



SUNDAY READING

SERMON.

Lawfulness and Expediency.

BY REV. THOMAS DYKES, D. D.

"All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient."—1 Cor. vi. 12.

These words are used twice in this epistle; but, though they are repeated in almost precisely the same form, the connection is somewhat different. In this passage the apostle says, "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient;" and then he adds, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." The point of view, therefore, from which the subject is here regarded is that of spiritual liberty. The element of expediency enters very largely into the exercise of that freedom, which is the right of Christian conscience. For we are to judge of things not simply by the standard of what is right and wrong; but also in many cases by the question of what is wisest in given circumstances. There are many things in themselves good which may not be expedient. There are many things which are quite legitimate in themselves; but which may be done in such a way, or at such a time, that they are unfeeling. Well now, what St. Paul implies is that to judge of what should be done, and what should not be done, in the light of expediency, is part of the liberty with which Christ has made us free. There is not an absolute unvarying rule applying to all the contingencies of human conduct, and all the ever-varying circumstances of life; but there is a certain discretionary freedom which belongs to Christians—a freedom to act according to what seems best and wisest.

That, then, is one view which the apostle propounds on the subject of regard to expediency—that it is essential to our freedom that we should give due regard to it. But, when we return to the other passage in which the words of my text are used by St. Paul, we find them used in a different connection, but one which is equally instructive. He says, in the tenth chapter of this same epistle, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not." That is the social view of expediency—its claims as a duty to our neighbour. There are hundreds of things, which are perfectly right in themselves; but which may be so out of season, and so unwise, that they tend to do harm instead of good. Thus, for example, there can be no doubt that beneficence to the poor and suffering is one of the most imperative of all obligations. And yet there is just a little doubt that, unless that virtue is exercised with the greatest care—unless there is the most anxious watchfulness as to the application of charity, it is extremely apt to do harm. Or take the case of persons who are very zealous for the promotion of religion. Nothing could be more Christian in itself than that. And yet there are many instances in which the most earnest people, in their efforts to advance the cause of religion, really act to its prejudice; just because they have not that regard to the fitness of things, or the tendencies of human nature, which is needed to make their work effectual. In short, over and above the question of what it is lawful to do in our relations to others, there is the question of what is expedient to do. There is a very wide region of social duty, which is covered by considerations of prudence. There are many points occurring in the common course of everyone's life, where the great thing needed is to act so as to promote the highest good—so as to subserve the truest advantage, the truest interests—of our fellowmen. Well, as regards all such matters, we are to be guided by the question of expediency. No precise rule can be laid down with reference to them. They require the exercise of that discretion, which alone can direct us what it is best for us to do amidst the varying circumstances of duty.

The distinction, therefore, which the apostle makes when he says, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient," opens up a subject of wide interest and importance. There is a certain province of human conduct which is clearly marked; its outlines are so distinctly defined that we cannot mistake them. But, on the other hand, there is a large number of things, in regard to which there is no law, except the law of spiritual wisdom—the law of that apostolic precept, "Be ye not unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

I ask you to look, in the first place, at the circumstances in the condition of the Corinthian church, to which St. Paul applied this distinction; and we shall afterwards consider some of the lessons which it has for us in the conduct of our daily lives.

1. The special circumstances which led St. Paul to make use of the words of my text are as remote as possible from the conditions of religious life at the present day; while, at the same time, they present certain strong points of resemblance to modern experience. It appears that a violent controversy had arisen in the Corinthian church, which was produced by the heathen surroundings amidst which it was placed. It is difficult for us, in the altered conditions of life in which our lot is cast, to realise that a Christian community could be rent asunder by a matter so trifling;—that very small matters often awaken bitter controversy. The case was this—of the meat which was offered for sale in the public market of Corinth, a considerable part consisted of bodies of animals, a portion of which had been offered for sacrifice in the heathen temples. Well, many of the Christians said that it was wrong to buy and partake of such meat. They argued that, having been used to provide sacrifices to idols, these carcasses had been defiled, and that to eat of them was to commit sin. On the other hand, a number of the Chris-

tians—the more independent and strong-minded of the Christians—contended that no harm could be done by partaking of meat which had provided the sacrificial offerings in heathen worship. They said that "an idol was nothing in the world;" that whether the meat sold in the market had done duty in heathen rites really mattered nothing at all—that it was neither the better nor the worse of that. As commonly happens in disputes of this kind, each party stood stiffly upon its own opinion. Neither would give way to the other. And the result was that the Christian church at Corinth was threatened with serious rupture.

Now, let us see how St. Paul dealt with a state of matter involving such serious difficulties. He exhorted the Corinthian believers that the whole subject was one which should be settled by considering what was to be most for the good of the church. He deprecated the question which had arisen about the eating of certain meat being made a question of supreme moment. He said that the question must be viewed in the light of wisdom, in the light of charity, because it did not involve anything of essential importance; and that the contending parties must seek to promote each others good, instead of disputing about what was really unimportant.

When we survey the history of the Christian church, do we not find that a great many of the bitterest controversies, which have agitated the church, and have broken up Christian people into conflicting parties, have been about points, which have as little importance as this question, which threatened to rend asunder the Corinthian church so long ago? Take, for instance, forms of church government. Well, people have disputed about these with the greatest possible keenness; and have ranged themselves in open hostility to one another, according as they had by this mode of church government, or that. And you will still find not a few, who are prepared to denounce those who differ from them in this respect. They make a man's church-connection equivalent to his Christianity. But the truth is, that the mere external form of polity which anyone may adopt—the mere type of church government to which he adheres—does not constitute, and cannot constitute, an absolute vital matter. Christianity lies deeper than modes of government and ecclesiastical order. It lies in sincerity of heart, and doing justly, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. And, whatever may be the ecclesiastical communion with which a man may be identified, it is his spirit and character, he is accepted with the All-Seeing and All-Merciful God. And the same thing holds as regards forms of worship. Very frequently, in the past history of the church, there have been most violent controversies as to the forms and ceremonies of Christian worship. And sometimes the point in dispute has been of the most trifling character. There are persons who attach such tremendous importance to some minute observance, or some matter of mere form, that one would think that it is the very essence of religion. But religion is far other than that. "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink"—it is not this ritual or the other ritual, it is not forms and outward modes of devotion, however useful these may be—it is "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

Now, you will see that the principle on which St. Paul here deals with such matters is one that lifts them high above the level on which they have so often been treated by the professed followers of Christ. He says in effect that they are not vital—that they do not belong to the essence of religion—and therefore, in his argument, they are to be used as expediency shall direct. Now, that is really the apostolic principle in regard to mere forms, mere outward things pertaining to religion. There is no rule about these things, except the great general rule that we are to act with reference to them as may be most expedient—most expedient for the wants and the good of the church—most expedient for the edifying of the body of Christ.

II. And now let us look at some of the other and more general applications of the same principle. "All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient." That is a rule which we are to take with us into the ordinary conduct of life. In trying to do good, for example, quite as much depends upon what you do being wise and fitting, as upon its being right. You may say, for instance, what is perfectly true and perfectly right in itself to some one you want to help; but, unless you choose the fitting time to do it, and do it in a becoming way, your words will do a great deal more harm than good. Much of the charm of good-doing lies in the manner in which it is done about. I have no doubt you have all yourselves felt this. You have felt that some persons who have wanted to do you good took the wrong way to do it, and the result was that their efforts rather hindered than helped you. A word or an action depends largely upon its accompanying circumstances. And therefore, you see, there is needed continually in all the work of life, and in all the duties of Christian service, the wisdom that will judge aright of the necessities of the case, and of the proper mode and the proper season to act, not less than the earnest spirit of Christian devotedness.

Well, look at the example of Christ Himself in His course of ceaseless labor for the good of others. One of the most beautiful features in Christ's life of good-doing was the perfect fitness of what He did—its harmony with the occasion and the circumstances—its keen appreciation of what was most wise and suitable. Thus you remember His rebuke of Peter's apostasy. The mode in which Peter would have been dealt with by most persons would have been to openly charge him with the baseness of his conduct and the dreadfulness of his offence. But the Saviour's look as he passed from the judgment hall, and afterwards his three-repeated question, "Lovest thou Me?" were on unspeakably more powerful appeal to the erring disciple. Or, you remember again, Christ being accused of "receiving sinners and eating with them." How, most people in the circumstances

would have defended themselves in indignant terms. But see what Christ does. He offers no defence; but He speaks the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the murmurs of His enemies are effectually silenced, and all the people rejoice at His gracious words. Or—to take one more instance—you remember Christ's treatment of Zaccheus, who bore the bad reputation of having lived a dishonest life. Most moral teachers would have denounced the offender for his misdeeds. But Christ said, "Zaccheus, make haste and come down, for today I must abide at thy house," and that day salvation came to the repentant Zaccheus. Let us learn, then, a great lesson from all this. Do not forget that there is a wrong way, as well as a right way, of doing what is good. Many things which are lawful are not expedient. Even those things which are good and right in themselves, if they are done in the wrong way, or at the wrong time, will cause what is good to be evil spoken of. Let us seek to learn the lesson of Christian expediency as a rule of life. Remember that, as in a picture, each single detail must not only be well executed, but must be in harmony with the surroundings, so there is a rule of spiritual fitness in life. The unwise zeal, which selects an unseasonable occasion, or an imprudent way of acting, may be as disastrous in its results as the intentional doing of wrong.

Let the effect of our consideration of this subject be to teach us that Christian duty requires our regard as to what is expedient not less than to what is lawful. The secret of the highest Christian influence lies in the "understanding heart," which chooses the right time and way to act, as well as the right thing to do. Let us seek to imitate the example of our Master, whose converse with men was pervaded by the wise discrimination that made His words and actions instinct with divine beauty. Let us ask the guidance of the Spirit of God, amidst the ever-changing conditions of life, so that we may wisely speak and act, and may exemplify not only "whatsoever things are true and just," but also "whatsoever things are lovely and of good report."

The Jewish Sabbath.

The law fenced round the Sabbath with a thousand petty rules and troublesome ceremonies that found no place in the mind of Moses when he brought down from Mount Sinai, amid the thunders of heaven, the beautiful commandment to keep the seventh day holy. I will tell you a few of the many little laws, but the whole of them would fill a book. Some of them are wise and good, and are to be found in the Old Testament; but a greater number were added long after the Jewish ceremonial law had been ordained. A Sabbath journey was one thousand paces. No man might walk farther than one thousand paces on the Sabbath. No burden might be carried; and nails were forbidden in shoes, because they were considered as a burden. A tailor must not have his needle in his pocket towards sunset on Friday, lest the sun should set while he was not thinking about it, and he should find himself with the burden of his needle still on his person. Indeed, all persons carefully emptied their pockets, lest they might carry about with them some forbidden burden. The amount of weight that might be carried was specially ordered, and no one dared go beyond what was permitted. Thus one man alone might not carry a loaf, but two men together might, as they divided the weight. Only particular knots might be tied on the Sabbath. The sailor's knot and the camel-driver's were both forbidden; and no knot might be untied that required the use of both hands, but as it could be fastened by one hand it might be done. No food might be cooked on the Sabbath, no vessels washed, and no fires lighted. All these things had to be done during the Friday night before the sun set, in preparation for the Sabbath. —The Child's Life of Christ.

A Significant Omission.

Many years ago, at a time when infidelity was rife on the continent, and when Voltaire had filled the minds of men with blasphemies, it was ironically said, "where is Nineveh, the great city of three days' journey?" The answer to that question has been given within the memory of many now living. An enterprising traveller (late English ambassador at Constantinople, Sir H. A. Layard) dug down and down into the sand heap that covered the reported site, until at last Nineveh in all its ruined magnificence was disclosed to view. But Rawlinson, the great oriental traveller, did more than this. He found out the meaning of the hieroglyphics inscribed on the walls of the buried city, and from the records on its stones was enabled to have the whole history of Sennacherib, king of Assyria. There was, however, one particular fact omitted in the stone history. The reason for that omission may be found in 2 Kings, xix, 23, 33: "Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the King of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield nor cast a bank against it. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord." Although Sennacherib took all the fenced cities of Judaea, and that fact is recorded, his failure to take Jerusalem is passed over. God, as appears in the Bible, sent forth His angel and destroyed his army; and the king went back ashamed to tell of his defeat.

How to Help the Memory.

"I don't know," said a gentleman to Andrew Fuller, "how it is that I can remember your sermons better than those of any other minister; but such is the fact." "I cannot tell," replied Mr. Fuller, "unless it be owing to simplicity of arrangement. I pay particular attention to this part of composition, always placing things together that are related to each other, and that naturally follow each other in succession. For instance, suppose I were to say to my servant, 'Betty, you must go and buy some butter, and starch, and cream, and soap, and tea, and b'n'e, and sugar, and cakes.' 'Betty would be very apt to say, 'Master, I shall never be able to remember all these.' But suppose I were to say, 'Betty, you know that your mistress is going to have some friends to tea tomorrow, and that you are going to wash the day following; and that for the tea-party you will want tea, and sugar, and cream, and cakes, and butter, and for the washing you will want soap, and starch, and blue.' Betty would instantly reply, 'Yes, master, I can now remember them all very well.'"

He Drank Water.

John Wesley's views on temperance were whole-hearted and thorough. He writes in his journal:—"I can hardly believe that I am this day entered into the sixty-eighth year of my age! How marvelous are the ways of God! How has He kept me even from a child! From ten to thirteen or fourteen, I had little but bread to eat, and not great plenty of that. I believe this was so far from hurting me that it laid the foundation of lasting health. When I grew up, in consequence of reading Dr. Cheyne, I chose to eat sparingly and drink water. This was another means of continuing my health." In a letter to the Bishop of London in 1747, he says:—"Since I have taken Dr. Cheyne's advice I have been free—blessed be God—from all bodily disorders."—Heroes in the Strife.

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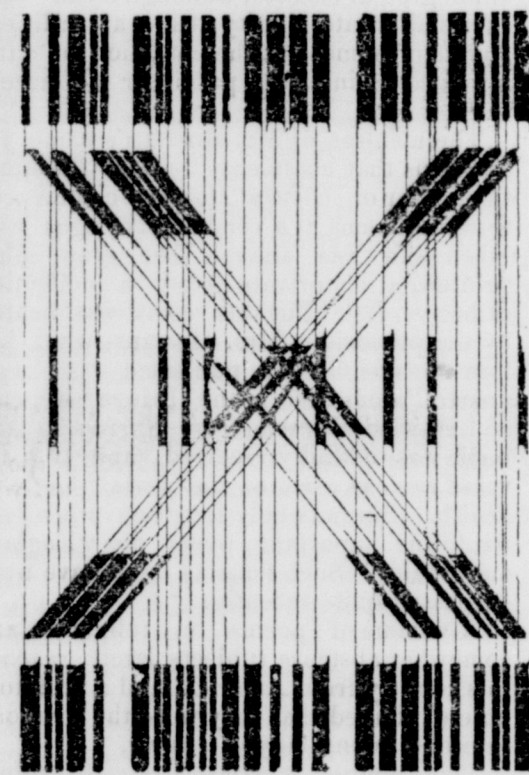
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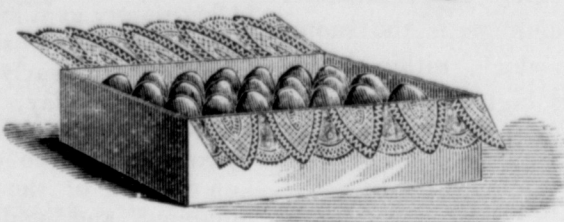
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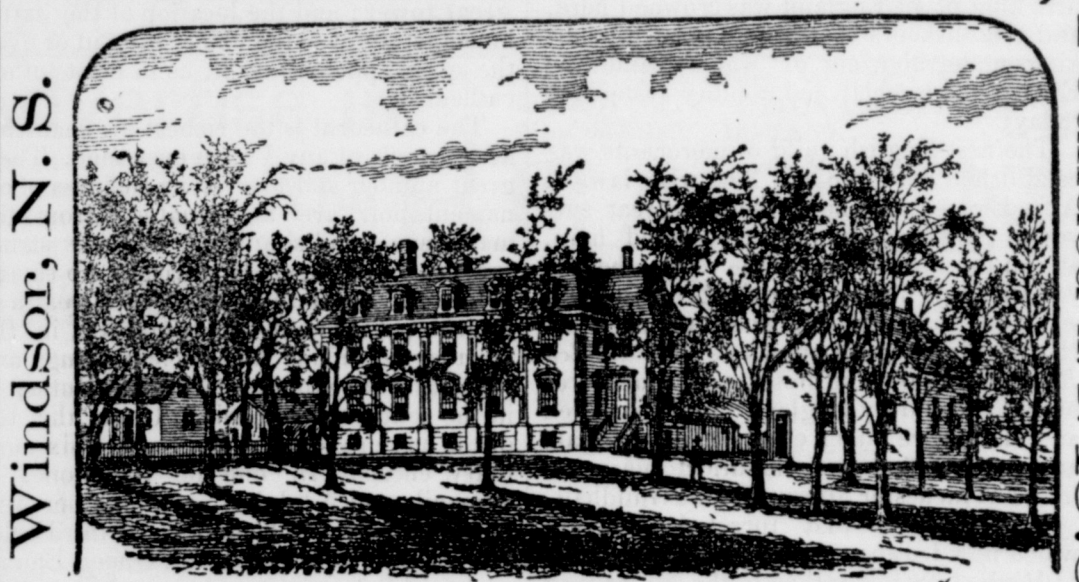
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