

The Follies of a Sinning Religion

By Rev. Paul S. Rees

Text: "For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith; and much people was added unto the Lord."—Acts 11:24.

This is Luke's inspired and impartial tribute to the man Barnabas. "He was a good man!" The God who spoke through "holy men of old" to give us the Scriptures is more careful in his use of adjectives than most of us are. Such descriptives as "good" and "great" and "grand" are often used so glibly and bandied about so carelessly that they become flat and trite. Who has not heard some vulgar worldling described as a "good fellow" when all that was meant was that he is a hail-fellow-well-met who treats the boys to cigars or something worse?

There are words that are like men; they need to be redeemed. If we can see goodness as God estimates it and as, by grace, this man Barnabas embodies it, the term "good" will be recovered to us as one of high and noble meaning. But before we examine the details of our portrait let us acknowledge to ourselves a very wonderful thing. It is this: Barnabas stands forth as God's declaration and demonstration that in a world of evil there are agencies at work which, if seized and utilized, will make bad men good and dead men live and unholy men holy. And this very great thing is affirmed in the face of a certain cynicism found among some worldlings and a certain pessimism found among some theologians.

As regards the cynical attitude, one need only point out that our day has brought to light a very considerable group of skeptics who shoot out the lip and tell us that goodness, measured by any conventional standard, is not only impossible but undesirable. A "good man" is dull, stupid, uninteresting. Thus a professor in one of our largest universities writes a book entitled "It's Not Our Fault—Why We Can't Be Good." On the fly-leaf is this cavalier inscription; "Sin Writes Histories; Goodness is Silent." We are left to draw the inference that the real makers of history are the Arabs and Jezebels rather than the Elijahs, the Herods rather than the John Baptists, the Neros rather than the Saint Pauls, the "Bloody Marys" rather than the John Knoxes. The inference is of course grossly false, but that matters little to the cynic who has made up his mind that goodness is as unimportant as it is uninteresting. "It is held as a first axiom by many," says Dr. Gossip of Edinburgh, "that holiness is a dull affair, and God's company intolerably dreary and that for color and vividness and interest you must look elsewhere. And yet," he adds, in words that blaze with eloquent fire, "religion is the romance of life. Besides its stupendous hopes and offers, those of the world are cheap and tame beyond expression, mere dusty sun-bleached nothings out of the window of a petty village shop."

Stranger, however, than the cynicism found among some worldlings is the pessimism about goodness found among some theologians and their followers. Their teaching, for which they think they find Scripture, is that there is something inevitably and hopelessly bad about human nature. Even by the grace of God men cannot actually become good; they can only be counted good for Christ's sake. Holiness as a quality in character and a characteristic in conduct is impossible. A well known repre-

sentative of this school of theological thought, commenting on the statement that Barnabas was a "good man," cautions his readers against taking the statement too seriously. He would have us understand that all men, even the best of saints, are always and only sinners. In support of his view he cites such references as Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:10-12 and I John 1:8. As thus interpreted, are these passages rightly used? We answer that they are not.

When one quotes Ecclesiastes 7:20, "For there is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good, and sinneth not," he should know that a more accurate, and certainly a more consistent translation reads, "There is not a just man upon the earth, that doeth good and that may not sin." Let us agree that this puts quite a different construction on the writer's thought.

When one quotes Romans 3:10, "There is none righteous, no, not one," and 3:11, "There is none that doeth good, no not one," he should mark well the fact that it describes not man's redeemed condition but the condition in which he stands in need of a Redeemer. To confound these two things is serious confusion indeed.

And when one quotes I John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," he should recognize that an intelligent and inspired writer cannot be charged with flat contradictions without serious consequences to any theory of inspiration. What precedes this 8th verse? The statement that through "the blood of Jesus Christ" there is cleansing "from all sin." What follows it? The statement that there is cleansing "from all unrighteousness." John is proving not that righteousness is unattainable but rather that sin is conquerable and human nature is redeemable.—The Herald.

TRUE GREATNESS

Here is the judgment of the late Dr. Jowett: "We are great only as we are God-possessed; and scrupulous appointments in the upper room with the Master will prepare us for the toil and hardships of the most strenuous campaign. We must, therefore, hold firmly and steadily to this primary principle that of all things that need doing this need is supreme, to live in intimate fellowship with God. Let us steadily hold a reasonable sense of values, and assign each appointed duty to its legitimate place. And in any appointment of values this would surely be the initial judgment, that nothing can be well done if we drift away from God. Neglected spiritual fellowship means futility all along the road."

With high appreciation Dr. Jowett quotes from the journal of Dr. Andrew Bonar, prepared with no thought that it would ever be seen by any eye but his own, these words which show how Dr. Bonar felt about prayer:

"It is my deepest regret that I pray so little. I should count the days, not by what I have of new instances of usefulness, but by the times I have been able to pray in faith, and to take hold upon God. . . . I see that unless I keep up short prayer every day throughout the whole day, at intervals, I lose the spirit of prayer. . . . Too much work without corresponding prayer."—Selected.

Seriousness . . .

Nothing is so contrary to godliness as levity. Seriousness consists in the matter of what is spoken, in the manner of speaking, in dignity of behavior, and in weighty, not trifling actions. Some people are serious by nature; some, by policy and for selfish ends; and some, by grace, and from a sense of duty.

Jesting and raillery, lightness of behavior, useless occupations, joy without trembling and awe of God, an affectation of vivacity and sprightliness, are all contrary to the Spirit of God. "A fool laughs aloud," saith Solomon, "but a wise man scarce smiles a little."

Levity is contrary to contrition and self-knowledge, to watching, prayer, and frequently to charity. Levity is also destruction of all devotion in our own heart, and in that of others, by unfitting the company for receiving good, and bringing suspicion of hypocrisy upon all.

Seriousness is useful to keep grace, to recommend piety and a sense of God's presence, to leave room for the Spirit to work, and to check levity and sin in others.

And have we not motives sufficient to seriousness? Are we not priests and kings unto God—temples of the Holy Ghost? Are we not walking in the presence of God, on the very verge of the grave, and in sight of eternity?

All who truly walk with God are serious, taking their Lord for their example, and walking by the precepts and warnings of the Scriptures.

But are we to renounce innocent mirth? If so, our souls are diseased. Are we to be dull and melancholy? Seriousness and solid happiness are inseparable. Is there not a time for all things? There is no time for sin and folly! —John Fletcher.

TWO SEEKERS

The two men met on shipboard. The younger said to the older, "What were you doing in India?" "I was a missionary," replied the other. Sneeringly the young man commented, "During my stay I did not see a single missionary or native Christian." Then the missionary asked of his mission. "Oh," the young man said, "I went to hunt tigers." "Did you find any?" "I should say so. I brought home some fine pelts." Then answered the missionary, "In India I saw no tigers."

The lesson for us might be that men may find what they seek. It is even so all through life—if we seek with diligence

—Free Methodist

DO YOU PRAY?

You are powerless unless you pray, you are defeated unless you pray, you are living on your capital which will soon be exhausted and leave you a physical wreck, except you pray

. . . I am not thinking of saying prayers at set times. Do you pray? Do you lay hold of God in an agony of soul and cry out: 'I will not let Thee go unless Thou bless me'? . . . We need not think that it is necessary for us to copy any other man or woman in their way of praying—but we must pray or die spiritually, as surely as we will die physically if we do not breathe, for prayer is our spiritual breather.—L. B. Fletcher