

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 3

Once more we find ourselves in the profitable company of those who, though they be dead, yet speak, that is, the servants of God who were authorised to make known God's mind. It is a very good thing for us that what they did make known has been preserved; for if that word had been destroyed, we should have found ourselves in a very different state of things from that in which we are placed this morning. Our being what we are is in great measure due to the influence of the Bible operating through a long line of ancestry. The superiority of our civilisation is entirely owing to the circumstances that the word of God at an early time, was allowed free course in this country. The moral ideas radiating from the Bible, have circulated freely in the minds of the people, and in the long run, have tended to the development of a higher type than natively belongs to Britons. The ideas in a man's mind have much to do in determining the bent of his growth. People who are ignorant of the high principles of the word of God, speedily degenerate from a naturally high type, and their children present an exaggeration of their own inferiority, and where the process is uninterrupted, it ends in barbarism. This is illustrated in the cases of nations that have gone down to the very bottom of the scale until they are just on the verge of equality with the brutes. Our forefathers were men who painted their bodies, and performed bloody religious rites; in the present stage of the world's history, the English nation stands in the van of civilisation. She owes her position to the unconscious impregnation of Jewish ideas through many centuries. Now, what the Bible has done in a general way for our nation as a nation, it has done, in particular, for us as individuals. It has diverted our career from objectless existence into the channel of intelligent, and noble, and elevating purpose. It has arrested moral degeneracy, and given an upward bent to our growth. It has opened a way out of darkness, and sin, and wretchedness, and death, into a pathway that guides to light and life, and joy for ever. It has rescued us from the vanity of mistaken, and fruitless, and disappointing schemes, and given us, in Christ, a purpose of life that adequately engages every energy, and bears the glorious fruit of an undimmed and exhaustless future of life and love. Yet its highest result to us is still a problem. Success in the destiny to which it invites us is contingent on success in this preliminary stage of moral probation.

It must conquer us now before it will glorify us then. It entirely depends upon the extent to which we submit ourselves to it, as to how thoroughly it will do this. It can take us up to God, but we must climb. Those who submit themselves much to the Bible's influence, will, gradually and insensibly, approach nearer and nearer the end to which it leads. Progress either upwards or downwards is for the time being, an unconscious process. You do not feel which way you are going. But after a lapse of time, if you stand and look back, you can see which way you have gone, whether you have become more worldly-minded, more selfish, more insensible to divine things, or more and more awake to the higher relations of being disclosed in the Bible. It is a very pleasant experience to feel that you are making progress, but you cannot make progress unless you submit yourself to that which will induce your progress, and the only way to make certain of our progress in relation to the truth is to be continual readers of the Word—to continually submit our minds to the action of those ideas that have been evolved by the spirit through the prophets and apostles. But of course, there is a limit of wisdom to this which must be observed. A man might shut himself off entirely from intercourse with other people, and become a private student in the sense of seclusion, but this would not be a favourable or a legitimate method of study. Such a man would certainly derive benefit, and become spiritually minded in certain directions, but the benefit would only be partial. Only one side of his mind would be trained, and the result would be defective,

both to himself and others. God does not intend us to be monks or hermits. He never intended that man should be alone; —the very opposite—His intention is to develop a family—a multitude whom no man can number. He therefore calls upon us to submit ourselves to those circumstances which have reference to His ultimate purpose. He asks us to mingle with the brethren and sisters, as well as study. This fact is conspicuously exemplified in the table; the very object of its institutions is to bring us together to unite us in a collective act of remembrance. This remembrance has many sides. The faith that we profess has not exclusive reference to Jesus. It has preponderating reference to him, but it also refers to ourselves. There are two things in the perfect law of God—

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbour as thyself; on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets;”

These are the two crowning features of the divine will; therefore we must grow up to the two, and we should not be doing this if we shut ourselves up in a convent. It would be an agreeable thing to retire from the bustle of life, and settle in the quiet enjoyment of those consolations which are begotten by the Word, but it would be an ignoble and cowardly thing to do, because although there is much in the present state of things to check, to chill, and to blight, discourage and destroy; and much that we instinctively might desire to get away from, yet in escaping them, we should be running away from our duties. We must never expect in the present order of things, that society will or can be perfect; in fact, it is part of God’s arrangement that it shall not be so. The predominance of evil is the universal law of human affairs in the sin state. Those who are God’s must not shrink away and refuse the battle, but must contend. This contention extends to every aspect of life.

Evil reigns; weakness of nature besets us at every step in ourselves, and those with whom we are surrounded, and there is in all society a preponderating dead weight of indifference to divine things. Association in the truth is the aspect which more immediately affects us. It is here where we may be most damaged. We look for nothing in this world. We are apt to have too high ideas of what is attainable in the ecclesia. Christ gives a parable which has a bearing on this question. He likens the kingdom to a net cast into the sea, which draws all manner of fishes, both good and bad. Therefore, we must not come into the community drawn together by the preaching of the kingdom, with the idea that it is a perfect thing, that each person in it is really the son of God. There could be no more blissful state than that in which every man and woman should have a supreme sense of God, and with whom his law should be paramount. But such a state of things might not be good for us at present. We might, perhaps, get too much in love with mere persons and associations and forget our present position in relation to eternal law. Yet we must take care not to be disheartened in relation to the truth, because we find all things are not to our mind. What we must do is to pluck up a good courage, and move neither to the right hand nor to the left, but be steadfast, always doing what we ought to be doing, whatever others may be saying, thinking, or doing. Never mind other people. Wherever their influence is calculated to dishearten and discourage—fear—endure; mix kindness with resolution: this is God’s will. We ought not to take notice of everything; we ought not to speak of every weakness we see, because the flesh is a weak thing at best. Let things slide, unless there is a breach compromising the authority of Christ, or dishonouring and weakening to the truth. Where a man openly disobeys Christ, or corrupts the faith, that would be a thing to take notice of; a thing that we could not countenance, and be guiltless. But even then we are not to act as judges; and say “You are a miserable sinner, not fit for our company.” What we have to do is this: for our own sakes, and as a matter of individual duty, we say “You must step aside from us, please, because we consider that we should be doing wrong if we were to continue our

connection with you, in your present condition.” That would be all we could do; but then there are a thousand little weaknesses and faults that do not amount to deliberate or intended violation of Christ’s law—the mere ebullition of weakness, which the individual is himself sorry for. If you take him to task, you destroy his sorrow and enkindle resentment, and evil is done. The best thing is to forbear: this is the lesson of the apostle:

“Forbear one another in love, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

This view of the matter is always brought out by Paul in his letters—that if we ourselves were to be measured by the standard we may be disposed to apply to others, we should be found greatly wanting. We have to be forgiven much and must forgive. There are many derelictions of duty—oversights, faults, offences, it may be—that God is pleased to pass by, at our request through Christ; and we have to cultivate a similar disposition toward those who err through weakness. Be kindly and forbearing to everybody but yourself. Be very merciless with yourself. Judge yourself by the highest standard. Allow no excuse for your own deficiency. Ever afflict your soul and press higher. If everyone did this, —but that is coming back to that which I said could not be, —we should have a very delightful community. Let us judge ourselves; others we must greatly leave alone, except under the special circumstances already hinted at. We are not to be indifferent about the truth. Some people say that because Christ says *“Judge not,”* therefore, we are not to trouble ourselves as to who is in the truth, and who is not. This is a misapplication of his word. The position of a man in relation to the truth, is just what we are to judge. We are not to judge who of those having the truth are really God’s, but we are to try the spirits whether they be of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. We are “to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered unto the saints.” We are not, for one moment, to give way to those who would corrupt the truth. Here we are to withstand delinquency. This is quite another thing. The principles laid down in the apostolic exhortation apply only to those who receive the faith, who believe the truth, and reject the fables. With those who reject the truth, we are not in association; but as to those who receive it, we are not to say that such and such are not of God’s; this is the place for our charity. Where there is a profession of obedience, and an external consistency; we are to throw a broad mantle overall. Think the best and act the kindest; take no notice of all weaknesses you see—forget things. This is our duty. It is a misfortune to our own selves if we have that feverish tendency to be critical which some exhibit—that unhappy nervousness about other people’s failings. It destroys happiness. No man can grow spiritually who is in a continual state of acrimony. He cannot evince that kindness of deportment which ought to characterise the intercourse of brethren and sisters, certainly not to the individual against whom the bitterness is harboured. The latter sees the coldness and is repelled, and made cold in return. He mentions it to another; the other is involved in the heat, and thus the evil spreads. If there is a grievous departure from the way of truth, we must speak to a brother about it, but let us speak about it privately. Don’t report the matter. If there is no departure from the way of truth, but merely the exhibition of constitutional weakness, be patient; take no notice. Instead of this, you go to another, and say “Why So and So has been behaving shamefully, hasn’t he?” “How,” says the other, “what is it?” and then you let off your story, which, if ever so trifling in its origin in your mind, makes a deep impression upon the mind of the other—an impression, it may be, not warranted by the original facts, but inevitably created by your representation. If you feel a thing strongly, you express it strongly, and the other having only your strong expressions to go by, naturally conceives a vivid and overdrawn picture of the matter. The result is that when he is thrown in contact with the man against whom you have been speaking, there is a coldness. Others hear of it and catch the

cold, and there is a general brewing of bad feeling, all through next to nothing at all. It is as Solomon says,

“A little matter kindleth a great fire;”

“A tale-bearer separateth friends.”

Tale-bearers ought to be kept down. They ought not to be listened to. It is their duty to go to the person themselves. This is Christ’s rule, and there are a lot of little rules, which if they were observed, would cause a much better state of things to prevail. If brethren are trying to do their best, encourage them. Do not repeat things. Let us do our duty. All these things are hinted at in what Peter says in the chapter read:

“Wherefore, laying aside all malice and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby.”

Now, this is very beautiful. When a person is full of unfriendly gossip—under the dominion of cantankerous feelings, which burn in his own bosom, and spread wherever he goes, how can the Word have a place in his heart? It is impossible. There is no more fatal thing than the fermentation of roots of bitterness, and Paul puts brethren on their guard. But such spring up, and many are hurt by them. Peter says—

“Put these things away, and let your mind, as a newborn babe, desire the milk of the word.”

We shall have a strong relish for spiritual things indeed, if this is the case. A newborn babe has an unquenchable affinity for its mother’s breast; nothing short of what it gets from its mother will make it grow. Peter says this is how we ought to be in relation to the Word. If this is our state, we cannot be permanently hurt. The mind will soon get back to its tranquillity and purity. A man who is under the control of the Word gets quickly over little disturbances; they are quite transient and accidental, and soon go off; but if the mind is not under the control of the Word, it is the other way. The serenity is accidental; the malignity and unhappiness of the fleshly mind is chronic. True liberty and happiness that will not grow old are only to be found in connection with the things that are of God. They are a well-spring of everlasting life, from which we are invited now to drink deeply.

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