

L I K E - M I N D E D .

(1 PETER III. 8-12.)

PETER now passes from the special precepts addressed to subjects, to servants, to wives, to husbands, and addresses men generally. The absence of self-assertion, the recognition of the authority and claims of others upon which he has insisted in certain specific relations, are now declared to be the characteristics of all Christian morality. We are to be "*like-minded*,"—to endeavour to be of the same mind with other people; are to try to look at things as they look at them; are to find no pleasure in asserting a difference of judgment; are to regard it as a calamity when we are obliged to differ from them. We are to be "*compassionate*,"—that is, sympathetic; rejoicing in their joy, and sorrowing in their sorrow; regarding their successes and triumphs, not with envy, but with delight, and their disappointments and humiliations with regret. We are to be "*loving as brethren*"—brotherly in all our temper; "*tender-hearted*,"—easily touched by other men's troubles, not hard, cynical, cold. We are to be "*humble-minded*,"—are not to claim distinction and consideration,—are not to think that we could claim them. "*Not rendering evil for evil, or reviling for reviling; but contrariwise blessing.*" In return for evil, and in return for reviling, we are to try to do men good.

It is a lovely picture, it wins the heart; if we only approached its transcendent beauty, heaven would descend to earth.

But is it possible to practise precepts which require so wonderful a perfection? Can any man in the presence of provocation exercise such incessant self-restraint as these precepts demand? I suppose that the real answer to these questions is to be given by an appeal to the great precept of Christ: "If any man would come after Me, let him deny

himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." And our Lord's words carry this with them,—that we must deny Him, or deny ourselves; must reject His absolute claims to the control and direction of our personal life, or reject our own absolute claims to the control and direction of our personal life. It is of the essence of the unchristian life to reject Christ's claim. It is of the essence of the Christian life to reject our own claims; and when our own claims are once rejected—really rejected—everything else becomes easy.

But Peter invokes a special reason and motive for the duty of "not rendering evil for evil, or reviling for reviling, but contrariwise blessing"; "*for,*" he says, "*hereunto were ye called, that ye should inherit a blessing.*"

He has not forgotten the great things that he said earlier in the epistle about the "inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away," and "the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." The great hopes of the Christian life are necessary to the perfection of its power and its righteousness. It is possible for men to dream of the splendours of the eternal future, of its shining palaces, of its crowns and harps, and of the white robes of the saints and the river of joy that flows from beneath the throne of God, and to find in them no strength for present duty, or at best only a temporary alleviation of present sorrow. But to Peter, the great inheritance lies close to the plainest and most difficult Christian virtues. For him it is not mere idle dreaming to dwell on our infinite hopes. We are to render blessing to those who injure us, to those who revile us, because we were called "*to inherit a blessing.*"

He means, I suppose, that the infinite generosity of God to ourselves imposes upon us the obligation to be generous to others. Forgiven, we must forgive. We are destined to inherit blessings infinitely beyond our deserts; and we

must bless other men, not according to the measure of their deserts, but according to the measure of God's goodness to ourselves.

That seems reasonable. There is force in the appeal. But if we are to feel the force of it, and if God's goodness to ourselves in the eternal future is to make us good to other men during our earthly life, we must think of the greatness of the blessing which we are to inherit in Christ. And the inheritance does not merely create an obligation to render kindness for injury and for reviling; it confers strength to fulfil the obligation, and that in more ways than one.

The extreme readiness of men to take offence arises partly from the exaggerated importance which they attach to the careless, reckless, or malignant conduct of others; and it is a matter of common observation that people whose interests are very limited, whose range of thought and life is very narrow, are, as a rule, much more sensitive both to the smaller offences and to the graver injuries which they may receive from those about them than are people whose life is large and more animated. It is said, for example, that in the society of small country towns people are often estranged for years by the most trivial and accidental things. In a larger, freer society men never notice offences which in the narrower society would be unpardonable. And even real and grave wrongs are forgotten when we have more important matters to occupy us.

And so a man who sees before him the great blessing which he is destined to inherit, becomes very indifferent to a thousand petty causes of vexation which would tease and torment him if he had not the vision of that eternal future. What does it matter that this person treats him with discourtesy, or speaks roughly to him, or tries to deprive him of the credit of some kindly and generous act, or

slanders him? What does it matter that another person crosses his plans, gives him unnecessary trouble, occasions losses to him, injures him seriously? What does it matter? It may be necessary to take some notice of the wrong-doer, sometimes to punish him. But there is no reason to get excited, to suffer the blow to be perceived, to writhe in pain and passion. There is a certain largeness of mind created by the habit of looking beyond our mortal years to the ages of the eternal future; and we learn to regard the transient injuries which we receive from people about us as of very small importance, and as not grave enough to justify us in regarding them with any deep and enduring hostility. It then becomes easy to forgive those who have wronged us, and easy to do them good.

But, further, the joy which the hope of the future inspires inclines us to generosity and kindness. Happy people are usually good-tempered people. They do not take offence easily; when offence is given and felt, they soon forget it. Their buoyancy and brightness make them unwilling to retain the memory of injury. For to remember the wrongs which have been done us is to embitter our present delights. It is the people whose spirits are low, who have no genius for joy, that find offence where no offence was meant, that brood over every imaginary indication of neglect on the part of their friends, and that preserve through year after year—as if it was their most precious possession—the memory of real injuries. Make them happy, and they will find it easy to forgive. And the blessing which we are called to inherit, if we thought of it more, would make it easy for us all to return good for evil.

First, then, Peter appeals to the great inheritance which is the object of Christian hope, to give force to the precepts in which he inculcates generosity and kindness, and the repression of self-assertion. This inheritance, as I have tried to show, creates an obligation to practise these

virtues, and the hope and anticipation of it encourage a disposition which will make it easy to practise them.

But now he takes another line. He quotes an ancient psalm (Psalm xxxiv. 12-15) to show that even in this life these virtues receive a reward from heaven: "For he that would love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: and let him turn away from evil, and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears unto their supplication: but the face of the Lord is upon them that do evil." Long life and happiness in this world come, as a rule, to the men that keep these precepts. The laws of the moral order of the world are on their side. This is confirmed by universal experience.

If a man "*would see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil.*"

Is not that true? Have not very bad days come to many men, and come to some of us, because we have not exercised self-restraint? Sharp, keen, bitter words came to our lips, and we let them go; words which wounded, stung, and tormented people who, as we thought, had wronged us. We saw them writhe, and we enjoyed it. We triumphed in our power to anger and to distress them. But the enjoyment and the triumph were soon over and forgotten. The words were not forgotten by the people that suffered from them. We made enemies who for months and years were able to annoy us. Other people fell away from us: they regarded us with distrust. At a moment when it was necessary for us to have the confidence of men in our temper and courtesy, we found that the confidence had gone.

It is necessary now and then to speak strongly, but we should always ask ourselves whether it *is* necessary. We should ask not whether we should be justified in speaking,

but whether we should be justified in not speaking; not have I a right to say these hard things? but, am I bound to say them?

Some men would say that when they are greatly provoked and feel strongly they must speak. Well, there is no harm in speaking. But, go a couple of miles into the country, and speak there, if you want relief; or go into a room by yourself, and have it out there. Or, if you can do it better by writing, write by all means; but keep the letter in your desk for a week, and then burn it.

But this is not all. "Let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his *lips that they speak no guile.*" It is not merely from angry and malignant words that we have to refrain, but from guile, if we are to live in peace.

And is not that also true? Have not the lies men have told brought them more trouble than the faults they were intended to hide?

And even when men get into the habit, not of telling what they themselves would call lies, but of "speaking guile"—putting a colour upon things, telling half the truth when the whole truth is expected—does not experience show that they are certain to have trouble from it? I am not sure whether the plausible people who mislead you by telling the truth are not more pernicious and more intolerable than the people who mislead you by telling positive falsehoods. I feel a greater scorn for them; I trust them less. The man who tells a lie—what he sees to be a lie when he tells it—knows that he is not telling the truth. His conscience is not blinded. There is something in him to reckon with. But the slippery man, whose words, when you come to test them, are true as far as they go, but are intended to have all the effect of falsehood,—he thinks that he is telling the truth while he is practically telling a lie: his conscience is at fault. I never know when I can trust him. And when trouble comes to him, as trouble is sure to come, he

will assume the airs of an injured saint, and provoke worse trouble still.

But further, "*let him turn away from evil and do good.*" All evil-doing soon brings outward sorrow, or clouds inward joy, or does both. "*Let him do good*"; in righteousness is joy and strength.

And this is not all. "*Let him seek peace and pursue it.*" Ah! what "good days" we should have in families, churches, political parties, and all the world over, if men and nations set their hearts on peace—resolved to have it, pursued it, hunted it down as the sportsman hunts his game. But that is not a common pursuit. Some men seem never at peace—except when they are quarrelling. They insist on their utmost rights. They will concede nothing. They will not acknowledge any equals, much less any superiors. To differ from them in opinion is an offence; to cross them accidentally is a crime. They insist that all men should consent to be planets revolving in systems of which they are the central suns. Their own claims are enforced by the thunders of Sinai; to refuse to admit them is to be guilty of the worst villainy. Other men's claims cannot be listened to till theirs are completely discharged. They never think of peace except as the result of conquest.

There are such people, and they have neither good days themselves nor do they allow other men to have good days. And although we ourselves, let us hope, are free from the more flagrant forms of this horrible vice, let us not assume too easily that we are altogether free from it.

I have said that in these words Peter is quoting a Psalm, but he quotes it with a very remarkable and suggestive modification of its terms.

The Psalm (xxxiv. 12) reads: "*What man is he that desireth life, and loveth many days, that he may see good?*" Peter gives it: "*He that would love life and see good days.*"

That is a suggestive change. Life will be a trouble if we do not refrain our tongue from evil and our lips from guile ; if we do evil instead of good. If we do not seek peace, then we shall not love life ; we shall find no joy in it ; we shall ask the question that was discussed a few years ago, "Is life worth living?"

If we would *love* life and see good days, we must be truthful, kindly, peaceful. What sanity there is in New Testament ethics ! Think of an apostle pointing out the way in which we are to come to *love* this present life ! The common impression is that the Christian faith necessarily creates an impatience to have life over. And Peter has been speaking of the infinitely glorious future, the supreme hope of the Church ; this is the principal topic of his epistle. And yet he tells us what we are to do if we are to love life.

It is not most commonly the energy of faith that makes a man weary of this life, but its weakness ; not sanctity, but sin. Sometimes, under the strain of protracted sickness, pain, disappointment, trouble, a Christian man may long to depart and be with Christ ; but the discontent, the enduring gloom, the desolation, which make it impossible to *love* life, usually come from other causes.

The tongue has not been refrained from evil, and friends have been lost who would have given brightness to the darkest days ; it has not been refrained from guile, and the confidence of friends who remain has ceased to be cordial ; or there has been perpetual war, with frequent defeats, because the heart has not sought and pursued peace. And so at last a man has made everybody about him his enemy ; or there has been still more flagrant ill-doing, and the ill-doing has brought disaster.

The morality of the New Testament, I say, is sane. Well-doing brings peace and joy in this world, and it is no element of Christian perfection to regard this life with

dissatisfaction and to wish it over. We are here by God's appointment; we already possess God's love. The song of rejoicing should be in the tabernacle of the righteous, and the great hope of immortality, while it lightens the weight of earthly troubles, should do nothing to lessen our delight in earthly happiness.

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THE IDEAL PREACHER.

THE embassy of the Baptist to Christ¹ is an incident in the life of the Forerunner which has always enlisted the attention of students of the Gospel narrative. "Art Thou the coming One, or are we to expect another?" Does the challenge represent an eclipse of faith, or does it not? and for whose sake was the question addressed by John to the Lord? It seems as if the data were insufficient to make a reply which should be final. It is difficult enough to calculate upon our own conduct under unexpected conditions, and how is it possible to forecast the issues in the case of others? Every crisis in each several human life marks also a new departure in morals, and before there can be any certain anticipation of its direction, one must be in full possession both of the nature and stability of the moral principle of the individual. But here adequate knowledge is denied to men; they can only guess, surmise, or infer, and always from imperfect premises. Yet they often make conclusions as if there was a complete science of human character, and as if there was a uniform line of conduct for all under like conditions. For such speculations this narrative has presented a field of special interest, partly from the greatness of the two figures which occupy it, partly because of the touch of nature in it, which so

¹ St. Matt. xi. 2-15, and St. Luke vii. 18-30.