govern, as a general's most serviceable officers are appointed governors over conquered provinces. The "Regeneration" was a term applied to the Messianic era, in which the nation was to be started on new lines of prosperity, influence, progress, and hope.

But the hopes of the Apostles were in this respect

blighted. Did then Christ's promise fail? To answer this question we have only to ask whether the Apostles would have received a better thing than they have actually obtained, had they been raised to the thrones of Archelaus or Antipas? whether it is better to rule a province for a few years, with power to tax and legislate, or to influence countless generations permanently and beneficially in those concerns which interest men most profoundly? Actually, have any men received more honour than the Apostles?

But why did our Lord not explicitly declare that the influence and rank of the Apostles was to be spiritual? Why do we allure our children by a trumpery gift to the acceptance of a permanent benefit? "Dig deep over all my ground," said the dying man to his sons, "and you will find much gold." They found none of the expected pots of ready-minted gold, but their land, improved by the deep digging, enriched them abundantly. All through life men are led on by hopes that are seldom realized, but which yet leave them possessed of some better thing than they had hoped for. The student misses the prize he has wrought for day and night, but no competitor can deprive him of the gain of having mastered some branch of knowledge and of having schooled himself to toil. The lad enlists in the army, attracted by the glitter of military equipments, the colours, the music, the pomp of war; these all turn into rags, and hunger, and blood, in his first campaign; but does he think himself cheated, or does he not gladly accept the truer satisfaction of serving his country and being a shield to his fellowmen? So was it with the Apostles; attracted by the promise of thrones, they were satisfied with sharing in their Lord's spiritual government of men.

It is obvious, too, that the *general* law of recompense which our Lord here lays down, was not meant to be taken literally. A man does not and cannot expect to receive mothers, wives, children, in lieu of those he has abandoned

for Christ's sake. But he will have compensation. He will recognise that he was right in making the sacrifice. The Apostles had abandoned all that we mean when we speak of "home." All that was once fullest of life to them became as dead. From the family love that soothed, encouraged, inspired, they went out among men alone, misunderstood, abused, driven from place to place. And yet, as time went on, and they found themselves the spiritual fathers of multitudes, and recognised that they had been the means of communicating a new life to the world, they found their compensation. The letters of St. Paul are full of it. Even when with keenest grief they felt the reality of their sacrifice, when from uncongenial companies their memories carried them back irresistibly to the happy days of their youth, and saw in fancy yearning eyes, and heard voices of regret and reproach, their hearts were still kept steadfast by the joy of bringing eternal blessing to many and by the friendship of those who were their brothers in Christ.

The *form* of the promise then is only to be regarded as a strong way of saying that every follower of Christ will, in the following, find ample compensation for all loss incurred. It is merely a striking mode of saying, No one can ever be really poorer for becoming a Christian.

(4) To this large promise our Lord added a much-needed warning, which also reflects light on the subject of reward. At the root of Peter's question, "What shall we have therefore? we who, unlike this rich young man, have left all and followed Thee?" there lay a bargaining spirit. Peter wished some assurance that compensation would be made for losses sustained in following Christ. He was willing to serve Christ, but he wished to know what he would receive as remuneration. To rebuke this spirit our Lord addresses to the disciples the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. This Parable opens and closes with the words,

“ Many that are first shall be last, and the last first,” and it is intended to illustrate the fact that reward depends not on the amount of work done, but on the spirit of the worker. Those that enter Christ's service in a bargaining spirit, and in order to make a good wage out of their life's work, will receive what they bargained for, but may find that others who entered Christ's service late and weary, and unable to do much, but in the trustful spirit of humble men, receive as much as they. Bargaining is incongruous with the spirit of Christian service. Trust in Christ should supersede all careful solicitude for our own advantage.

(5) It is also to be considered that although the disciples of Christ are spoken of as His servants, and must accordingly be considered as receiving wages or return for work done, yet this is not the relation which most nearly represents the reality. This is rather to be found in the words, “ Henceforth I call you not servants, but I have called you friends ; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth ; but all things which I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.” The slave does his day's task, a small part of the whole work his master has in hand. He does it in ignorance of his master's plan, and probably with no sympathy, seeking only the poor reward of escaping the lash and of being fed and clothed. That, of course, cannot represent the eternal relation we are to occupy towards Christ and His work, however well it represents men who are under the law. There are many who do their work and spend their whole energy in a servile spirit, without any speculation as to the result of human life and the aim of God in imposing the law. Christ's people are awakened by His life to a sense of the dignity and utility of all human life ; they recognise God's purpose in the world, and are stirred to true sympathy with that purpose. They are dealt with as friends who are able to enter into the Divine purposes and recognise the perfectness and Divinity of them.

They are expected to see the greatness of what God counts great, to feel the stimulus of what moves God to action, to recognise the worth and desirableness of the end for the attainment of which God has judged it worth while to work and to sacrifice. Plainly the reward here must be the attainment of the end. Attaining the end they labour for, nothing more needs to be added as a reward. When the aims set before us by God are adopted as our own aims in life, when we so enter into God's purposes as to desire nothing more earnestly than their fulfilment, then plainly the highest reward we can have is to fulfil these purposes. Thus only does human life become real, and thus only do we become truly one with God. We may be styled God's servants, because it is not by His own hand or lips He forwards His cause in the world, but by us; but when we apprehend His purpose, and are so attracted by it that it becomes ours, we are lifted above the spirit of the slave to that of the friend of God.

This too leads to the same conclusion regarding the nature of the reward. God's purpose is to make men holy; like Himself. But if God makes us like Himself, that is the utmost He can do. There *is* nothing beyond. God is blessed because He is what He is. We shall be blessed by being like Him. Perfectness, that is the true reward. The sick man does not ask to be rewarded for the attention he has paid to his physician's advice, by which he has become healthy. To be healthy is his reward. So with the spirit: the attainment of health is itself the reward.

MARCUS DODS.