

PAUL AND TRUE GODLINESS

We cannot do better, on the present occasion, than return to the consideration of Paul as the model which Christ has avowedly set forth for the study and imitation of all succeeding generations of disciples. So many other models are pressed upon our attention in modern times, and we are in daily contact with so much that is alien to the case and principles of Paul, that it is a matter of necessity that we look closely at, and conform as much as we can, to the standard to which Christ would have us rise. God said to the adversary of Job:

Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth . . . one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?"

The case before us is as if Christ said to us: "Hast thou considered my servant Paul, who is a chosen vessel unto me, and an example of what I desire to see in all my brethren?"

We have looked at him in the ardour of his devotion to Christ; in his modest self-estimate, yet courageous assertion of personal truth, and in his disinterested concern for the poor. There are many other notable points in the picture. The most conspicuous, perhaps, is that in which he presents so complete a contrast to the secular-minded "civilisation" of our day—namely, his constant, practical, robust-minded, unaffected recognition of God. God is in the foreground of all he does, says, or thinks. God is not a theory with him—not a doctrine merely—not an intellectual conception—but a fact perceived and taken into account in as matter-of-fact a way as a man does his friend or the weather. His gospel is not merely the gospel of the Kingdom: it is first, the "*gospel of God*" (1 Thess. 2:9). He thought of himself as a personal agent of God, by whom God approached men with entreaty to be conformed and reconciled to Him, in a personal sense.

"We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

To the Athenians, he placed the presentation of God first:

"Whom ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you—God that made the world, and all things therein" (Acts 17:23).

"He commandeth all men everywhere to repent."

Again, to the men of Lystra, he said:

"We preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, who made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein" (Acts 14:15).

The message from God—the gospel in its technical sense—is placed second, which is a natural order of ideas. This message is summarised in the fact of His "*having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself*" (Eph. 1:9). A man aware of this message, but not acquainted and in friendship with God Himself, is not in the circle of the saintship, to which we are invited by the hand of Paul. Let us beware of those beggarly presentations of Paul's gospel, which leave out its warmth and its colour and its glory. The love of God is the first feature of the house of God, which Paul laboured to establish. Without it, Paul's doctrines become so many rattling bones with which slaves of the flesh may perhaps make music to themselves, like the dusky buffoons of modern minstrelsy, but which are of no benefit to anybody unless they are in fervid love with God, from whom they originate. It was the fault Jesus found with the Pharisees that, with all their compliances with Moses, "*they had not the love of God in them*" (John 5:42). They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:43). It is the possibly (illustrated in more cases than one) that we may acknowledge Christ and know the elementary facts of the truth, and yet, while having thus a name to live, be dead, knowing not the Father, who is the head of Christ, and apart from whom Christ has no meaning. To love God was more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. This was the sentiment of one of the Scribes, the expression of which elicited from Christ the remark that he was not far from the kingdom of God (Mark 12:34). So, to love God is more than all money-spending, meeting-holding, and doctrine-defining that men may engage in, without a sanctifying recognition of the Creator of heaven and earth. These things have their place, but if they are without Paul's love of God, they are as salt without savour. It was the first of the great commandments—that men should love God with all their strength and soul and mind. This is the "*first commandment*" both of the law and the gospel. It is one exemplified in the case of Paul, who, even before his

enlightenment, worshipped the God of his fathers, and was zealous towards Him (Acts 22:3), and afterwards was a living embodiment of it in all its manifold relations.

In our day, men are ashamed to acknowledge God. Even when there is a professional recognition of Him in a ceremonial way, it is obscured in Latin words (*Deo Volente*) and these are pared down to their smallest form—their first letters. Men, who think they ought at all events to appear pious, propose to do so and so, “D.V.”

This is very different from Paul’s straightforward, sincere and manly—“*if the Lord will.*” “D.V.” is reducing the recognition of God to its smallest dimensions. It is not in reality a recognition and confession of God, but a compliance with the conventionalism of the Gentile apostasy from apostolic truth and simplicity—a respectable system which overshadows the world with the shadow of death and from which every earnest man will seek to deliver himself by a return to the clear and healthy and saving example of Paul.

His recognition of God even in common things, is constant and natural. He is, in fact, a good example of what James means when he refers deprecatingly to those who say,

“Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.”

Says James (4:14),

*“Ye know not what shall be on the morrow . . . Ye ought to say, **If the Lord will**, we shall live, and do this or that.”*

This was the habit of Paul, our example from Christ. Parting with the brethren at Ephesus, he said,

*“I will return again unto you, **if God will**”* (Acts 18:21).

Writing to the Corinthians as to the prospect of a visit, he says (1 Cor. 4:19),

*“I will come to you shortly, **if the Lord will.**”*

So to the Romans, he says he had “*made request in prayer that he might have a prosperous journey to them **by the will of God***” (1:10); and he asks them to pray that “*he might come to them with joy **by the will of God***” (15:32). The brethren following his example when they could not dissuade Paul from running into danger at Jerusalem, said,

“The will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14).

Peter in the same line of things, recognised that if any brother found himself in circumstances of suffering, it was the will of God (1 Pet. 3:17), and “*according to that will*” (4:19). If a door was opened to Paul, it was opened to him “*of the Lord*” (2 Cor. 2:12). If Paul lived in all good conscience, it was “*before God*” (Acts 23:1). If he spoke with special emphasis, it was before God in Christ (2 Cor. 12:19). If he abstained from lying, it was before God (Gal. 1:20). If he addressed himself to Timothy in a specially solemn way, it was before God (1 Tim. 5:21; 2 Tim. 4:1). If he desired a witness to the truth of his assertions, it was God whom he served (Rom. 1:9; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:5). If he desired to comfort the brethren, his appeal was to the fact that God was faithful, **who would not suffer them** to be tempted above that they were able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13), and who was able to make all grace abound toward them (2 Cor. 9:8); and so on, through many examples. Paul, like the Lord himself, set God always before him. It was the constant vision of his mental man. He is our example. Do not be satisfied with any other. Beware of the blighting influence of refined society, or the example of the vulgar in this matter. The world lieth in wickedness. It knows not God. Its ways and thoughts and habits are odious in His eyes; and we are in danger of being conformed to all these. Listen to the command of the Spirit by Paul, which says,

“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove (or realise in yourselves) what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

“In all thy ways acknowledge him.”

In view of Paul’s habitual recognition of God, it is natural to find that he was a man of prayer—another feature of our model to consider. Almost his first appearance on the page of New Testament history exhibits him in this aspect. Jesus said to Ananias, when directing him where to find Saul of Tarsus,

“Behold, he prayeth” (Acts 9:11).

Immured in prison at Philippi, in the darkness and silence of night,

“Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises” (Acts 16:25).

Bidding farewell with the Ephesian brethren at Miletus,

"He knelt down and prayed with them all" (20:36).

Visiting at the temple, he prayed (22:17). Even before a large ship's company,

"He gave thanks to God in presence of them all" (27:35).

He prayed for the brethren—

"We pray always for you" (2 Thess. 1:11).

"I thank God upon every remembrance of you. Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy" (Phil. 1:4).

"I make mention of you always in my prayers" (Rom. 1:9).

"We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you" (Col. 1:3), "night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face" (1 Thess. 3:10).

He often asks the brethren to pray for him:

"Brethren, pray for us" (2 Thess. 3:1; Heb. 13:18).

"Strive with me in your prayers to God for me"

(Rom. 15:30).

"I trust, through your prayers, I shall shortly be given to you" (Philem. 22).

He makes it a matter of urgent exhortation that the brethren should give themselves to prayer:

"Pray always with all prayer in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18).

"In everything, by prayer and supplication, let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:6).

"I will that men pray everywhere" (1 Tim. 2:8).

"Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you"

(1 Thess. 5:17-18).

Paul's familiar communications with the brethren were tinged with the same spirit of godliness. There is no levity; no avoidance of allusions to the truth to conciliate unjustified men, the fear of whom bringeth a snare. He exemplified in himself the exhortation he gave to the brethren:

"Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt . . . sound speech, that cannot be condemned . . . neither jesting nor foolish talking, which are not convenient, but rather giving of thanks."

When he saw the brethren, on his journey towards Rome, *"he thanked God and took courage"* (Acts 28:15). His salutations are all divine. Examine every epistle: he brings God and Christ into all his greetings. Are we to follow Paul or the paganism of modern atheistic custom? Modern paganism will soon be swept from the face of the earth, and make way for the glory of the Lord, which will be inscribed even on the bells of the horses. If we conform to the world, we shall perish with the world. Our part—our duty—our wisdom is to conform to the image of the new man of which Christ has given us so abundant an example in Paul.

There are several other features. Paul was affectionately interested in the brethren. He writes to the Thessalonians:

"Being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted to you not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us" (1 Thess. 2:8).

This is a contrast to the social ideal of the nineteenth century, of which polite indifference is a prominent feature. It is considered weak to be affectionate, and small to be sympathetic. Men harden each other in pride, and miscall it by many fine names, which gloss over the monstrosity, and perpetuate a strained and tyrannous etiquette which blights the fruit of the Spirit. Paul represents a totally different school, i.e., the school of Christ, who himself was meek and lowly, and not ashamed even of tears. He wept at the death of Lazarus; he wept over Jerusalem; he made supplication with *"strong crying and tears"* (Heb. 5:7). Paul also appears before us as a tender-hearted man moved frequently to tears. He *"served the Lord with many tears"* (Acts 20:19). He *"ceased not to warn every one of the brethren, night and day, with tears"* (verse 31). He wrote to the Corinthians *"with many tears"* (2 Cor. 2:4). He told the Philippians—even weeping in the act of writing—of false brethren, who were enemies of Christ (Phil. 3:18). He was touched at the entreaties of the brethren, who sought to dissuade him from going, in the teeth of danger, to Jerusalem. He said,

“What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13).

In this, also, we have an exhibition of his courage and enterprise in the service of Christ, as well as his susceptibility to tender emotion. The ideal brother of Christ, as represented in Paul, is not all head; he is a tender-hearted loving man.

There may be many who are called brethren, through whom the truth is brought into reproach, who conform not at all to the Pauline standard. They are contentious without being faithful; intelligent, without being loving; courageous without being humble; bold, without being reverent. They are self-assertive, without being regardful of others; sensitive to human opinion, without the fear of God; manly and resolute, without being sympathetic and considerate. Wise men will resist the influence of this class, and seek to neutralise it by the exhibition and assertion of the model Christ has given us in Paul. This model we have only partially outlined in the matters passed in review. It is in the power of everyone to make its closer acquaintance in the daily and attentive reading of Paul's most wonderful epistles. The details exhibited, however, present a sufficiently complete picture for practical purposes.

Summarising then, we have found a man of good conscience and modest self-estimate; yet of bold self-assertion when necessary; an earnest, ardent, devoted, thorough-going friend and servant of Christ; supremely, yea, exclusively interested in Christ's affairs on earth, for which he entertained an appreciation amounting to enthusiasm. We have found him a benevolent man, mindful of the needs of others; interested in the brethren; solicitous of their welfare, and compassionate of the poor. We have found him a man of sympathy, of affection, and of tenderness of heart, even to tears. We have found him, above all, a lover of God, a man of prayer, with constant recognition and regard for the will of God in all his matters, and a constant exemplification of sobriety and godliness.

In these particulars we have a copy set before us by Christ to imitate. Shall we give up the attempt because it is difficult? Our copying may be blundering and blotted in the first stages; but with perseverance, like the children who pore over the desks at school, we shall find the progress grow easier with every effort, until, at last, we shall attain to a degree of approximation that may, at first, seem impossible. Let us remember that in the Master of the school, we have a merciful and faithful high priest, who knows our infirmities, and will make allowance for our shortcomings, if only we are attentive and diligent scholars. He ever liveth to make intercession for us; and in all our struggles with the old man within, and the seductive world without, having himself suffered, being tempted, he is able also to succour them that are tempted. Such is Paul's assurance to us (Heb. 2:18), who also says, in view of the very fact (4:16):

“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

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Pages 370-375

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