

STUDIES IN THE "INNER LIFE" OF JESUS.

XIV. THE PERFECTION OF CHARACTER.

(1) **THERE** is no evidence of the truth and the worth of Christianity that appeals so strongly to the modern reason and conscience as the character of Jesus. The current aversion to metaphysics is accompanied by a prevalent appreciation of ethics. Many men want a non-miraculous Christianity who would scorn a non-moral. In the realm of ethics they will, more or less consciously, admit the supernatural which they banish from the province of physics. The perfection of the character of Jesus is as inexplicable naturally—by His heredity and environment—as is His virgin birth or His bodily resurrection; but many who feel no sense of loss in denying the physical, would feel themselves poor indeed if deprived of the ethical marvel. Not only so, but their intellectual standpoint makes possible such belief in the one sphere and not in the other. Although, first, determinism, and then materialism have confidently denied human freedom, and have endeavoured to represent human character as the necessary resultant of various forces, yet even those who formally accept this conclusion practically often ignore it, and recognize in human life less uniformity and greater variety than in the processes of nature; for them history seems a less rigid system than nature, and their thought can allow exceptions in the former without the same sense of incongruity as in the latter. Just because what is natural in human character has not been so fully explored and clearly defined as in physical processes, the extraordinary in the one does not appear as supernatural as it would in the other. Thus a moral and an intellectual reason seem to combine in the readiness of many who deny all miracles to accept the

perfection of character of Jesus, which is not really—although it may be apparently—less supernatural.

(2) So general is this recognition of the moral supremacy of Jesus that it does not seem at all necessary to pause on the one hand to prove the moral impossibility of the assumption that the portrait in the Gospels is fictitious, the work of the imagination, inspired by the affection of the disciples; or, on the other, to disprove the charges against the character of Jesus that have from time to time been advanced by unbelief. But, while this twofold task may not be imperative, it will serve the main purpose of this *Study* very briefly to call attention to the two confirmatory evidences which doubt and denial may offer to Christian faith. In the first place, the more closely the picture presented in the Gospels is studied the more symmetrical and harmonious will it appear to be, the more consistent with all the claims made for the subject of it. It is moral perfection, nothing else and nothing less, that meets us in the Gospel story. Those who were ultimately responsible for the eye- and ear-witness to the words, and works, and ways of Jesus cannot have been either deceivers or deceived; for, in the one case, they would have lacked the moral integrity, and in the other the moral discernment, which would have made them at all capable of conceiving the ideal presented to us as a reality; here and there, notwithstanding the utmost care, they must have fallen into some error of moral judgment, which would have introduced some flaw of moral character into their portrait of Jesus. The Gospels may, as modern scholarship insists, reflect customs, beliefs, and needs of the time and the place of their composition; but it is morally certain that the picture of the Person of Jesus in the Gospels cannot be the product of any temporary or local, mental, moral, or religious tendencies of the writers, for the perfection there presented

transcends, not only the actualities, but even the aspirations, of the age and the race to which Jesus belonged.

(3) An examination of the accusations that have been brought against the character of Jesus only serves to justify our confidence that Christian faith can boldly repeat on His behalf the challenge which He Himself cast down to His enemies: "Which of you convicteth Me of sin?" (John viii. 46). Even if the words mean, "Which of you proves Me to be in error regarding the nature of sin?" it is, if less directly, a claim of sinlessness, as only absolute moral integrity can possess absolute moral insight. The charges betray more ingenuity in the service of prejudice than historical understanding and moral insight. The Lad in the Temple is said to show disregard of the feelings and disobedience to the wishes of His earthly parents (Luke ii. 4). But does not His enthusiasm for God and His temple justify His forgetfulness of these other duties, especially if, as is not improbable, some communication had been made to Him regarding His vocation by His parents, as has been already suggested in the *Third* Study. The severity of the language of Jesus to His mother at Cana (John ii. 4), as also His repudiation of the authority of His family in His public work (Mark iii. 33-35) is explicable, as has been shown in the *Seventh* Study, by the necessity of His surrender of home in order that He might fulfil His vocation. The permission given by Jesus to the demons to enter the swine at Gadara has been regarded as an unjustified violation of the rights of property, or a blameworthy instance of cruelty to animals (Mark v. 13). In the discussion on the limitations of the knowledge, it has been maintained that Jesus neither intended nor anticipated the destruction of the swine, and that the permission which is attributed to Him is due to a misunderstanding of the word by which the cure was effected (Matt. viii. 32). Foolish anger has

been assigned as the motive of the cursing of the fig-tree (Mark xi. 14); but surely it is more reasonable to regard the act as a solemn warning in symbol of the approaching judgment on the Jewish people, even if we cannot explain the story as the misunderstood tradition of a parable (Luke xiii. 7). Violence is charged against Him in connexion with the expulsion of the traders from the temple (Mark xi. 15-16); but is there not a holy indignation against and punishment of wrong-doing? The moral difficulty, which from the common point of view the choice of Judas involves, has been dealt with in the *Twelfth* Study. The seemingly harsh answer given to the Syrophenician mother (Mark vii. 27) is probably Jesus' rebuke of Jewish exclusiveness in His disciples by the use of their own terms; He shows them what their unwillingness to come into contact with Gentiles involves. If we give due weight to the limitation of His knowledge, the demands and the difficulties of His vocation, the enthusiasm of His disposition, not only will all such charges fall to the ground, but we shall, even in the instances so abused, find proofs of His wisdom and grace.

(4) Although all these accusations can be disproved, although the Gospels present Jesus to us without fault or flaw, although His enemies could bring only false charges against Him, and at last condemned Him on a charge of blasphemy, which for Christian faith appears only a necessary confession of His position and vocation; yet it may be argued that the defects of childhood and youth, before His character was fully developed in Him, and His ministry before the eyes of men was entered on, must be assumed in Him; for, as the study of the child shows, instincts and appetites which come into conflict with moral law have in its growth the start of conscience and volition, and thus its moral life is from the outset handicapped, even if we deny any inheritance of sinful tendency. But this assump-

tion Christian faith rejects ; it affirms that the personal development of the Child Jesus was divinely preserved from inherited taint or natural flaw until His moral probation could begin. The belief in the virgin-birth (see the *Second Study*), if not absolutely necessary to, is a support to the belief in the sinlessness of Jesus from infancy onwards. A confirmatory evidence is offered in Jesus' own consciousness ; for nowhere in His words does He betray any remembrance of fault or failure in the past. It is not present sin alone that makes a man conscious of sinfulness ; past sin leaves a memory behind, which forbids moral satisfaction. There is no evidence that Jesus carried such a burden. He calls men to repentance, but He never Himself exhibits the grace of penitence. We must deny His moral sincerity and sensibility if we admit that He had sinned, however little, in the past years of His youth. It does not seem necessary to affirm that Jesus never joined His disciples in the use of the prayer He Himself had taught them with its petition for pardon, for in His Baptism, as on His Cross, He in His love identified Himself with the sinful race ; yet we must maintain that there is no proof of confession of sin and desire for pardon on His own behalf. The argument from silence, here employed, is not open to objection as it usually is, because it is in the extreme improbable that the Evangelists would have had the skill to suppress every trace of such confession and desire if penitence had had the place in the life of Christ which it must have in the life of every saint who is conscious of any sin. This absence of penitence from the experience of Jesus also disposes of another suggestion, that there may have been secret faults, flaws in the inner parts, hidden from men, although known to Himself. If we consider the inwardness of the morality of Jesus, the emphasis He laid on motive and disposition, it is impossible to believe that He could have concealed His penitence for

faults even that could themselves be concealed. Jesus never repented, because there was never anything in Him that required penitence.

(5) But the conclusive evidence of the sinlessness of Jesus seems to be found in the attitude that He assumed towards the sin of the world. He, as the Son of Man, claimed power on earth to forgive sins (Mark ii. 10), not by the proclamation of a general amnesty, but by the assurance of an individual pardon, as to the palsied man (*v.* 5: "Son, thy sins are forgiven"); or the sinful woman (Luke vii. 48-50: "Thy sins are forgiven . . . thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace"), or the penitent thief (Luke xxiii. 43: "Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with Me in paradise"). Although the offer of forgiveness is universal, yet the fact of being forgiven is individual. Not the Divine intention alone needs to be known, but also the human response, if the assurance is to be given as Jesus gave it. Who but the sinless can so read the heart of God and the heart of man as to know with the certainty of Jesus that the estrangement is ended? Who but the sinless would dare thus to pronounce what claims to be an infallible judgment on the condition in God's sight of another soul, as Jesus so confidently did? If we look more closely at the instances just given, the wonder and the surprise of Jesus' assurance of individual pardon will grow upon us. Most commentators assume that the palsied man and his friends wanted his bodily cure, and that in pronouncing him forgiven Jesus gave an uncraved boon; but this is to show a lack of moral insight, for pardon cannot come undesired; penitence is, and must be, the antecedent of the faith that claims the grace of God's forgiveness, although the offer of that grace may first awaken penitence. Jesus saw what no others saw—that the human conditions of the Divine pardon were fulfilled in the man. The sinful woman and the penitent

thief did not appear to any one save Jesus as capable of penitence, as accessible to the Divine pardon ; but He alone could judge unerringly the human heart.

(6) How confident He is that He can cure this disease of sin ! His plea, when He is reproached for eating and drinking with publicans and sinners, is that, as the Physician, His place is among the sick (Mark ii. 17). The Pharisees feared moral contagion from close contact with those whom they regarded as morally lax or depraved. Jesus was conscious of such moral vitality and vigour, that He knew Himself immune from any such peril ; sinners could not stain Him, for He could cleanse them. There seems no doubt that Jesus anticipated His death as a ransom for many (Matt. xx. 28), as the price of a moral deliverance, and that He desired His death to be remembered by His disciples as His offering of the " blood of the covenant which is shed for many unto remission of sins " (Matt. xxvi. 28). Even if the last clause, which is not found in Mark xiv. 24, is the Evangelist's addition, yet the covenant Jesus had in view was one of forgiveness. (See Jer. xxxi. 34 : " For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.") According to the Law the sin-offering must be without blemish (Lev. iv. 3) ; according to the prophet the Servant, whose soul is made " an offering for sin . . . had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth " (Isa. liii. 9, 10). It would appear intolerable to our conscience surely that any man, stained with sin, should claim that he could offer himself as a sacrifice to cleanse mankind from sin. Although Jesus in His patience and compassion, His humility and charity, promised forgiveness of " a word against the Son of Man," yet His solemn warning to His enemies shows how easily antagonism to Him might pass over into that attitude, which He describes as the sin against the Holy Ghost, for which as an eternal sin there is no for-

givenness" (Matt. xii. 32; Mark iii. 29). Not only does the Fourth Evangelist claim for the Son of Man the function of judgment (John v. 22, ix. 39), but in the Synoptists Jesus is represented as making the future destiny of men depend on their confession or denial of Him (Matt. x. 32, 33), and as judging the nations in accordance with their treatment of Him in His brethren (xxv. 31-46).

(7) Such claims to forgive and save, redeem and judge mankind are inconceivable, unless Jesus was conscious of His own absolute moral integrity and purity. To deny His sinlessness is to disown His claims. He cannot be enshrined in the heart, or enthroned in the life of man, unless He is without blemish or guile. Christian preaching is false witness, and Christian faith vain, for we are still in our sins (1 Cor. xv. 14-17), unless Christ, who knew no sin, was made sin for us (2 Cor. v. 21). The claims Jesus made for Himself are not an instance of how "vaulting ambition o'erleaps itself"; for, as we look more closely at His life, we cannot but be deeply impressed by His humility, the lowliness of His perfection. It was not in a humility, conscious of its own virtue and value, and thus annulling itself, that He said, "I am meek and lowly in heart," but in a genuine humility, which was content to be misunderstood by the wise and understanding, and sought to give rest of soul to the labouring and heavy-laden, not only in teaching given to them, but in a yoke shared with them (Matt. xi. 25-30); a humility which set not its mind on high things, but condescended to things that are lowly" (Rom. xii. 16). Christian theology, in laying stress on the witness of Christ to Himself, has very often misrepresented His character. He accepted His vocation not as the fulfilment of an ambition to be great, but as the dedication of Himself to a service and a sacrifice which God His Father willed, and men His brethren needed. What He claims

He claims only because the revelation of God in Him and the redemption of man by Him make the claim imperative. One cannot but feel that His lofty vocation, because so lonely, must have been to His lowly spirit a burden to be borne, and not a prize to be snatched. Whatever scholars may say about the origin of the phrase Son of Man, Jesus put His own meaning into it, attached His own worth to it; and does not His humility best explain it? Even when He is claiming functions that necessarily distinguish Him from all mankind, He seeks by this title as closely as possible to identify Himself with His brethren. That does not mean, as is sometimes assumed, that Jesus assigned these prerogatives to manhood as such, and was not conscious of a unique vocation; but that the humblest of the Messianic titles was most congenial to Him. In His Baptism at the beginning, as on His Cross at the end of His ministry, He made Himself one with man; "He was not ashamed to call men brethren" (Heb. ii. 11). His humiliation was not a fate imposed on Him, but the proof of His humility.

(8) Some special evidences of this characteristic of His moral perfection invite our closer study. In knowledge, in character, in power, He confessed Himself inferior to His Father. His confession of His ignorance regarding "that day and hour" (Matt. xxiv. 36) shows His meekness and lowliness of heart. It is no common grace for a teacher to plead lack of knowledge before those who are learning of him. Jesus' answer to the rich young ruler's address, "Why callest thou Me good? None is good save One, even God" (Mark x. 18; Matthew's version, "Why askest thou Me concerning that which is good? One there is who is good," xix. 17, is evidently an effort to escape what was felt to be a difficulty), is not to be explained, as it has so often been, as merely a correction of a mistake in the questioner; it is a glimpse into His inner life Jesus grants

to us. His work was not yet done, His warfare was not yet accomplished, He was still liable to temptation (Matt. iv. 1-11); He still felt the strain of His vocation; His baptism was not yet accomplished, and He was straitened (Luke xii. 50). His cup had not been drunk, and He dreaded it (Matt. xxvi. 39). Therefore He would not call Himself good, as His Father dwelling unchanged, unmoved, undisturbed in His blessed and glorious perfection. He anticipated that greater works would be accomplished by His disciples, because He was going to His Father; and this going would be an advantage both to Him and them, because He knew the Father to be greater than Himself (John xiv. 12, 28). Instead of ever seeking to make Himself equal with God, as His enemies misrepresented His words, "My Father worketh even until now, and I work," to mean (v. 17, 18), He always confessed His absolute dependence on, and His complete submission to God in all His words, works, and ways. It is significant that it is the Fourth Evangelist who gives an emphasis to the divinity of Christ such as is not found in the Synoptists, in whose pages abound the utterances of Jesus in which He acknowledges that all He is, speaks, and does is the gift of God's grace, wisdom, power. It is not at all likely that such a conception of the relation of Jesus to God would have originated in Ephesus at the end of the first century; and, therefore, allowing for modifications of the language of Jesus by the Evangelist, we may claim him confidently as a trustworthy witness to the humility characteristic of Jesus.

(9) The humility of Jesus cannot hide from us the transcendence of His goodness, the loftiness of His perfection. As has been indicated in the *Thirteenth* Study, His moral insight and spiritual discernment raised Him far above both law and prophets. The requirements of the one and the predictions of the other He fulfilled only as discovering in

their earthen vessels the heavenly treasures of a righteousness, wisdom, and grace of God hitherto unknown and un hoped. His own age and people cannot explain Him ; He was unintelligible in spirit and purpose, character and conduct to His countrymen and contemporaries. He was so much an offence, as He was necessarily opposed to, because exalted above the passions and prejudices, nay, even the pieties and moralities of His own environment. He could be pitiful and forbearing, gentle and kind to the sinners and the outcasts of Jewish society because they opposed no inferior standards of morals, no lower type of piety to His own ideal of godliness and goodness, and He could by His grace trust and hope to win them to learn of Him, follow Him, and take His yoke. But the Pharisees and the scribes claimed to be the authoritative teachers and the exemplary guides of the people in morality and religion ; and Jesus, therefore, saw in them an antagonism to Himself, which, if persisted in, must prove fatal to themselves and all who trusted them for counsel and guidance. So transcendent was the perfection manifest in His Person and His teaching, that He had to remove as a hindrance the highest developments of the piety and the morality of His nation and His age. The severity of His condemnation of the legal morality and the ceremonial piety of scribes and Pharisees is not due to a want of humility, or a lack of charity ; but to His infallible perception that " that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God " (Luke xvi. 15), that the finality and sufficiency claimed by the scribes for their goodness and godliness was the most perilous and destructive opposition to God and the ideal, that vanity and pride are more fatal to the soul than animal appetite and sensual passion, because an invasion and a subjugation of the soul's inmost sanctuary, conscience and the consciousness of God, by sin. He who has so perverted his

moral and religious sense that he is ever congratulating and never censuring himself, needs the severest and fullest condemnation ; his insensibility needs the stinging lash of unerring Divine judgment. That Jesus so clearly detected and so fully denounced the falsity and futility of the morality and religion of the scribes and Pharisees shows not only how independent and original His perfection was, but also how final, because absolute, is His ideal. Humanity, under the guidance and control of the Spirit of God, has advanced from age to age, but it has not transcended Jesus : in its truest aspirations and its best endeavours it most realizes His transcendence.

(10) It seems necessary to lay emphasis on these two features of the perfection of Jesus—His humility towards God, and His transcendence of the righteousness of man—before noticing the feature which is probably the most prominent in the common Christian consciousness—the sympathy of Jesus, or the largeness of His ideal. Without those features this is likely to be misconceived. The tenderness and gentleness and kindness of Jesus may be conceived sentimentally, and may encourage a feeble emotionalism in the Christian life without the sufficient reverence for God or for His Christ. He who has soared above all mankind in the loftiness of His moral achievement ever stooped before God in the lowliness of His religious aspiration. The majesty of the perfection of God, which Jesus so humbly revered, while He so transcendently revealed, forbids the familiarity which is a constant and serious peril of the intimate communion with Him which the largeness of His love encourages. The love of Jesus makes Him " heir of all the ages," " citizen of the world," to whom nothing human is alien. The largeness of His perfection is shown in His treatment of women and children on the one hand, in His attitude towards the outcasts of Jewish society and the

Gentiles on the other. His disciples were surprised that He talked with the Samaritan woman (John iv. 27) ; His acceptance of the penitent gratitude of the sinner in the city offended His Pharisee host (Luke vii. 39) ; even His disciples could not understand a woman's heart as Jesus could, and murmured at the wasteful generosity of Mary (Matt. xxvi. 8). In the reference to His own burial Jesus gave to her acts of anointing may we not read a deeper meaning than at first sight appears ? From His disciples, opposed to His Cross, He had failed to find sympathy ; but to Mary He had been able to speak freely, and what she did was a token of unchanging love and unswerving loyalty in view of His Cross, an assurance that one heart at least would not faint or fail in devotion to the very end. When we remember the contempt for woman which we meet with in Rabbinic writings, this regard for womanhood is a mark of Jesus' perfection. So, too, is His interest in childhood. He watched children at their play (Matt. xi. 16, 17) ; He made a child an example to His disciples (xviii. 2) ; He was displeased when the disciples desired to keep mothers and children away from Him, and took the children in His own arms and blessed them (xix. 13-15). In His lowliness He was Himself childlike ; in His tenderness womanly. The strength of manhood was accompanied by the charm of childhood and the grace of womanhood. By birth and breeding a Jew, He had none of the limitations even of Jewish piety and patriotism. "Publicans and sinners" were chosen as His companions, not from any vain or weak pity, but because His moral insight and spiritual discernment detected in them possibilities of goodness and godliness which He could not discover in scribes and Pharisees. In the last study enough was said regarding this offence against Jewish prejudice. Jesus' attitude to the Gentiles has often been misunderstood. On the one hand, He most

generously recognized Gentile faith (the centurion's, Matt. viii. 10; the Syrophenician mother's, xv. 28); He was deeply moved by the desire of the Greeks to see Him (John xii. 23); He commended the gratitude of the Samaritan leper (Luke xvii. 18); He presented a Samaritan as worthy of imitation (x. 33). On the other hand, He confined the mission of His disciples to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," expressly excluding the Gentiles and the Samaritans (Matt. x. 5, 6); He refers seemingly with disparagement to the things the Gentiles seek (vi. 32), and do (v. 47), and to the vain repetitions in their prayers (vi. 7); He enjoins that the impenitent brother is to be regarded as the Gentile and the publican (xviii. 17); He limits His own even as His disciples' mission, and meets the Syrophenician mother's prayer with the seemingly harsh refusal: "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to the dogs" (xv. 26). The limitation of the mission of the disciples is explicable by their inexperience; they would not know how to deal with Gentiles. There is no contempt or censure in the references to the Gentiles in the Sermon on the Mount; Jesus states, as matter of fact, the spiritual inferiority of the Gentiles to incite His disciples to aim at higher excellence. When we remember Jesus' tender solicitude for publicans, we may conclude that the treatment of an impenitent brother as the Gentile or the publican would not exclude a loving care for his good. The limitation of His own mission is adequately accounted for by the nature of His vocation. He came as Saviour of the world, but the divinely-appointed historical function for Him was as Messiah of the Jewish people. Not only did the shortness of the day in which alone He could work forbid any wide diffusion of interest or effort, and demand the utmost concentration on His task, but Jewish exclusiveness was so intense, that any premature extension of His Gospel to the

Gentiles would have prevented any effective offer of the divinely-promised salvation to the Jewish people. The fidelity of God required that the chosen people should get its full opportunity to welcome its Messiah, and that no stumbling-block should be put in the way of its faith. Although the nation proved unbelieving, the faith of some was won, which would probably have been hindered, if the ministry had been wider in its range. Jesus submitted, not without pain, to this necessity. The sneer of His enemies. "Will He go unto the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks?" (John vii. 35), shows that there was something in Jesus that suggested the possibility of such a Gentile ministry even to those to whom it would appear as "the climax of irrationality for any man" seriously claiming the title "of Messiah." The insistence of Jesus on the necessity of His death when the Greeks came to Him (John xii. 23) suggests that the possibility of such a Gentile ministry as an escape from Jewish hostility presented itself even to Him. It was rejected by Him, not because He was indifferent or hostile to the Gentiles, but because His death at the hands of the Jewish people was the cup His Father had given Him to drink. His limitation of His ministry was not through defect of love to man, but through completeness of love to God, to whose will in self-sacrifice He submitted Himself. His words to the Syrophenician mother do not express His own disposition to her; but echo, by way of grieved, indignant protest, the Jewish prejudice, which imposed this unwelcome limitation on His work in the world, a limitation to which submission to God's purpose required Him to submit. His disciples had probably protested against His withdrawal from His ministry in Galilee and His retirement into a Gentile region, and had thus forced on His attention at the time this national exclusiveness; probably they had even used the

very words He repeated under circumstances in which even they must have felt how inhuman their narrow prejudice was.

(11) Although the Cross must be the subject of a special Study, this Study would be incomplete without a brief reference, in conclusion, to the vicarious and sacrificial character of the love of Jesus. He loved so intensely and unreservedly the human race, that He so completely identified Himself with its need and peril, its burden and struggle, its sorrow and shame, its sin and curse, that it was possible for Him to become not only its representative, but even its substitute, not by any legal fiction, but by a personal experience. This identification with mankind was necessarily sacrificial to the uttermost. He had to give Himself fully and freely in His agony, darkness, desolation, that He might become humanity under the burden of sin and the shadow of death, in order that He might be the propitiation for the world, and secure redemption and reconciliation for man. His being made sin for us was the final evidence that He knew no sin, the absolute proof of the perfection of His character.

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