

*JESUS MIRRORED IN MATTHEW, MARK,  
AND LUKE.*

V. THE MISSION TO THE PUBLICANS.

OF this part of our Lord's work, not less than of the synagogue-ministry, the ordinary reader of the Gospels has a most inadequate idea. It amounts to this, that Jesus happened on one occasion to be present as a guest at a social entertainment given by one of His disciples, named Matthew or Levi, to associates of the publican class to which he had himself previously belonged, and being present, ate with them without hesitation, and doubtless also addressed to His fellow-guests some gracious words, indicating that the door of the Kingdom was open even to them. Not a few careful students of the Evangelic Records have been content with this meagre conception. Yet if we could only shake off the trammels of custom, so as to be able to take a fresh view of the matter, a little reflection would suffice to convince us that what has just been stated cannot be the whole truth or even the principal part of it. From the nature of the case Jesus cannot have been merely passive in the matter, in the sense in which persons invited to an ordinary festive gathering are passive, each one going because he has received an invitation from the host, and without knowing whom he is to meet. The newly called disciple would not have ventured to invite his Master to eat with *publicans* without first ascertaining that He was willing to meet them. Nay, one may go further, and say that the publican-disciple would never have thought or hinted at such a meeting unless he had been given to understand that the Master

was not only willing but desirous to have social intercourse with the outcast classes of Capernaum. The initiative must really have been with Jesus. The whole plan must have been His. He must have had in His mind a deliberate intention to come into close fraternal contact with the "publicans and sinners." Of this design the Evangelists say nothing; they simply report very briefly the main events: Matthew's call and the ensuing feast. But once we have got the idea of such a design into our minds, we recognise in these two events simply the working out of the plan—the method employed by Jesus to give effect to His gracious purpose. First He calls to discipleship a *publican*, doubtless with a view to ulterior service as an apostle, but likewise with a view to immediate service as an intermediary between Himself and the publicans of Capernaum. Then, through Matthew as His agent, He calls together the class to which the new disciple belonged, that He may eat with them and speak to them the good news of the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

That Jesus would entertain such a plan was to be expected. We have seen how much in earnest he was about a systematic synagogue-ministry. But His earnestness was not one-sided. He desired to do His duty as the Herald of the Kingdom, impartially, to all classes of Jewish society. In this connection we may distinguish four classes. First, the religious leaders of Israel; secondly, the respectable synagogue-frequenting body of the people; thirdly, the hidden minority of devout men and women who had spiritual affinity for the New Teaching; lastly, the social pariahs. Now that Jesus performed the function called for in reference to the first three of these four classes, is sufficiently evident from the Gospels. He criticised faithfully and thoroughly scribes and Pharisees, that being what they needed. He went the round of the synagogues of Galilee

<sup>1</sup> *Matt.* ix. 9-13; *Mark* ii. 13-17; *Luke* v. 27-32.

and preached in them in turn, at least in as many of them as possible. He was constantly on the outlook for persons of special spiritual susceptibility and promise, and gradually formed them into a disciple-circle for the purpose of careful instruction. In view of these familiar facts, who can doubt that He did not neglect the lowest pariah class, that He was equally conscientious and thorough in regard to them, that He cared for their spiritual interest in no casual, haphazard, or half-hearted way, but systematically, persistently, and very cordially? Neglect the publicans! One would say that, whatever class was to be overlooked, it would not be they. Neglect the "sinners," neglect the neglected and despised! Impossible for such a one as Jesus.

It might be supposed, however, that there was no need for a special mission to the "publicans and sinners," that their interests would be sufficiently provided for, *e.g.*, by the synagogue-ministry. But the fact was not so. The publicans were practically, if not formally, excommunicated. They were as heathens in the esteem of religious Jews. A learned writer on this subject states that publicans were not reckoned in religious society, quoting from the Talmud words to this effect: a religious person who becomes a publican must be driven out of religious company.<sup>1</sup> "No money known to come from them was received into the alms-box of the synagogue or the corban of the Temple."<sup>2</sup> Such being the state of feeling, it is evident that few if any publicans would have an opportunity of hearing any of Christ's synagogue discourses. They would probably not have been admitted even if they had sought entrance, and they were not likely to do that, for men all the world over avoid places of worship when they know they are not welcome. There was just one chance for the publicans.

<sup>1</sup> Otho, *Lexicon Rabbिनico-philologicum*, p. 556.

<sup>2</sup> Article "Publican," in Smith's Dictionary of the Bible.

They might join the crowds that gathered about Jesus wherever He went, and get the benefit of His open-air preaching. That they seem to have done to some extent, for in his report of Levi's feast Mark states that they (the publicans) were many, and that they followed Jesus.<sup>1</sup> That was so far well. It might content the publicans, but it would not content the sinners' Friend. He would desire closer contact and more direct intercourse. In the interest they were showing He saw His opportunity, and Matthew's call and the feast following were the result.

In the development of His plans our Lord followed the leadings of Providence. He began with a synagogue-ministry, because, as that depended on the good-will of others, it was important that it should be started at once and pushed on vigorously before the suspicions of the scribes were aroused. The mission to the publicans was undertaken after the return to Capernaum from the preaching tour in the synagogues of Galilee. It was the natural second step. They were a class whom the synagogue-ministry, for reasons already indicated, had not reached, and their presence in the crowds that followed Jesus along the lake-shore showed that they were not beyond reach. An evangelising experiment among them was worth trying. So Matthew was called, and through him the festive gathering convened. The publican-disciple was ready to respond, and his call would immediately create expectation. It would at once be felt that He who took that bold step meant to do more. An event was impending that would create a sensation.

It was a great event. That is plainly indicated by all the three Evangelists; but readers of the narratives, pre-occupied with the notion of a private dinner party, readily fail to notice the fact. In each of the reports it is distinctly stated that "many" were present. That itself ought to

<sup>1</sup> *Mark ii. 15.*

open our eyes to the significance of the occasion, and make us think of a *congregation* embracing hundreds, rather than of a private entertainment to say a score of guests; meeting not in the dining chamber of a house, but in the large open court around which the apartments of an Eastern house are built.<sup>1</sup>

Of course it was not a merely *festive* gathering. To eat and drink was not the sole or even the chief end of the meeting. Jesus from the first meant to speak to that remarkable assembly of social pariahs and moral non-descripts. The eating was subservient to that as the ultimate aim, a means of establishing cordial relations between Speaker and hearers, and opening a way for His message into their hearts. But in that respect it was all-important; hence the prominence given to it in the narratives. The Evangelists say nothing about the speaking; that they take for granted. They assume it will be understood by all their readers that Jesus would not meet with such a large company, and especially with a company of so peculiar a quality, without having something memorable and uniquely impressive to say to them concerning the Kingdom. As a matter of course He would tell them the good news of God. As a matter of course accordingly it is treated, a thing not needing to be mentioned. But of the eating careful note is taken, and for an obvious reason. It was the speciality, the thing that would create surprise on all sides—in fellow-guests and in outsiders; the thing that was sure to be extensively talked about and that would inevitably make a powerful impression of one sort or another, winning publicans, shocking scribes and Pharisees. In giving such prominence to the social aspect of the function the Evangelists only show their full comprehension and appreciation of the situation.

<sup>1</sup> Furrer, author of a delightful book on Palestine (*Wanderungen durch das heilige Land*) assumes as a matter of course that the meeting took place there.

The thing of importance to note, however, is that Jesus understood the situation. He knew perfectly what He was doing. He knew that His line of action would create scandal and in all likelihood provoke malevolent misconstruction. But He felt that He must take the risk. He knew that no half-measures would do with the people He was trying to benefit. He must either be their friend, their comrade, out and out, or let them alone. If He could not, or would not, eat with them, out of a regard to social proprieties, the instinctive swift inference of the classes concerned would be: "He too is at heart a Pharisee. He cares a little for us, mildly pities us, would like to talk to us about religion; but He dare not sit down at the same table with us; He fears the censure of the virtuous, the tongue of the pious, the frown of those that pass for good." All this Jesus clearly perceived; therefore He pursued the policy of radical, fearless, thorough-going, comradeship. But He did not so act *from* policy. He acted spontaneously, without calculation, and without effort, at the bidding of a loving heart. *Phenomenal miraculous love* was at the bottom of the whole proceeding. Mere wisdom would not have been equal to the emergency. Nothing but love unexampled in Capernaum or anywhere else could have had the originality to conceive the plan, the courage to adopt it, and the tact to carry it through. What cares such love for conventional proprieties or evil tongues? It leaps the fence, however high; it overflows the most carefully constructed embankments of social custom; it will have its way, and it is prepared to take the consequences.

Sure enough there were consequences to be reckoned with. That also the Evangelists are careful to record. He is a very simple man who fancies that he can indulge in the moral originality of Jesus, taking counsel only with love, and escape unpleasant consequences. All things new and original, in thought, and still more in action, are inevitably

blamed. The best things, before men get accustomed to them, are treated as if they were the worst. So it came to pass that the conduct of Jesus provoked the question, "Why eateth your Master with the publicans and sinners?" Nor was that the end or the worst of the matter. It came at last to hideous, horrible calumny. They said in effect: He associates with the reprobates because He is a reprobate: a drunkard, a glutton, and what not.<sup>1</sup>

So deplorable a result almost tempts the question: Was that well-meant movement not after all a mistake? Has a man any right to throw away his good name in trying to do good to others? This is a question of casuistry that is not likely often to arise, for few have love enough to expose them to any danger. If any one feels inclined to raise the question in connection with our Lord's action in reference to the publicans, it will be well that he first of all make an effort to understand the alternatives. There were, as has been already hinted, only two courses open: either to go the full length in comradeship or to let the publicans and sinners alone. A middle course in the circumstances was not possible. Therefore, taking care of His good name would have simply meant for Jesus treating the outcasts with the usual indifference. Now once for all that was simply impossible for Him. The one thing He could not do was to let people alone in their sin and misery. Surely a noble, honourable, blessed inability! And observe what the let-alone policy would have involved. It could not be limited to the case of the publicans; it must be carried through. If Jesus must neglect them to save His good name, how much more He would have to neglect! He would have to shun the *cross* to escape the shame. And what would that have come to? Saving Himself and failing to save others. Nay, failing ultimately even to save

<sup>1</sup> *Matt.* xi. 19.

Himself. If Jesus Christ had made it His chief business to adapt His conduct to local and contemporary ideas, instead of being the Saviour of the world He would have been a Nobody. That is the penalty men pay who are too desirous to please their own time. In their anxiety to conciliate the prejudices of to-day they do nothing for the future, and are soon forgotten.

In the Capernaum movement in behalf of the publicans Jesus emphatically worked for the future. No part of His public ministry possesses a deeper or more abiding significance. As a revelation of His spirit and a promise of great things to come, it stands on a much higher level than the synagogue-ministry. That was a good work which had to be done sometime, and which was most fitly done at the commencement. But in it the activity of our Lord ran in the channel of a purely Jewish institution. The new wine was put into an old vessel. In that preaching tour among the synagogues of Galilee Jesus was simply a Minister of God to Israel. But in the mission to the publicans it was otherwise. The new wine was put into a new vessel. The new spirit found for itself at once a new sphere and a new method of working. Jesus then began to be a Servant of the Kingdom for the *world*. To the Jew a publican was as a heathen man. He is entitled to the honour as well as the dishonour of that identification, and to be regarded as the representative of the Gentiles. The Capernaum movement was the forerunner of Gentile Christianity. A man of prophetic vision watching its progress might have said: "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life."

There was more than universalism latent in that mission. It was the cradle of Christian civilisation, which has for its goal a humanised society from whose rights and privileges no class shall be hopelessly and finally excluded. It was a protest in the name of God, who made of one blood all the nations and classes, against all artificial or superficial



cleavages of race, colour, descent, occupation, or even of character, as of small account in comparison with that which is common to all—the human soul, with its grand, solemn possibilities. It was an appeal to the conscience of the world to put an end to barbarous alienations and heartless neglects, and social ostracisms, cruelties, and tyrannies; so making way for a brotherhood in which “sinners,” “publicans,” and “Pharisees” should recognise one another as fellow-men and as sons of the one Father in heaven.

But it may be asked: If that movement was so important, why did the Evangelists give so inadequate an account of it? why, above all, did they not report what Jesus said on the occasion, which must have been extremely well worth recording, both in substance and in form? I will deal with this complaint before I am done, but meantime I remark that such a lament the lack ought at least to make the most of what the Evangelists have actually given us. They report one word Christ uttered on this occasion on no account to be overlooked; not spoken indeed to the publicans, but to men who blamed Him for associating with them. It is: “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” The saying consists of two parts, each of which serves a distinct purpose. The first part recognises the claims of the weak on the strong; the second proclaims a policy pursued in the interest of the Divine Kingdom. “Sinners,” therefore, to be shunned you think? Nay, that is just the reason why they should be sought after, as it is the sick whom the physician visits. Sinners, therefore, not worth caring about? Nay, to care for them is not only a duty imposed by love, but a policy dictated by wisdom. Of just such as these recovered from the error of their ways is the Kingdom of Heaven, whose best citizens are drawn not from those who pride themselves on their virtue, but from

those who repent of their folly. A commonplace now, thanks to the teaching and example of Christ, but a startling doctrine in an age when it was thought that the one thing a man had to do was to be good himself without trying to make others good, and when it was taken for granted that a man with a mission, the founder of a new religion, the originator of a new society, would gather about him the best people he could find, and form them into a select, exclusive circle of superior persons. The world has cause to thank Jesus Christ that He came to attempt a more heroic task, to gather around Him the erring, the ignorant, the weak, that He might make them temperate, pure, thoughtful, strong. By undertaking this high mission He inaugurated a new era—the era of *grace*.

Returning now to the lament over the unrecorded address, two questions may be asked regarding it: Have we no clue to its drift? Is it quite certain that its most essential part has not been preserved?

1. The *action* of Jesus speaks. It speaks to us; it would speak even more impressively to the publicans and sinners. His presence there as a fellow-guest on equal terms, not as a patron but as a comrade, told *its* own story. All understood instinctively that religion, God, man, must be something quite different for this new Teacher from what they were for Pharisees and scribes. "He does not hate us; He does not despise us. Holiness for Him does not mean keeping virtuously aloof from the unholy. Bad as we are, He seems to find in us some common element that He can love, some touch of nature that makes us kin, far apart though we be in our ways. In spite of our unpopular occupations and evil deeds, we are still at least men and women to Him, and apparently not without possibilities of becoming good men and good women. What kind of a God can He believe in? Surely not the God of the scribes! The God of the scribes, like the scribes themselves, looks

askance on the like of us. The God of this Teacher must be a kindly Being like Himself,—One who would not be ashamed to be called even *our* God, and who would own us as His children, though men have cast us off." Such were the thoughts that in the form of dim feeling, if not in distinctly formulated conception, passed through the minds of that motley audience even before Jesus began to speak, suggested by the mere fact of His being there. By eating with them He silently preached a veritable Gospel in a *symbolic sacramental act*.

And when Jesus began to speak, what else could He do than express in word what He had already expressed in deed? His line of thought was dictated by the impression which, as He well understood, His presence was making upon His audience. He could only put into words what was in the mind of all. One needs only to realise the situation to be able to reconstruct the address, at least in outline. It would state in simple language the truth about God and His bearing towards erring men. It would hold out hope of a better future for the worst, declaring that past sin was no inevitable doom, and that by repentance every man might pass from depravity and misery into purity and blessedness. It would strive to cure the doubt latent in every heart in that assembly as to the possibility of either God or man really caring for the like of them, a doubt too well justified by the contemptuous indifference with which they were treated on every hand. "He seems to care for us, else why is He here? But how can it be? What should make Him in this so utterly unlike all other men we have known? And as for God, is it credible He can be like this Man, and so utterly unlike all we have been taught to believe by our religious instructors?" Such was the state of mind with which the Speaker had to reckon; and if He dealt with it after His wonted manner, He would use some happy parable to make the difficult in the

spiritual sphere clear by a familiar story taken from natural life.

2. This brings me to my second question. Is it quite certain that the essential part of the address of Jesus to the publicans has not been preserved? On the contrary, it is highly probable that we ought to discover the kernel of the address in the parables concerning finding things lost contained in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. They suit exactly the requirement of the case as above indicated. And from Luke's introductory statement we learn that the parables grew out of a gathering of "publicans and sinners" to hear Jesus, at which He not only spoke to them, but ate with them. This at once suggests the Capernaum assembly as the real historical occasion. True, in Luke's account the parables are represented as spoken not to the publicans, but to the Pharisaic fault-finders. But this fact creates no serious difficulty. In themselves the three parables, in their essential parts, might have been spoken to any audience, to a congregation in a synagogue, to a meeting of social pariahs, to disciples, to Pharisees. They would simply require a little modification to fit them to the particular audience. Quite possibly they were uttered again and again to all sorts of audiences. Matthew gives the first of the three, "the Lost Sheep," as a word spoken to the twelve in the Capernaum lesson on humility.<sup>1</sup> This is perfectly credible. And it is still more credible that not only the first, but the whole three, were spoken to the publicans. No more appropriate audience could be imagined, and no one knew that better than Jesus. It may be matter of regret that they have not come down to us in the form of a sermon to a publican audience. But that the tradition is at fault here is not surprising. The primitive Christian society cared much more for the words of the Master than for the exact historical occasions. Therefore

<sup>1</sup> *Matt.* xviii. 12.

we need not wonder if, in the book of Logia compiled, according to the testimony of Papias, by Matthew, these golden words were faithfully preserved without clear indication of their historical connection. And we have the remedy in our own hands. We are not bound by the connection assigned to them by Luke or by the author of the first Gospel. We can give them the setting that is most fitting, and that brings out their full pathos, and claim them for the festive gathering in the court of the house of Levi, as the core of the address spoken by Jesus that day. It is no sin against true reverence to reproduce them here adapted to the circumstances by needful modification and brief preface.

Jesus, then, may have spoken after this manner :

“Men and women, I love you. I am your Brother. God, my Father and your Father, loves you, and will welcome you returning to Him in penitence. You doubt this ; cannot think it possible. I wonder not, knowing how you have been spurned by your fellow-townsmen. Yet it is simple when you think of it. Your Father in heaven, and I your Brother on earth, only share the joy common to all who find things lost. Hear a parable :

“‘A certain man had a hundred sheep, and having lost one of them, left the ninety and nine in the wilderness and went after that which was lost until he found it. And when he found it he laid it on his shoulders with joy. And when he came home, he told his neighbours, and they were all glad that he had found the lost sheep.’

“Does the joy of the shepherd and his neighbours seem strange to you? Such joy would I, would my Father in heaven, have in any of you turning from evil to good.

“ Not only the owner of a flock of sheep, but the poorest of you may know the joy of finding things lost. Hear another parable :

“ ‘ A certain woman had ten pieces of silver, and lost one of them. She lighted a lamp, swept the house, and sought till she found it. In her joy she told her neighbours, and they all rejoiced with her.’

“ Think not there may be joy in the finding of a sheep or a coin, but no joy in finding a lost man. There may be more joy over a *man* found than over the finding of any lost *thing*. Hear yet another parable :

“ ‘ A certain man had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there he wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country, and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country ; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he longed to eat of the pods which were the swine’s food, and no man gave unto him. But when he came to himself, he said : How many hired servants of my father have bread beyond their need, and I perish here with hunger. I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight. I am no more worthy to be called thy son ; make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. And

when he was still at a great distance from home his father saw him, and was touched with pity, and running towards him, he fell on his neck and fervently kissed him. And the son said: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee: I am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to the servants, Bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, as becometh a son, and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"<sup>1</sup>

When we think of this parable as spoken to the publicans in the house of Levi, we perceive that the festivities of that day explain the parable, and that the parable explains the festivities.

What success Jesus had among the publicans we do not know, though I think that the story of the woman in Simon's house<sup>2</sup> may be taken as an illustrative example of the effect produced.

The method of Jesus *deserved* success. Nothing but His deep, unfeigned love, going the whole way, will win men. Patronising philanthropy will not do. Those who practise it have nothing in common with Jesus. "He was no patron; He never acted in a condescending manner. He was the friend in the most genuine sense, even of publicans and harlots. His Kingdom cannot make progress through patronage, however kindly intentioned."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The second part of the parable concerning the elder brother relates to the Pharisees.

<sup>2</sup> *Luke vii.* 36-50.

<sup>3</sup> *The Spirit in Literature and in Life*, by Dr. Coyle. Houghton, Mifflin and Company: The Rand Lectures in Iowa, 1894. A thoughtful, suggestive book.