

The Visitor's Pulpit.

The Christians Mark and Prize.

A SERMON BY REV. W. M. PUNCHEON, D.D.

"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." PHILIP. 3: 13, 14.

The best teaching is the teaching of example. Exhortations look well on paper, and sound well in eloquence; but they are most forcible when accompanied by the exhibition of a consistent life. But certain conditions are required before our minds can acknowledge an example. There must, for instance, be sympathy of nature. It were of very little use for us to read the diary of an angel. He knows nothing of our infirmities, and therefore can sympathize neither with our trials nor with our joys. There must also be similarity of circumstance. He who has only seen the ocean from the cliffs of a watering-place can have but a sensational sympathy with the seaman's hazards. He who has only seen a battle on canvas or in letterpress is no authority on matters of war.

If an example is to be before us then, and if our minds are to be prevailed upon to follow it, these two conditions are indispensable; but even where these conditions exist we are apt to shrink back when a spotless character, is presented for our imitation, and to deem it a mark too high for us. Partly from an erroneous notion that high moral purity is inconsistent with common life, and partly from a morbid aversion to the effort necessary to obtain it, we fail to be influenced by the pattern as we ought.

But this is quite wrong—a part of our yet remaining perverseness and depravity; and if we would evolve for ourselves the lustre of a better character, and obtain the mastery over our corruptions, we must look, not at those examples which are blemished and unworthy, but at those which display consistency in a full-orbed brightness, and holiness that is altogether lovely. And Scripture certainly has done its best to reassure us by presenting all its characters, even the Divine Man Himself, in circumstances and conditions of experience which can hardly fail to happen ourselves.

Hence Jesus was in all points tempted like as we are; and if we shrink as we think of His superiority to all worldly motive, of the constancy and closeness of His fellowship with the Father, and of the mysterious divinity enshrined in his human soul, we see Him, for our sakes, involved in very different surroundings—coming in contact with abhorred evil, enduring the contradictions of sinners, wrung by the desertion of traitors, agonized by the loss of friends, and groaning beneath the mysterious bitterness of the soul's winter when the light of the Father's countenance forbore to shine.

In like manner, when we look at Paul there is something at the first sight which seems to dishearten us utterly in our attempt to follow him. He seems so fast wedded to the right, and so nobly scornful of the wrong, so self-forgetful, so brave, so superior to the prides and jealousies which sweep through the common human bosoms, that our eyeballs ache with gazing at him—just as we cannot bear to look upon the sun—and it seems as if our utmost efforts to overtake his purity were as impotent as the tyrant's to lash the ocean, or the child's to grasp the sky; and yet this holy man was a blasphemer once.

Of all the revilers of Christianity you could not have found one consumed with a madder rage of scorn. He had no natural advantage, no original superiority, by which he shot a league ahead of us in the Christian race. Not only was he a man of like passions with yourselves, but his passions were fiercer and more untamable than any that have possessed you. He did not glide, in almost imperceptible transition from the good and amiable up into the Christ-like and godly. With him the struggle was something terrible. He had to wrench himself away from the habits which had been tyrannous over him for years. His conversion was a crucifixion to the quivering flesh of the old man that would leave scars for life.

He does not hesitate, in his deep conviction of personal guiltiness, to call himself the chief of sinners, and many a time did the remembrance of his impiety haunt him in his after-life, stimulating him to diligence if haply he might atone for his former wrong, and subduing him, even in his most ecstatic moments, down into a pensiveness of spirit. You cannot, therefore, refuse to acknowledge Paul as an example, because he inherited the same nature and strayed into the same perverse practices as all sinners.

By the same grace—your grace and mine, if we like to ask for it—he obtained mercy; by the same grace he was strengthened for self-conquest, and was elevated into heavenly communion; and he presents himself before us to-day as on our level, still a wrestler against evil, still a pilgrim toward Zion. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; . . . but this one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of my high calling, which is of God in Christ Jesus."

I. The image of the text, as I need not remind you, is taken from the Grecian games. The course is thronged with gazers; the prize for the fleetest glitters full and bright in the runner's view; the judge waits to crown and to welcome the winner. But the runner must be free from every incumbrance; he must lay aside every weight; he must not look behind him; he must persevere with integrity of purpose and with unflinching steps unto the end.

And so, if a man would be a Christian after Christ's type of Christianity, he must aim at making progress continually. His life must be a continual endeavor from well to the better, from the bester to the best. The summit of his attainment of yesterday must be but the starting-point for his venture of to-morrow. He must not go to his rest upon the reputation of old victories, or beneath laurels won so long ago as to have absolutely faded from their greenness by the lapse of time. Every morning of his life must light him to a fresh battle-field; every evening of his life must set upon some vanquished lust or slain desire. He must trample upon every grace which was formerly lacking, until he stands out as the new creature in Christ Jesus the Lord.

Brethren, this must of necessity be the aim of every Christian's life. He must grow if he would live. If he would ascertain his sense of the Divine favor, he must constantly aim at conformity to the Divine image. The mark which the Apostle set before him, and at which, during a protracted lifetime, he aimed with untiring ardor, was perfection in the knowledge and in the fellowship of Christ. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect"—do not be frightened at it; it is his word, not mine—why should I be ashamed of it when he has chosen to use it? "Not as though I had already attained, either were already made perfect."

If we follow him, therefore, we must follow him as he followed Christ. If nothing short of perfection would satisfy him, nothing but perfection must be the ideal standard after which we aim. And we cannot possibly select a finer or more inspiring one. In the world around us, you know, the selectest models are uniformly chosen. The young sculptor and the embryo poet are thrilled with high emulation; but it is to wield a Phidias's mallet, or to sweep a Homer's lyre. The young soldier gazes at reverent distance upon some hero of a hundred fights; but it is that he may be brave and honored as he. Visions of fame and fortune flit before the young aspirant's eye, only to be embodied in some renowned statesman or some wealthy millionaire.

And why are all these models chosen but that each, in his own sphere, may reach or approximate to perfection? Worldlings would scorn to aim at a mark less high, or to set before them a standard inferior to themselves. Let them shame you, Christians, into a holier ambition to-day. What is that you say? That, for your part, you will be content with just as much religion as will ward off from you the curse, and bring upon you the recompense of the reward; that in your mock humility you will be satisfied if you get just within the portals of heaven; that you would have the lowest and most menial place by the threshold there; that, rejoicing in your sense of the Divine favor, you will be careless about your life's entire holiness, and about your heart's complete renewal?

Surely I have mistaken you! A Christian would never lend himself to such a selfish and dishonorable policy—a policy which must be as disastrous as it is confessedly unworthy.

What! gather all the benefit from the death of Christ you can, and yet not be consecrated to God's service, and conformed to God's image? Oh how miserably do we belie our profession if we harbor such thoughts as these! How far have we fallen from apostolic precept and pattern, and how surely do we entail upon ourselves disappointment here, and a heritage of wrath and shame hereafter! But I hope better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though I thus speak.

You have taken the great Apostle of the Gentiles as your model, and his aim you know was to be perfect in Christ Jesus.

THE PRIZE GLITTERED BEFORE HIM; during a long lifetime it was never absent from his thoughts, but during that long lifetime he never once lost sight of the mark. It was holiness he wanted; not to be delivered from the righteous consequences of his sins, but to be delivered from the sins themselves; not to be screened beneath the wing of the covering cherub and deserved condemnation, but to have the lambent fire coming down, shredding off the paralysis from his moral manhood, and uplifting him into the fullness of the stature of a man in Christ Jesus the Lord.

He was not satisfied with going immeasurably beyond the foremost man of his time; he was not satisfied with going far ahead of the highest standard of the age in which he lived; he was not satisfied with being surpassingly beyond his former self; nothing would satisfy him but to be like Christ. "Let that mind be in you"—no other, no, not even an archangel's—"let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus the Lord." To this his every struggle tended; to this every circumstance of his life was made subservient.

Just as the bee distils only one essence from its bright, wild wanderings amid a thousand flowers, so every struggle of his nature and every journey of his spirit only filled the cells of his soul with the fruits of the Spirit, which were by Jesus Christ unto the glory and unto the praise of God. My brother, thou that art anxious to be right, it is this to which I summon thee to-day; there is the mark, holiness; there is the prize, heaven. If thou press toward the mark, thou shalt not be disappointed of the prize. Not as in the earthly race where only one can win; all who start in this heavenly course and persevere to the end, can grasp and wear the crown.

We know, then, so far, what was the Apostle's object; let us look for a moment or two at the effort which he made to attain it. The means of this attainment, as they are presented in the verse before us, are these—determinate singleness of thought, and determinate looking forward to the future.

II. Take this one grand thought for a moment. "This one thing I do;" not many things. There is no fretting away of the soul upon a multitude of discordant objects, to the loss of concentration, and the consequent loss of power. "This one thing I do." Here is the attitude of a soul that is determined after a worthy purpose; the attitude of quiet strength, which will suffer nothing to deter it from the accomplishment of its deliberately planned design.

"THIS ONE THING I DO." And thus alone can excellence be attained in any pursuit which may invite the attention of men. If the man be but faintly impressed with desire, or if he hesitate between rival claims, or if he pursue the object which is chosen only in spasms of activity, the result will inevitably be disappointment and shame. "A double-minded man," it is true all the world over, "is unstable in all his ways,"—like a wave upon the streamlet, tossed hither and thither with every eddy of its tide. The recognition of a determinate purpose in life, and a sturdy adhesion to it through all disadvantages, are indispensable conditions of success.

The outside world understand the matter well. Hence, in the great life-race, the vacillating are outrun by the steady, although the former may fleet of foot as Asahel upon the mountains of Israel. Hence, also, setting aside those contingencies which make all mortal things uncertain, the battle is not to the strong, except his determination and his perseverance are at all events equal to his bravery. There must be no contradictory play of purpose in the mind, if there is to be the symmetry of the perfect character.

If a man follows after many and different purposes he may pile up, in course of years, a head of gold, a breast of silver, thighs of brass, and feet of clay; but it is nothing but a great image after all. There must be one worthy purpose, and that worthy purpose fully carried out to constitute the man. Those great names which the church has canonized, your Howards, Luthers, Wesleys, Pauls, were their hearts, from recreant or traitor faculties within them, disloyal to the great purpose of their lives?

Did Howard blanch in his circumnavigations of charity because of the curl of the official lip, or the shrug of the official shoulder? Did Wesley turn cowardly because the scorn of mobs assailed him? Did Luther linger after Rome, as Lot's wife

lingered after Sodom, enamored of the beauty that he had left behind? Did Paul swerve a hair after he had once plighted his troth to the Redeemer? These men, world-uplifters as they were, had one purpose, and kept at it through the hazards and the ventures of years. Hence their heroism; hence their success; hence their immortality.

Brethren, if you would emulate their attainments, you must emulate their singleness of aim. No—I know what your hearts saying, and I am just going to answer it—no, emphatically no, they are not marks too high for you. There is not one of them that is a mark too high for you. In many respects you have a mighty advantage over them, such as they knew not how to possess.

The most laborious worldling must pause sometimes in his work. The warrior must come into winter quarters now and then; he cannot always be on the offensive, manifesting the stratagem and skill of war. The student cannot always—though by the way, he ought not to do it—let the rays of the morning sun fall aslant on the fevered brow that has been at work all night. The most laborous worldling must pause now and then. The merchant may rise up early and sit up late, and eat the bread of carefulness for a number of years, but he must rest at sometime; if he does not the maddened brain will take into its own hands, and, like a frantic slave, work a terrible, terrible revenge. But

YOU NEED NEVER PAUSE; in the work you are doing you may go on continually. You are not to achieve a task, you are to grow into a character; you are not to do many things, you are to become like Christ. Your work may be carried on as well, and sometimes a great deal better, when weariness seizes upon the limbs and sorrow darkens upon the house, as when strength couches in the frame and joy sparkles in the dwelling. Every circumstance of your life may be made subservient to this great purpose. You cannot pass a single day without the experience of something either to help or to hinder you. Every temptation as it is tampered with or trampled on makes it likelier whether in the long-run you will be the conquered.

The least noteworthy of the events of daily history are worth something in the great record of your life. In your work you may show your bravery as well in the closet as in the camp; as well when the principalities and powers are marshalled without as when the combatants are fighting within. Nay, every vicissitude of your history, the joy that makes the spirit jubilant, the anguish that wrings the soul, the blighted harvest, the grief inspiring stroke, the slanderer's lie, the agony's fierce baptism of fire—all by God's grace may be made subservient to this one grand design.

It is impossible that you should pass through life without subordinating everything, either to the shaping of your character for evil or the shaping of your character for good. There is not a scorned trifle in the common routine of daily life which does not tell the likelihood of the contest in which you are engaged, whether you shall remain the trembling vassals of impiety forever, or whether imperial in your conquest, you shall rejoice in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free. There does not need, then, to be either pause or interval in your pressing forward to the mark.

III. Just another thought, for I can read your hearts here again. It is the mark of the prize which is in Christ Jesus—in Christ Jesus, and that is enough to answer all the misgivings of your hesitating and your rebellious spirit. This it is to which you are called, but you are called

IN CHRIST JESUS.

You have been saying, "Ah! but it is too high for me; it is something to which I shall never attain; there are oppositions, inveterate and terrible, with which I have to grapple; my flesh lusteth against my spirit; my passions are strong and powerful tempters; all the strength has been taken out of me by that paralysis under which I totter; and I shall strive vainly if I strive ever so much: that crown glitters very brilliantly, but it glitters all hopelessly for me." Well, anything more? You have written many bitter things against yourself,—have you done? You have not said too much at all. It is hardly possible to put poor human nature so low as it is by nature and in itself; but all this that you have been talking about is in yourself as you need to be—is it not?—before you were in Jesus.

Ah! but God did not call you to this loftiness of attainment then, for the very

simple reason that He knew you could not come, and God never calls any individual when He knows he cannot come. If there is a call there is power to obey it always and at all times. You were buried then; you were chained to the body of death then, as the living soldier to the dead one. Your Easter has not come then. The cocoon must be burst asunder before the buoyant wings can spread themselves and fly. The death-frost must be thawed away from the heart of Lazarus before Christ says, "Loose him, and let him go."

But you are in Jesus now, and in Jesus you live, and where there is life there is the capacity for growth; where there is life there is the susceptibility of expansion and of increase, to an almost unlimited degree. Swathed in death too long, you may arise and clear yourself from every vestige of the sepulchre; there may be the fetid and unwholesome odor of it about you, but you may rise up the first-born angel's peer and the Lamb's unspotted bride. "But temptation is adapted and incessant;" I know that. "The world is a siren to seduce, and a tyrant to persecute;" I know that. "The flesh within lusteth against the spirit very sorely;" I know that. "Hosts of demons crowd and darken the air;" I know that.

But you are in Christ Jesus, and in Christ Jesus you have a captain of your salvation who is more than all that can be against you. Poor tempted heart, do not be frightened by this. Thou art like the young man of Elisha's, when the Syrian armies were round about the city; he saw sheen of their spears glistening in the sun; his knees smote together, and his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; and when at last it was partially loosened, he said, "Alas, my master! how shall we do?" Calm, kingly, high-souled, trustful, all the prophet prayed about was, "Lord, open his eyes;" and as soon as his eyes were opened, he saw that round about him on the mountains there were chariots and horses of fire.

And is it not so with us? "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to them who are the heirs of salvation?" Above all, isn't He with us who "knows what sore temptations mean, for He has felt the same." Press forward to the mark; it is not beyond you; press forward to the mark, and as sure as God lives you shall grasp and realize the prize.

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