

Such communications would in most cases insure for them a welcome, though in His instructions to the apprentice missionaries Jesus contemplated the possibility of an opposite reception: "Whosoever shall not receive you."¹ The words may express a fear suggested by personal experience of work frustrated or interrupted by religious prejudice in His own early effort to evangelise Galilee.

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THE GREAT COMMANDMENT.

(MARK XII. 28-34.)

BOTH in Matthew and Mark the question put to Jesus as to the great commandment in the law is connected with the repulse of the Sadducees. The first Evangelist represents the whole transaction in a less favourable light than the second. We infer from Matthew's narrative that the Pharisees hoped to succeed where the rival party had failed, and that the lawyer who put the question to Jesus did so in order to tempt Him, and that in pursuance of a plan deliberately formed at a Pharisaic meeting. "When they heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. And one of them, a lawyer, put a question to Him, tempting Him." The question was one constantly discussed in the schools, and no doubt, as Weiss says, they hoped, with the resources of their casuistical dialectic, to bewilder and confound the layman who ventured, in the simplicity of his heart, to give any straightforward answer. And in effect, in Matthew, Jesus does not give a direct answer. He is asked of what nature a commandment must be to be great in the law, but He declines to make distinctions in that which is throughout the will of God. He repeats two commandments, the significance of which does not belong to them as distinct from others,

¹ *Matt.* x. 14.

but consists precisely in this, that they include all the rest. "On these two commandments hangeth the whole law, and the prophets." They are great because they summarily comprehend the whole will of God.

In Mark the same event is narrated, but under a different light. The questioner is the same, a scribe or lawyer; but he is moved rather by admiration of the noble answer Jesus had given to the Sadducees than by any hostile purpose. Alike in what he says and in what Jesus says of him we get the impression of a man who was too good for his society, whose soul hungered for something better than the moral pedantry of the Jewish schools, and who longed for deliverance from the bondage of the letter into some kind of spiritual freedom. Like others of his profession, he had no doubt enumerated the commandments of the Old Testament, and discussed which should take precedence of which; but as long as there is a spark of religion in the soul this atomistic morality is profoundly unsatisfying, and the scribe who came to Jesus was feeling his way out of it. "What kind of commandment," he asked, "is greatest of all?" The "all" is neuter, not feminine like "commandment"; the scribe wishes to know that quality in a commandment which entitles it to an absolute precedence: in other words, which makes it, not an item in a code, but the principle of the code. "Jesus answered, The first is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."

Probably the first thing which struck the scribe when he heard the words was their familiarity. Jesus may have pointed as He spoke to the phylacteries in which he carried them on his person at the moment. He had repeated them night and morning ever since he could remember. They remind us that the most important truths in religion are as a rule the best known, and that the first lessons of a religious

education have that in them which we never need to out-grow. If a man has learned the twenty-third Psalm in childhood, can he ever want a more perfect expression of faith in God? If he has been taught to say the Lord's Prayer, can he ever require a prayer which covers more? One great advantage of a religious education is, that the soul discovers, in the experience of life, that it is the possessor of unexpected resources; it does not need to climb heaven or cross the sea for the truth or the guidance it requires: the word is very nigh, in the mouth and in the heart.

The commandment which Jesus cites to the scribe is peculiar to revealed religion. That is only to say, in other words, that it presupposes redemption. We could not imagine such a precept in the religion of Greece or of Rome, and of course we do not find it. Who could "love," in any conceivable sense of the word, Zeus or Poseidon, Hêrê or Athênê? Neither the place they hold in the universe, nor their characters and relations to each other, nor their attitude to men, inspire any such emotion. It is often said that love cannot be commanded, but that has only a limited truth. Granted certain relations between persons, and love is demanded by the very nature of the case; if it is wanting, its absence is the gravest of moral faults, and brings innumerable others in its train; till it comes, literally nothing can be right. This is the situation which is assumed to exist where God and Israel are in question. It is not as though they were nothing to each other. God is the God of Israel, and Israel is the people of God. The "thou" in Deuteronomy vi. 5 is of course collective; it is the nation as a whole which is addressed, and from which this hearty devotion to God is required; but there was no difficulty in applying it to the individual case. The Israelites knew what God was, and what He had done for His people. They knew that the inheritance into which they entered in

virtue of their birth had been prepared for them by Him. They knew that at the head of all commandments stood the name and title of the Redeemer: I am Jehovah thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. They knew that He had been the dwelling-place of Israel in all generations, and that long before any earthly love His love had thought of them and blessed them. Their history was the history of God's mercy and faithfulness; wherever they looked, His loving-kindness was before their eyes; to love Him was the ever-present duty, the first, the last, the most urgent of all.

It is for the same reason that this commandment retains its significance in the New Testament. Love to God is still the first of duties, because it is the one thing which answers to the relation which has been revealed in Christ as existing between God and man. Christians have a knowledge of God going beyond that possessed by Israel, and all in our knowledge which surpasses theirs is but a new enforcement of this precept. Can any one believe in the Incarnation and the Atonement, and be in doubt about the duty which comprehends all others? Can any one believe that God Himself has condescended to dwell among us in the person of His Son, that He has worn our nature, shared our experiences, borne "the strain of the problem our sins had created," given His life a ransom for us, and yet cavil at the idea of making love to Him a duty? If it is not a duty, it can only be because it is a passion, and yet it is as a passion that men are most apt to dispute its right to take God for its object. But what do we find in the New Testament, the only place in which we see Christian life in its original and most characteristic form? If we find anything, it is love to God raised to passionate intensity and made the first law of life. It is souls that vibrate with the thought of what God has done for them in His Son, and respond to it with an ardour that glows across those nineteen hundred

years. We might almost say that in Old Testament times the great commandment was never kept: the motives which alone could constrain so unspiritual and refractory a thing as the human heart had not yet been brought to bear upon it. The psalmists who say, "I love the Lord," knew something of Him, and made some response; but they did not know what Paul knew when he said, "The love of Christ constraineth us"; nor what John knew when he wrote, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. . . . We love, because He first loved us." The central truths of the Christian revelation must keep their central place if the great commandment is to have that fulfilment in the modern Church which it had in Peter and Paul and John. Our love is ever a response, a response to an irresistible constraint, and that constraint is exercised only through the Cross.

Of all commandments, love to God is that which most perfectly combines law and liberty. If we love Him at all, we wish to love Him more; we feel that all we are capable of in this kind is for ever too little. Hence it is not the voice of the Lawgiver only, but of our own spirits also, which says, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." The true religion, the supremely great commandment, appeals to all that is within us; it calls our whole nature into play. This is why, though exacting, it is not grievous. It commands us to do what we instinctively long to do. The soul is fettered till it can thus love, and to love thus would be its emancipation. In truth, our being is only raised to its height as it comes under the inspiration of God's love and begins to respond to it. We look eagerly in young converts for a blossoming of the whole nature, an expansion of intelligence, an awakening of affection, an abundant entering into a new

and larger life. Only God can evoke the latent powers of heart and strength and mind; and no one knows of what he is capable, in thought, feeling, or character, till he has begun to obey the first commandment of all.

The scribe had only asked one question, but Jesus gives a twofold answer. To the first commandment He annexes a second, also in familiar Old Testament words: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Luke represents a lawyer, who came to Jesus tempting Him, as quibbling over the word "neighbour" in this sentence, and being answered in the parable of the Good Samaritan. But an honest mind would find no difficulty, and none is made on the present occasion. The second commandment, we ought to remember, is really the second; though it is enunciated side by side with the first, it is not strictly co-ordinate with it. It is in God that men are related to each other, all men are so related, and it is through Him that their duties to each other are determined. Yet the connection between God and man is so close that the two commandments are in a true sense one, and obedience to either may be made a test of obedience to the other. The man who does not love God cannot know what man is to God, and therefore cannot love man either as the law of God requires; and the man who does not love his brother makes a false claim when he professes to love God. For all practical purposes, therefore—for all such purposes as a commandment has in view—God and man exist in each other, and the duties we owe in either relation can neither be seen nor discharged if the other is allowed to fall out of view. Kant's supreme ethical maxim is always to treat humanity, both in yourself and in others, as an end, not a means: in the language of the New Testament, we should rather say, Always treat humanity, both in yourself and in others, as what it is to God. Recognise under all circumstances, first and foremost, that which is of God in your neighbour—

God's interest in him, God's hope of him, the rights which God has given him both in this life and beyond. Regard him always as invested in these, and you will have the only key to your duty towards him. God loves my neighbour exactly as He loves me: whatever may distinguish us, we have all one Father. Even if I hate my neighbour, God loves him, and the sum of all my duties towards him is unchangeably determined by that fact. I am bound, at whatever cost, to guard and to further God's interest in him. If I decline to do so, I renounce both the commandments at once. That is the meaning and application of the two in combination—the law and the prophets in one word. What love means is also to be determined from this point of view. Care for that which is of God in us may sometimes require us to be severe to ourselves. In corresponding circumstances there would be the same call for love to be severe to others. We distinguish almost unconsciously between love and severity; but the only ground on which these two commandments, which mutually interpret and support each other, can maintain the primacy here assigned them, is that the love which they prescribe shall be a universal principle—a spirit capable of developing and using resources and tempers of every kind, of exercising both judgment and mercy.

It seems an obvious inference from the words of Jesus in this place that the distinction between religion and morality is only half real. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart"—that is religion. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"—that is morality. Yet Jesus cannot speak of the one apart from the other, any more than in His own life He could actually have separated the one from the other. His own perfect love of the Father was expressed in an infinite devotion to the human race and to the Father's purpose for it; and that devotion itself took all its character and derived all its power from

His perfect knowledge of God and unreserved obedience to Him. This is the essential and permanent relation of the two things, to speak of them as two. Love to God, or religion, is primary; love to man, or morality, is secondary. Neither has any reality apart from the other; but the conception of God—through whom alone men are related to each other, and without whom they are as moral atoms to whom no common duty is owing—is that which determines the mutual obligations of men; in other words, morality is determined by religion. The first commandment must not be discarded as transcendent in order to give more room and more emphasis to the second. When the first has disappeared the second has lost both its basis and its contents. For no abstract conception of “humanity” can be a principle of unity and of obligation like the living God, the Father and Redeemer of men.

The scribe showed a hearty appreciation of our Lord's answer to his question. The *καλῶς* of *v.* 32 brings back the admiration already referred to in *v.* 28. What he felt when he heard Jesus' answer to the Sadducees he now frankly expressed: “Of a truth, Master, Thou hast well said that He is one, and there is none other but He; and to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” They were standing in the Temple courts as he spoke. The altar was there—the centre of immemorial devotion, the place of costly and reverent sacrifice; it was there the praises of Israel ascended, on which Jehovah was enthroned. But to keep these two commandments was better than all; no worship could be so great as this love. The scribe answered as a man lifted above himself, and carried away by his instinctive sympathy with Jesus. And while his soul yet vibrated to the great words, Jesus, seeing that he answered

prudently, said to him, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God."

A moment of suspense like this, face to face with Jesus, is a singular but not a very rare experience. Most people have said to themselves, after some word of Jesus: "Yes, this truly is salvation; this is life eternal; this is unquestionably the one thing needful and incomparable." The heart, perhaps taken at unawares, perhaps in deliberate, sober seriousness, confesses that with Jesus is the secret of life, and that it is made for His kingdom. What insight one may have, yet what power to arrest action answering to it! What a capacity for sympathy with the Divine, nay, what an experience of it one may have, and yet after all only stand inconsequently admiring, instead of entering into, the kingdom! How can we get past this perilous place? How, but by receiving into our souls that love of God which will evoke in us an answer of love, in which all our heart and strength and mind will become His? This is the religion which asserts itself in the only perfect morality, and which fulfils the whole will of God for man. At the very best, to do the other commandments, but ignore the first, is to seek a righteousness of works—an endless and futile task; but to begin where Jesus bids us begin, under the inspiration of that love of God which is revealed in Him, is to follow the righteousness of life. When we catch a glimpse of the length and breadth and depth and height of this answer of Jesus, we do not wonder that no man after this ventured to ask Him any further question.

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