

name. Just as we may rightly object to philosophy being narrowed down to positive science, in the interests of a particular school of philosophers, so may we with equal justice demur to religion being so widened out in connotation—in the interests of individual thinkers—as to include forms of experience which would never have called for a specific name at all, or have felt the want of one, had not the coveted title been there to excite the unlawful desire. For all these other forms of experience we may employ some such title as ‘cosmic vital feeling,’ which Höfding suggests; while religion should be looked upon as a particular form of such emotional disposition, and one which is always accompanied by, and dependent upon, the belief in a superhuman personal Being with whom we stand in relation and in intercommunion.

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*THE TEACHING OF JESUS CHRIST UPON SIN,  
AS SHOWN IN THE FIRST THREE GOSPELS.*

It is customary to connect the missions of our Lord and of John the Baptist and to find in the Baptist's preaching either the announcement of his Successor (as used to be said) or (as some now say) the impulse which drove Jesus of Nazareth into His public ministry. Whatever may be the historical connexion between them, it is as important for us at least to realize the broad gulf that separates them. They meet, it is true; both use the phrase “Kingdom of God,” and we are apt to assume they mean the same thing.

I propose in this paper to examine in bare outline one phase only of the teaching of Jesus, and whether the conclusions reached prove wrong or right, I hold that it is only by such endeavours in one field or another that progress and unity are possible for the Christian church. What we have

all suffered from in the past is inattention to the meaning of our Lord. We have used His words, but we have given them our own connotation, and called the curious results Christian teaching. And yet how much that has been fundamentally wrong in the churches and the heresies is due to the use of the term "God" (for instance) without the full complement of meaning that it had for Jesus Christ? Attempts, successful or unsuccessful, to find out what Jesus actually did say, and what He meant by what He said, and (if such ventures are possible at all) how He came to mean it, seem to me all of them so far to the good that they at least drive us anew to our Centre and our Source.

With so much prelude I come to the teaching on Sin which we find in the first three Gospels.

John the Baptist, it is obvious to the most careless reader, preached of sin and judgment. The Kingdom of God—his message rings like that of the old prophets—is not to be comfort and prosperity for the seed of Abraham—judgment rather and terror. The day of the Lord will be indeed *dies irae*. "You only have I known . . . therefore upon you will I visit your iniquities." But John is substantially no further on than his predecessors. He comes with a message of axe and fan and fire; he is desperately in earnest; there is none among those born of women greater than John in some ways—"Suppose we grant it," hints Jesus, "yet—." John fails precisely where his strength is greatest and most conspicuous. He is a moral teacher; his theme is sin; and there he fails. He sees what is obvious—poverty above all; "he that hath two coats, let him give to him that hath none"; violence and extortion by publican and soldier; but his psychology of sin is not deep enough. Repentance is his word: let a man bring forth fruits meet for repentance; and the baptism of repentance. But how deep does repentance go? What hold upon the nature

do its roots take ? Will it wither when the sun is up ? will the thorns choke it ? And if it lasts, who can bring forth fruits meet for repentance ? St. Paul, at least, found he could not. John's righteousness, as he preaches it, is too like that of the Pharisees—self-directed and self-dependent. And yet when the Holy Spirit comes, we are told, He will convince the world of precisely the things John preached—sin, righteousness and judgment—the same things, but in a different way and with different outcome. There is permanent value in John's teaching, for John is a witness to man's need of redemption, though he does not indicate how deep the need is, nor how fundamental the redemption must be.

The method of Jesus is quite other. He associated with publican and sinner, even ate with them, and was criticised on that score. It was confusing moral issues. But Jesus saw deeper into the matter than His critics saw—deeper than His friends do. They held that His distinctions in the ethical sphere were badly drawn ; we forget that He drew any at all.

Yet a note like that in Matthew xxiii. 33, with its deliberative subjunctive, is significant—" how *are* you to escape the judgment of Gehenna ? " It is not a threat ; it is a warning. There yawns the chasm—with your driving how *do* you think you can escape disaster ? For with Jesus there is in God an element we have forgotten. When God matters to a man, all life shows the result. Good and bad, right and wrong, stand out clear as the contrast between light and darkness—they are unmistakeable, and they matter—and matter for ever. They are no concern of a moment. Action makes character, and until the action is undone again the effect on character is not undone. Right and wrong are of eternal significance now, in virtue of the reality of God. Buddha, without this consciousness of God, saw a

significance in good and evil which we can only not call boundless, though it is next thing to it. Heaven and hell of one sort or other are in his teaching, as they are in Plato's. With all the humour and charm there is in Plato, we cannot escape his tremendous teaching on the age-long consequences of good and evil in a cosmos ordered by God. Carlyle in our own days realised the same thing—he learnt it no doubt from his mother; and learnt it again in London. In Mrs. Austin's drawing-room, with "Sydney Smith guffawing" and "other people prating, jargoning," "to me through these thin cobwebs Death and Eternity sate glaring." "How will this look in the Universe," he asks, "and before the Creator of Man?" When some one in his old age challenged him with the question, "Who will be judge?"—(it is curious how every sapient inanity strikes, as on an original idea, on the notion that opinions differ, and therefore—apparently, if their thought *has* any consequence—are as good one as another)—Who will be judge? "Hell fire will be judge," said Carlyle, "God Almighty will be the judge now and always." So it is with Jesus. There is a gulf between good and evil, and each is inexorably fertile of consequence. There is no escaping the issue of moral choice.

Perhaps we may most readily see something of what He means by looking at the four classes with whom He associates the danger of Hell, and then trying to find the common element.

First, then, it is familiar to everybody how He warned the Pharisee class. They played at religion—tithed mint and anise and cummin, and forgot judgment and mercy. In our clumsy polysyllabic language, they lost all sense of perspective. What He said was that the Pharisee was never quite sure whether the creature he was looking at was a camel or a gnat—he got them mixed. Once we realise what

this tremendous irony means, we are better able to grasp His thought. The Pharisee was living in a world that was *not* the real one—it was a highly artificial one, picturesque and charming no doubt, but dangerous. For, after all, we do live in the real world—there *is* only one world, however many we may invent, and to live in any other is danger. Blindness that is partial and uneven lands a man in peril whenever he tries to come downstairs or to cross the street—he steps on the doorstep that is not there and misses the real one. He is involved in false appearances at every turn. And so it is in the moral world—there is one real, however many unrels there are, and to trust to the unreal is to come to grief on the real. “The beginning of a man’s doom,” wrote Carlyle, “is that vision be withdrawn from him.” “Thou blind Pharisee!” The cup is clean enough without; it is septic and poisonous within—and from which side of it do you drink, outside or inside? As we study our Lord’s teaching here, we see anew the profundity of the saying attributed to Him in the fourth Gospel, “The truth shall make you free.” The man with astigmatism, or myopia, or whatever else it is, must get the glasses that will show him the real steps, and he is safe, and free to go and come as he pleases. See the real in the moral sphere, and the first great peril is gone. Nothing need be said at this point of the Pharisee who used righteousness and long prayers as a screen for villainy. Probably his doom was that in the end he came to think his righteousness and his prayers real and to reckon them as credit with a God, Who did not see through them any more than he did himself. These were men who believed in God—only that with His world, they re-created Him (as we are all apt to do for want of vision or by choice)—but what is atheism, what can it be, but indifference to God’s facts and to God’s nature? If religion is union with God, in the phrase

we adopt so lightly from St. John, how can a man be in union with God when the God he sees is not there, is a figment of his own mind, something different altogether from God? Or, if we use the older phrase of other New Testament writers and their contemporaries, if religion is Vision of God, what is our religion if after all we are not *seeing* God at all, but something else—a dummy God, like that of the Pharisees, some trifling martinet who can be humbugged—or, to come to ourselves, a majestic bundle of abstract nouns loosely tied up in impersonality? For all such Jesus has a caution. Indifference to God's facts leads to one end only. We admit it ourselves. There are those who scold Bunyan for sending Ignorance to hell, but we omit to ask where else could Ignorance go, whether Bunyan sent him or not. Ignorance as to germs or precipices or what not leads to destruction *in pari materia*; in the moral sphere can it be otherwise?

The twenty-fifth of Matthew, with its judgment scene, gives us the second class whom Jesus warned of hell—the men and women for whom some people did not matter. Those on the right hand had not taken in the full significance of their kind acts—they just did them instinctively and thought no more of them, and they were surprised at the Judge's decision. Could He be making a mistake? Honesty prevails, and they almost ask Him to rectify it. But it was not a mistake. They had at least grasped the significance of the human fact as God sees it. The group on the left hand had not seen this; they never supposed that Gentiles, or slaves, or, it might be, women, counted—or negroes, or uneducated persons. The passage is often reduced in meaning through our emphasis on the food and comfort aspect of it. We forget how Carlyle found the men and women of his day “needier than ever of inward sustenance,” and how needy men and women still are in this

direction. We forget Christ's identification of Himself with pain of mind—His sympathy for those who are ignorant and out of the way—His death for the heathen world—and we decline on a "social righteousness" that falls short a long way of John the Baptist's fire and moral truth. And yet surely our Lord has a warning for some of us who think the heathen world can do without what He has given us.

The third class warned by our Lord consists of several groups dealt with in the Sermon on the Mount—people whose sin is not murder or adultery, but merely anger and the unclean thought—not the people who actually give themselves away, like the publicans and harlots, but those who would not be sorry to have that ring of Gyges which Plato described, who would like to do certain things if they could. Here St. Paul can supply commentary with his suggestion that one form of God's condemnation is when He gives up a man to his own reprobate mind. (Romans i. 28—the whole passage is worth study in the Greek.) The mind, in Paul's phrases, becomes darkened, stained and cauterised—invalidated for the discharge of its proper functions, as a burnt hand loses the sense of touch, or a stained glass gives the man a blue or red world instead of the real one. Blindness and mutilation are better, Jesus said, than the eye of lust. How different from the moralists for whom sin lies in action and all actions are physical! The idle word is to condemn a man, not because it is idle, but because, being unstudied, it speaks of his heart and reveals, unconsciously but plainly, what he *is* in reality. Thus it is that what comes out of the mouth defiles a man—with the curious suggestion (whether intended or not) that the formulation of a floating thought gives it new power to injure or to help. That is true; impression loose (as it were) in the mind, mere thought-stuff, is one thing; formulated, brought to

phrase and form, it takes on new life and force ; and when it is evil, it does defile, and in a permanent way.

Lastly (not to be too long), " no man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." The word is an interesting one (*εὐθέρος*). The man is unhandy (like Paul's haven on the north of Crete) or " not easy to place." All that is wrong with him apparently is uncertainty—he cannot make up his mind. Like the man who saves his talent but does not use it, he is not exactly bad, but he is useless. Jesus conceives that the gist of the Kingdom of Heaven is not spectacle but work, that truth is not a curiosity for the cabinet but a tool in the hand, that God's earnest world is no place for nondescripts, and that there is only one region left to which they can drift. What part or place can there be in the Kingdom of Heaven—in a Kingdom won on Calvary—for people who cannot be relied on, who cannot decide whether to plough or not to plough, nor, when they have made up their minds, stick to them ? Jesus cannot see. (What a revelation of the force and power of His own character !)

These then are the four classes we set out to consider. Sin, we find, is tracked right home into the innermost and most essential part of the man. Men set sin down as an external thing that drifted on to one like a floating burr—or like paint perhaps—it could be picked off or burnt off. It was the eating of pork or hare—something technical or accidental ; or it was (many thought) the work of a *dæmon* from without who could be driven out to whence he came. Love and drunkenness illustrated the thing for them—a change of personality induced by an exterior force or object. But for Jesus, sin is another thing, something inward, and part of us. It is not that evil befalls us, but that we *are* evil. (I know this is not fashionable talk, but it seems to me to be in the Gospels, and it is the gospel idea of sin we are



considering *ex hypothesi*. It is for those who choose to say that I misconstrue—which is one thing, or that the gospel idea is wrong—which is another. The latter assertion will carry serious consequences.) Jesus sees, then, that if sin is of us—or, to use the expression of Dr. Edward Caird, if “the passion that misleads us is a manifestation of the same *ego*, the same self-conscious reason which is misled by it”—then it is a deeply serious matter with implications of the longest range. All four groups considered so far are alike in a rejection of God’s facts and laws and appeals—they do not fairly and squarely face up to the sum total of God’s dealings with them—and in all the element of choice is involved—in all something is fundamentally wrong.

This handling of sin is at once profounder and truer than John’s, as every man knows who has been serious with himself and with God’s facts, and it implies a great deal. It involves a far profounder treatment of repentance and forgiveness than John undertook; and if, as we study the work of Christ in history, we find that sin—I mean the real thing as He saw it and as He shows it to us—has been dealt with and “put out of the way,” then, I submit, we are challenged to another inquiry, an inquiry of the profoundest seriousness, as to what is the new force, which, in the Christian Church, has prevailed over evil so essential, and so deeply rooted, and, by all other means reached in antiquity or to-day, ineradicable? Conversely, I submit, when we find that the Christian Gospel, as we have it in the New Testament and in the Church, has prevailed in this way, we are in possession of a greater and sounder apologetic than we may have thought.

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