



SUNDAY READING

SERMON.

Forgiveness, and After.

By REV. ALEXANDER BROWN.

Preached in St. Paul-street Evangelical Union Church, Aberdeen.

"There is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king which would take account of his servants."—MATT. XVIII. 23-35.

Peter was a generous-hearted man, but at the best he makes a poor appearance beside the Master. "Shall I forgive seven times?" he asks, believing himself to be quite heroic in his liberality. To forgive a man seven times for the same fault is, indeed, a most unusual stretch of charity; but to go thus far, then to suddenly cry "Halt!" and harden up, so that the eighth offence becomes unpardonable, implies a change of feeling and of principle too sudden to be healthy. It is unnatural, and being unnatural is at the same time unwise. Christ's injunction is—"Put no limit to your acts of mercy; forgive whoever it is needed. Your duty is settled by no numerical rule, but by your brother man's necessity. Your charity should be endless, like the charity of God, and thus will you be the children of your Father which is in heaven." Our Lord proceeds further to expound this law, and in fact to lay before us something like a complete outline of the moral politics of God's kingdom—a trenchant exposition of the principles of mercy and justice in the Christian government of God.

The Divine Righteousness.

The fundamental moral principle in God's Kingdom is righteousness. "A certain king would take account of his servants." There are many who have failed to notice that the gospel, the good news of the kingdom, comes to us, first of all, as the news of iniquity and of judgment, the institution of a strict account between God and man. The gospel is popularly identified with pity and compassion, and the eager welcome that it gets from many is due to the belief that it dispenses with reckoning of judgment by the message of a mercy which is so soft and gentle that it hardly makes mention of our sin. This common notion is superficial and mistaken. God never comes to men with a fresh revelation without awakening in their souls a sharper sense of righteousness and sin. The brighter vision which He gives us of His holiness so vivifies our sense of responsibility and sin that we feel His coming to be like an advancing judgment day. The child who is left at home with strict injunctions as to its conduct, but who disobeys, will perhaps for a time have little sense of wrongdoing; but when the finger of the clock is pointing toward the hour when the parent has promised to return, the thought of that returning parent is the revival of its sense of guilt. The clerk who has been intruding with his employer's cash is scarcely troubled in his mind so long as his superior behaves as if he were a distant man; but when he is seen to look into the books, or to approach with a serious air as if something weighty lay upon his mind, then the sense of apprehension comes. He may be one of the kindest of men, but yet his near approach to the book in which the secret is still hid, is to that guilty clerk like a section of the day of judgment. And so, when God draws near to men, His coming, apart from His express intention, is the awakening of the conscience to a keener sense of responsibility, the deepening of its guilt, the kindling of remorse and shame and fear. Such was the effect on Moses, on Isaiah in the Temple, and on Peter when he saw the flashing glory of Christ's Divinity. No man is rightly touched by the Gospel unless one of the earliest experiences awakened is the sense of guilt and shame. "When the Spirit is come He shall convince the world of sin, of righteousness and judgment." A solemn sense of God's awful righteousness looking with a searching eye upon our sin is needed as a forerunner of salvation; for until we feel our guilt and confess the justice of God's condemnation, we are in no condition either to desire or to receive the mercy that God is willing to bestow.

It is the same all through the Christian life. The Gospel is a law of righteousness as surely as a law of love. Christ died for us not to free us from the law, but to enable us to adopt a higher law of duty. From the converted man God demands not less, but more. No moment in his life is free from the burden of responsibility. We are always sowing, and behind every seed-time comes a harvest. Over against the closing scene of life there rises the vision of the great white throne, where every man is rewarded according to his works. This thought should give solemnity and depth of tone to every hour of life. Considering what we are, we live too triflingly. We forget that God is near. Remembering His presence we would not willfully violate His laws. Our action and our speech would be purer and holier. Feeling ourselves grieved by those laws which are either His blessing or His avenging hands, we would feel the reality of that significant utterance of old: "I am the Lord which exercise judgment and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight."

Heavenly Mercy.

In God's Kingdom the demand for righteousness is accompanied by the needful mercy. While the gospel demands that the righteousness of the law shall be fulfilled in us, it is quite as essentially the message of heaven's mercy. The servant in this parable is no sooner humbled by the demands of justice than, upon the confession of his helplessness and desire to make amends, he is abundantly forgiven. The judgment of his master was at once his condemnation and deliverance, and in the moment when he felt himself confessing he was conscious that he was also freely and graciously forgiven.

Now, what I want to press upon you

here is this. It is no hard task for a sinful man to obtain forgiveness from his God. This servant's repentance was neither very broad nor very radical. The man was by no means a noble specimen of his race. There was in him no conspicuous merit to make him worthy of such generous treatment as to have his debt of nigh £2,000,000 frankly and at once forgiven. Therefore the picture is expressly intended to convey the fact that in the heart of God there is no reluctance to forgive, and that man's honest appeal to be forgiven is met by an immediate and most generous response. Much as certain evangelical theologians have magnified God's love, we gospel preachers have not, upon the whole, been faithful to the beneficent generosity of this scene. We have for the most part represented God as standing upon certain strict and elaborate conditions in the granting of forgiveness. We have said that God forgives us after He has secured a sufficient compensation to His honor, and when we have grieved enough over sin, and believed a certain truth (usually some dogmatic setting of Christ's atoning work) and our faith gives evidence of its depth and genuineness by good works. Now, that statement represents so large an aspect of the actual truth, that I am not going to controvert it. But, brethren, that teaching does not do proper justice to the heart of God. He is represented here as far more generous than that. And in that other parable, the prodigal has only to say, "Father, I have sinned," in order to be immediately reinstated in his only privileges, and going farther back, we see that the prodigal in his absence is every day forgiven in the feelings of his father's heart. Therefore we do not go a whit beyond the scriptures if we assert that God has actually forgiven us all—every sinner of mankind whose sin was laid on Christ—whether we have repented genuinely or repented not at all. For what are the actual facts of the case? That God in Christ is reconciling the world to Himself; and, meeting the ignorant and unbelieving in his most blessed graciousness, is "not imputing unto them their trespasses and sins." God our creditor has pitied us His debtors, anticipated our petitions for forgiveness, and sent the message of forgiveness before we have lifted up our prayer. Therefore, if there is one of you tonight still immersed in sin, so bad that you feel as if you had reached the highest possible climax of a sinful life, still even to such of you God is not imputing sin, but striving with you by His Spirit to bring you to a proper apprehension of your misery, in order that by a timely faith and genuine repentance you may be delivered from the curse of sin before it is too late.

Forgiveness and Relief.

It seems to me that this is even a more blessed Gospel than has been commonly proclaimed. "God will forgive you if you believe." Yes, that is good news indeed; but there is a broader and simpler truth than that, and it is this: God in Christ is forgiving you, loving you, helping you even now, to enter into faith, the gateway of repentance, and by repentance into love, so that coming to yourself and your true and only revelations to your Father, you may enter on that life of heart communion in which alone a man finds life and peace.

Do I speak to anyone to whom this is a matter of deepest personal importance? Are you burdened with the question, "Will God forgive me; and how, and when?" I press upon you this answer: If you know that you have sinned, know also that you are forgiven. It is enough to feel the burden in order to get God's release. It is enough to want to be forgiven, in order to say, "I know that I am forgiven." It is enough to go to God and say, "I can never make compensation for my sin; be merciful and forgive," in order, like the publican in the Temple, to return justified to one's home. For God can say to everyone of us in the enjoyment of forgiveness now, "I forgave thee because thou desiredst Me," and the words are put on record in this Gospel that every burdened soul may know that God's grace anticipates its sin, and that in Him there is forgiveness that He may be feared—forgiveness which is extended according to our needs, seven and seventy times and more.

Possibly there may be some of you to whom this colloquation of righteousness and mercy seems utterly paradoxical. God's demand for righteousness may seem to stultify itself if accompanied by so liberal a dispensation of His mercy. But all history shows that high demands for righteousness from a sinful and morally enfeebled race, without a mercy as deep and super-abounding, only result in greater sinfulness. "Law and terrors do but harden." The clearest wisdom conceivable is to demand of man the highest righteousness, to keep God's "musts" ever sounding in his ears, God's encouragements to aim at high attainments ever before his eyes; and then when he has failed to have God's great healing mercy telling him to begin again and try, with every assurance of such timely help as God can give. This is heaven's wise and simple plan of governing men. The method reaches its perfection of "wisdom and prudence" in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom we see God's righteousness revealed, the purest ideals of human life made at once imperative and attractive; and at the same time, God's unfathomable mercy encouraging the worst and weakest never to despair, but with forgiveness according to his needs, to renew the effort to live in harmony and peace with God.

Man's Inhumanity.

In God's Kingdom man's inhumanity stultifies God's mercy. This man who is himself so readily forgiven, goes out into the world to act unforgettingly, unmercifully to other men. And what is the result? That the mercy which had blessed him is made useless, and he is left to reap the punishment of his original sins. See now what that teaches. Every where I find men stumbling over the notion where I find men in the getting of Divine forgiveness. On God's side, tremendous governmental obstacles are supposed to intervene between Him and the forgiveness of the

sinner. On man's side, even after Christ's propitiation, how much repentance and faith, how many tears and resolutions of amendment are required to secure God's pardon? Brethren, we are misled. The serious difficulties of our salvation lie somewhere else, and not between us and God's mercy. So large is God in love, so magnificent in His generosity, and so glorious in His sympathy, that because you need Him as a sinner He takes you up with the tenderness of a mother, and would fain cleanse you and set you before His throne "without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing." The most serious block to your salvation may emerge after your forgiveness rather than before it. Tell me a case in Scripture where a sinner found difficulty in securing the Divine forgiveness. But after you have received forgiveness you enter on a new probation. What are you going to do with it? When you know that Christ has died for you, and that God forgives you, what influence are these facts going to have upon your life?—that is the question on which your ultimate salvation hangs. My brother, God is not binding the penalties of your sins upon your back; you may assure yourself of His forgiveness at this moment; but when you believe as much what manner of man do you mean to be henceforth? We know that this servant in the parable was not made a better man by the assurance of his master's mercy; perhaps he was made a worse! Forgiven so much by his Lord, he was irascible, passionate, unmerciful in circumstances where it was easy to be calm and most considerate. He could admire a forgiving spirit in his master, and clutch greedily at a cheap forgiveness when he was to reap the benefit himself, but he had no room for mercy in his cruel and relentless heart.

Man's Mercy and God's.

What, then, did his master's mercy profit him? Not one farthing. He fell a victim to that justice which exacts the utmost. Does not that justice force on us this deeply personal question, Has God's forgiveness, extended to us in Christ, made us better men and women? Is it possible that I believe Christ died for me, that God forgives me, treats me as a Father, and yet that I am not made a brotherly man by His pardoning love and tenderness? My friends, I need not tell you that there are men who believe strongly in God's grace for themselves, and yet when they go out into the world are hard, cast iron men, who never treat their fellows with the magnanimous mind of Christ. There is the haughty aggrandizing spirit which is entirely swallowed up in its own mean vanities and glories. Ah! there is no need to be anxious on the score of God's willingness to forgive; but there is the most impressive need for asking whether God's forgiveness is to make us forgiving too. God's merciful attitude will not save you if you have not God's merciful spirit. There is no happiness, no heaven, even no safety for the man who has not learned to be kind, meek, and merciful. Heaven is the loving heart; and all God's pity cannot keep a merciless self-engrossed soul from reaping to the full, the bitter fruit of its life-long selfishness and sin. When God's forgiveness, extended to the world in Christ, fails to change our selfishness, and our sin recoils on us, it is not that God becomes unmerciful like ourselves and vents fresh anger in our punishment; and we must not press the parable too hard, because there is no other analogy by which Christ could express this most terrific truth—that if God's grace fails to change us into Christ-like men, we make God's grace in vain, and the natural penalty of our hard and selfish life follows us and curses us to the bitter end.

Brethren, if you will consent to dwell in love you will also, and not otherwise, dwell in God. If you will dwell in bitterness, wrath, and malice even toward inferior, ill-regulated, or injurious men, then you will be incapable of having fellowship with that purest peace and purest love which constitute eternal blessedness. The proud, inexorable, unforgiving man is never happy in his heart, however boastful of his Christian standing in the kingdom. He is given over into the hands of fates and furies that torment him by means of his passions and darling sins. Sad is the lot of him for whom God's mercy can do nothing; whose hard, insensate heart is all untouched by the cross and sacrifice of Christ; whom God's Fatherhood cannot melt; whom no plea can move toward the gentle spirit of the Saviour. There is no salvation to that man until he meets the claims of God upon him for a meek, a reverent, and loving soul; and, if he will not meet God's requirements in response to the discipline of paternal law, then, as the last and dread resort, he must yield back to God as it were, the gifts he has continued to abuse, and as a totally ruined man pass out into the fatal darkness which is never penetrated by the face of God. "So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother his trespasses."

Ministers, Not French Dolls.

And as for these good people who would have their ministers never express an opinion about the measures and methods of organized sin above a whisper, and never step out of the old rut in their preaching, though the devil be turning the world upside down—what sort of an idea do they entertain of the ministry? Do they wish their ministers to be a sort of French doll? Are they afraid that they are made of sawdust, and if they got knocked about a little in the rough world the sawdust will run out? Are ministers called chiefly to eat toast and say sweet and pretty things? These pious people who are so solicitous about ministers' reputations are helping to perpetuate Sidney Smith's three-fold classification of people as men, women and ministers. They would have ministers display neither the softness of women nor the strength of men. That is not our idea of the ministry, and it is not God's idea.

God never intended the ministry to be a pastime. He never intended prophets or apostles to be coddled like nurslings, or brooded over like chickens. John the Baptist went about in Judea with a rough robe on his back, and Paul repented so loudly that he frightened men. Paul spoke of himself as an ambassador, and again as a soldier and fighter. David declared that God had taught his fingers to fight and his hands to war. I believe that the world needs more fighting parsons, and less weeping Jeremiahs; more preachers and fewer readers of petty, pious platitudes at Sunday services.—Rev. T. F. Green.

A Highland Lament in Church.

According to the Glasgow Mail, the band of the Royal Scots took part in a military service recently held in York Cathedral. A great sensation was created when the eight kilted Highlanders of the regiment—under the leadership of Pipe-Major Mathewson—played a Highland "Lament" as an integral part of the anthem. The effect on the congregation is described as "infinitely touching and beautiful." True, at the first skirl of the pipes there was a tendency to smile, but it was "instantly subdued by the solemn and pathetic wail, accompanied throughout by the soft roll of the muffled drums."

A Delegate's Prayer.

The attitude of many methodists on the question of a time limit for preachers reminds a lay delegate at the conference of a good brother in a prayer meeting who prayed that the Lord would permit "the good preachers to stay a little longer," and that he would allow "the poor preachers to circulate freely." There are some unfortunate clergymen in all the churches whose lack of pulpit ability makes their time limit in any parish exceedingly short.

Two Ways to Fight Evil.

Rev. Dr. DeCosta says there are two ways to fight evil—one is moral and the other immoral. He believes the White Cross movement for social purity is the correct and moral way to go about it. He denounces Dr. Parkhurst's methods and plainly intimates that he considers them immoral.

A Fashionable Drink.

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