

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 23 (336)

1 John 2. —Beloved brethren and sisters, we have in this present time to prepare for a period of great goodness to come, by giving heed to the instructions which Jesus has left for our guidance so largely and so clearly in the writings of his various servants, among whom John occupies a distinguished place.

“My little children,” says this apostle, “these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.”

This is the climax of the calling in the truth, the object of the gospel’s operations—that men and women may be brought into such relation to God that they shall not sin—shall not transgress—that they shall not be disobedient, but be obedient.

Obedience implies the existence of law, and it means compliance with that law; and our whole profession of the heavenly calling is a dead failure, if it result not in obedience to all the commandments which go to make up the law which God has given for the guidance of those whom He calls to be His children. We have a very broad indication of the scope of these commandments in the sixth verse of this chapter.

“He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.”

Proof is better than assertion: seeing is better than hearing: fruit better than blossom. If any man saith he is a brother of Christ, he ought to be able to satisfy others as well as himself. Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles. Good trees do not bring forth corrupt fruit. If the fruit is all the time nauseous, the tree is bad, notwithstanding a fair appearance of the leaf. If any man say he is a brother of Christ and walk not as Jesus walked, his profession of truth is a lie. It would be better for him not to know anything of the truth, than knowing it to disgrace it with a sin-polluted life.

Now there are many commandments for the ordering of our conversation in the sight of Him who has called us from darkness to light. All of them have an equal claim on our consideration and obedience; but some are larger and more urgent than others. First stands the necessity of living and acting for the good of other people. This is the strongest feature in the example set by Jesus, who went about doing good, ministering unto, and finally laid down his life for us. Jesus and his apostles command our imitation of their characteristics. They are the opposite of what we see in the world, where all is cold, selfish, unkind, and cruel. They are the virtues that the natural man is slowest to learn; sacrifices which he is the most liable to excuse himself from making on all sorts of virtuous and philosophic grounds; yet qualities, the very existence of which is indispensable to an enjoyable state of society, and without which, this at all times dishonourable flesh-state becomes irredeemably vile and uninteresting. No wonder that, called to a reign of benevolence (administered in subjection to law, of course), we should be called upon to cultivate that character in advance, at a time when evil prevails, and when its cultivation and practical exemplifications are more meritorious on that account. It is quite certain that a character destitute of active benevolence will not meet with approval at the judgment-seat of Christ.

We are, of course, to be on our guard against the perversion of this truth which is common in the world. There we see philanthropy exalted at the expense of truth. We see it put forward as a means by which men shall be saved, teaching inferentially that condemned man can attain to eternal life by the things he may devise to do for himself, thus shutting out the Gospel. Then the good deeds that are done, are associated with a peculiarity that was strongly reprobated by Jesus. They are much more frequently prompted by a desire to be considered good than a desire to benefit fellow creatures, or to perform a duty to God-ward. These two features of current philosophy are equally false, if not equally odious. The truth

has taught us to see this strongly, but may we not be carried too far in the opposite direction? There is no doubt the liability. The concern is to avoid the danger.

Because the world falsely makes salvation securable by kind deeds, irrespective of our relation to Christ, there is a tendency to exalt purity of doctrine to the exclusion of godliness of character in the matter in question. This were as fatal a mistake as a denial of the Gospel itself. We must continually remember that although the truth doctrinally is the beginning, and nothing can be done without it, that though we must, without fainting, contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, there is a fruit-bearing of personal holiness and well-doing, without which our knowledge of the truth will be to condemnation and not to salvation. The object of Jesus in the truth is, to purify unto himself *a peculiar people*, and their peculiarity consists in this—that they shall detest sin in every shape and form, and have a hearty affinity for matters pertaining to his will, and an active zeal for “*good works*.” Such will be known among the common run as “*peculiar*,” but know them well, and if they are the right stuff, they are admirable. They are men of kindly word and deed, whose patience you don’t soon get to the bottom of.

You, by and bye, get to know the difference between a real man and a buckram man in this respect. There will come times in everyone’s experience—even in the relations of the best friends, when a divergence of view on some little matter may cause a hitch. If your friend is a moral Buckramite—or you yourself happen to be so, which, of course, is not impossible—or worse still, both—the hitch is “ungetoverable.” A breach in base metal cannot be repaired. The Buckramite, once off the rails of good fellowship, can never be hoisted on again. He is formal and unfriendly for evermore. The true man is different from this. He forgives, and starts again, as the law of Christ requires. He works by that law in all things. His friendship does not so entirely depend, as the other’s, upon the qualities of those to whom it is extended. It is based in great part upon divine considerations. It is drawn from a deeper source than the friendship of the carnal man. It is drawn by an invisible process from the deep profound of God. He is consequently not easily discomfited. He pursues his steady way without deviation. He will be found in the path of duty, whatever may come, whatever disruption may arise, whatever evil winds may blow—alike through evil as through good report.

This is the characteristic of Christ’s true people. It is easy to make a profession of the truth. This is a day of religion-professing, and a man may as easily profess one religion as another. Let us have the true disciples of Christ, walking in the light as he was in the light—men of benevolence, men of patience, men of high honour, men of righteous practice, men of disinterested aim, and unflagging obedience—men who live now for Christ. This only, or something near it, will suffice for eternal life. The truth puts us in the way. It puts us into a position in which we may be saved. It, as it were, secures our “*entrance*” in the list for the race. This is a great thing in a day when so difficult of achievement. But let us not rest upon it. We must work out our own salvation, running with patience the race set before us. We must all at last stand before the judgment seat of Christ; and it is the mode of running that will then be in question. The subject of enquiry will not be how much of the truth we have. The thing to be brought into account will be “*works*,” which embraces all that pertains to the character of a man.

Matthew 25. brings this out. There Jesus portrays the judgment, and shows that the subject of enquiry is not the truth. The existence of the truth in the minds of those who are here, is taken for granted, for this is the basis of judgment. It is the character of two classes that the King is represented as investigating, or making manifest. To one of these classes, he says,

“I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat; thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick and in prison, and ye visited me not.”

And the self-righteous persons thus addressed, who had gone through a lifetime of profession, answer in effect, “We never saw you in such a predicament, or certainly we should have assisted you.” The rejoinder of the Judge reveals an important principle:

“Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it not unto me!”

This shows where our chance lies of doing Christ a good turn now, when he is absent and his affairs are in humiliation. Then come the other class, to whom Jesus says in commendation,

“Well done; ye are good and faithful. I was in prison, and ye visited me, I was hungry and ye gave me meat, thirsty and ye gave me drink, naked and ye clothed me.”

In their modesty, not at once perceiving the ground of such a salutation, they in effect answer, “When did we do such a thing unto thee? We have no recollection of any deeds of that description.” And Jesus brings out the principle stated in his rejoinder to the others:

“Inasmuch as ye did it to the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me.”

So the subject matter of judgment will be our individual practice while we make a profession of the truth. The great test will be, **what we have done in honour or service of Christ, while he is in the “far country.”** This, of course, includes what we do for the truth, on the self-evident principle that if what we do for the brethren of Christ is counted as done to him, the creation of those brethren by the proclamation of the truth is at least as high a service, in adding to his possessions, and his glory, and joy in the day of his manifestation; but we must by no means restrict our zeal or our activity to the spread of the truth. We must take in the whole circle of our duty. We must rise to the full standard of the new man in Christ which is formed after the image of Him that created him.

What is the foremost feature of this image? There is no mistaking it. It is LOVE; kindness; a heart of goodwill to all—true benevolence. This is what is declared of the Eternal Father, that He is gracious, long-suffering, slow to anger, of great kindness, forgiving iniquity, and doing good even to the transgressor. God is love, and He exacts of us that we shall be what He is. Christ says to us, “*Be like unto your Father, who sendeth His rain upon the just and the unjust;*” and He gives us to understand, that He will be to us as we are to others: --

“If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses.”

Our moral characteristics are, therefore, of the first importance in Christ. While unavailing for salvation to those who have not believed and obeyed the Gospel, moral excellence is everything to those who have. It is as the fruit to the seed; without which, the sowing, and the planting, and the watering are all thrown away. We are to “*bring forth much fruit*” (John 15:8), even that “*fruit which is unto holiness and the end, everlasting life*” (Romans 6:22). This fruit is expressed by Paul, thus: “*Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith*” (Gal. 5:22); and by Peter, thus: “*Virtue, temperance, godliness, brotherly kindness, charity to all men*” (2 Peter 1:5-7).

The general attitude of those aiming at fruit-bearing of this sort is thus described: “*Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, they live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world*” (Titus 2:12), and the circle of their excellent qualities is thus widely indicated:

“Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely,

whatsoever things are of good report, if there be ANY virtue, if there be ANY praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

Well might Paul exhort believers to leave first principles, and go on unto perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works (Heb. 6:1). Our salvation depends upon compliance with this apostolic rule. Peter plainly says,

*“IF these things be in you and abound, they make you neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ; but **he that lacketh these things, IS BLIND**, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins” (2 Peter 1:8-9).*

Our only safe course is to give earnest and constant heed to these “*things which we have heard,*” attending weekly on the memorial appointed by Christ, looking at all duties, realising all dangers, avoiding all hindrances, and laying hold of all helps, so that, having looked around and meditated wisely upon all things during this mortal sojourn, we may, in that day when the Son of Man shall be revealed, be prepared with a true and enlightened and well-speaking conscience, to stand before him.

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By Bro. Robert Roberts