

CHAPTER XIX

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"But what think ye? A man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in the vineyard. And he answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented himself, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Which of the two did the will of his father? They say, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye saw it, did not even repent yourselves afterward, that ye might believe him."

(*Matthew 21:28-32*)

This story is direct and simple. There is no cloudy word. It names explicitly those for whom its teaching is intended: "The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you,"—"you" being the Pharisees and their followers. If we should ask who are modern representatives of the Pharisees, we might be driven to answer, "Some good church people." The Pharisees were scrupulous about Temple observances, and they were ardent patriots.

The parable is equally explicit in its teaching. The "man" who "had two sons" is God. It is timely to remark on the childlike, not childish, clarity of the message of Jesus about God. Our modern vogue is to refer to the Deity under titles misty and mystifying. God is the "Omnipresent Urge," the "Absolute Essence," and the "Stream of Tendency." The foggier the title, the more it pleases us. But Jesus said, "After this manner pray ye: Our Father . . ." ¹ That Name meant nothing crudely anthropomorphic. It did not counsel less of reverence and awe. It did not attempt to sweep away that vast realm of mystery which attaches to any worthy concept of the Divine. But it did imply a Spirit Who "beareth witness with our spirit," ² and Who loves us with so deep a love that the best human affection can only faintly intimate it. Jesus advanced no philosophical definition of the Godhead. Rather he drew word pictures: "God is like a Gardener . . . like a Shepherd . . . like a Father . . ." When religion parts company with the simplicity of Jesus it gropes in darkness.

God, then, has two sons. He bids them work in his vine-

¹ Matthew 6: 9.
² Romans 8: 16.

yard.³ The Pharisee answers, "I go, sir." He does not omit the "sir"; he is punctilious and polite; he is alert in seeming obedience—"You can depend on me, sir." The tax gatherer (hated Jewish collector of the Roman conqueror's taxes, battering on the misery of his compatriots) and the harlot (scum and outcast of society) reply: "I will not." The answer has no "sir." It is curt, boorish, and deliberately insolent. But the Pharisee does not go;⁴ while the outcast, feeling some stab of conscience, finally obeys. Thus the simple story. Then comes the simple question: "Which of the two *did* the will of his father?" There is a world of emphasis on that word "*did*." Could any parable be more direct? The thought is translucent. The etching is firm. There is no wavering or uncertain line.

The story is as impartial as it is clear: "For John came unto you in the way of righteousness." It is as if Jesus said, "I do not judge you by your obedience to me, but by your response to John. He taught you, and what he taught was good.⁵ There were no startling innovations in his message. He required such fastings and ablutions as you approve. He was guilty of no Sabbath desecrations such as you charge against me. You shall stand at the bar of *his* message. By your churchly attitude you say to God who has spoken to you through John, 'I go, sir'; yet you do not go." Sometimes we wish that we might meet Jesus in the flesh. That, we imagine, would be of all experiences the most radiant. Perhaps it would be also the most ruthlessly penetrating! The only mercy would be that the unsparing truth of Jesus is its own kindness. If He should say to us, "I will not ask you how much of God's command you ought to have heard. Let the question concern only that command which you have heard. I make no issue of your response to Me, but only of your response to that voice which you yourselves have felt to be right. Have you obeyed?"—how would it seem to meet Jesus in the flesh?

³ Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 223, suggests that the farm in this story is a small family holding, whereas in the Parable of the Laborers and the Hours it was the large holding of a magnate.

⁴ Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 442, 443, remarks that the charge of insincerity could have been laid against the Pharisees without the introduction of the character of the second son. But it is evident that the story is enhanced in value by the sharp contrast of characters, and is thus made to cut both ways—one way in condemnation and the other in redemption.

⁵ This seems to be the meaning of the phrase "in the way of righteousness."

Once more, the parable is swept by an almost terrible urgency.⁶ The language is abrupt. The condemnation burns. "Publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you." The phrase "publicans and harlots" was proverbial as applied to all beyond the pale. It is said that there is an analogous phrase current in Korea—"pigstickers and harlots."⁷ For Jesus thus to speak was, at least in the eyes of the Pharisees, to sin against good taste. But to saddle the words on them; to say, "These people, bad as you believe them to be, will enter the kingdom before you—you, the pillars of the Judean Church," was insult's crown of insult. Such language could not have escaped His lips except under the impulse of a terrible urgency. He spoke thus because the destiny of man hung on His teaching. He knew what insincerity could do—this pretense of honoring God and then failing utterly in the test of deeds. He knew what it *would* do on Golgotha before the week had passed! He knew that it breeds a verminous realm until character becomes rotten at the core. If we had His eyes, we likewise would fear insincerity more than we fear shame or death; nor would we wonder at this crashing of doom in His words.

The thrust of the teaching is sharp: "Which of the two *did* the will of his father?" The ritual of worship without some serious attempt at worthy living is a painted lie. Floating incense without deeds as fragrant as incense is a reek and a disgust.

"Wherewith shall I come before Jehovah, and bow myself before the high God?" they asked of an old prophet. "With burnt-offerings?"

"No," he answered, "*you cannot ceremonialize your way into God's favor.*"

"With thousands of rams?"

"No, *you cannot bribe the Eternal.*"

"With ten thousands of oil?"

"No, *you cannot ease yourself into the Divine presence.*"

"Then I will give my first-born for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul."

⁶ Compare Chapter V of this book where the same urgency is noted concerning the same theme; namely, the duty of deeds.

⁷ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

"No!" thundered the old prophet, "you cannot seduce God even with shed blood! He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?"⁸

So much depends on what we do. One man says, "I go"; but goes not. Another says, "I go not"; but later goes. The curt denial in words is not to be approved.⁹ Insolence is not virtue, even though it afterwards repent. It is no grace for a man to say, "I do not pretend to be religious"; nor does such a confession justify him. Avowed badness is not made goodness by being avowed. But a curt denial in words, even without the subsequent repentance, is better than the eagerness of false piety. The denial has at least the merit of being honest.

We may say with our *reason*, "I go," religion having commended itself to our intellect; and it is no requirement of Christian faith that reason should be stultified. "Come now and let us reason together, saith Jehovah."¹⁰ Yet reason in itself is not enough. Under Jesus the mind not only *may* test all that purports to be true, but *must* test it. That self-mesmerism which cries "I believe, I believe," until it flogs intelligence from honorable doubt into dishonorable acquiescence, is not even remotely Christian. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."¹¹ But reason degenerates into windy speculation unless it acts. There is no ground for the customary assumption that a man's philosophy can be true even when his deeds are vicious. The mind cannot be imprisoned in a hermetically sealed chamber, immune from the poison in the will. The ultimate question remains: "Which of the two *did* the will of his father?"¹²

We may say with our *emotions*, "I go," religion having commended itself to our instinctive feeling; and it is no requirement of Christian faith that a true emotion should fail of its reward. Under Jesus there may be hours when sentience will

⁸ This famous passage, Micah 6: 6-8, is best interpreted as a "controversy" (see Micah 6: 2) between the people and the prophet, as has been attempted above.

⁹ Hubbard, *op. cit.*, pp. 388 ff., and Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 288, have wisely emphasized this point. The latter says with characteristic pungency ". . . but it is a fatal mistake to assume that, provided you are not a hypocrite, you will be welcomed into heaven with all your vices on your back."

¹⁰ Isaiah 1: 18.

¹¹ John 8: 32.

¹² For elaboration of this thought, see Chapter V of this book.

become a white and living flame. The disciple ought to have his luminous hours:

. . . "and then
Stream'd thro' my cell a cold and silver beam,
And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail,
Rose-red with beatings in it, as if alive,
Till all the white walls of my cell were dyed
With rosy colors leaping on the wall;
And then the music faded, and the Grail
Past, and the beam decay'd, and from the walls
The rosy quiverings died into the night."¹³

There is place in true religion for such seasons of vision. But Jesus warns us that the emotion which says, "I go," and is not straightway translated into deeds is an insincerity even worse than curt denial. Straightway!—for the command is: "Go work *to-day*." The commands of Jesus are instinct with immediacy. He is not content to receive the promise of tomorrow's goodness: "We must work . . . while it is day; the night cometh, when no man can work."¹⁴ The Epistles have caught this instancy in the message of Jesus: "*To-day* if ye shall hear his voice harden not your hearts."¹⁵ Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."¹⁶

We may say with *ritual-worship*, "I go"; and Christian faith lays no veto upon worship, but exalts it. There is so much worship which finds no issue in conduct that it is easy to exclaim in false antithesis, "Not ritual, but deeds!" But Jesus never spoke thus. Worship and conduct to Him were indissolubly joined. We have the evidence of His example, as well as certain precious words of His, to justify the belief that worship genuinely espoused is the highest exercise of which life is capable. He spent long hours, sometimes half the night, in the adoration and agony of prayer. The inference is plain; without prayer worthy living is well-nigh impossible. Yet Jesus avows that deeds which irreverently deny God, but afterwards repent to do His bidding, will gain heaven; while worship which makes vows only to break them will fall under the curse!

"Son, go work *to-day*." We understand the divine require-

¹³ Tennyson, "The Holy Grail" ("The Idylls of the King").

¹⁴ John 9: 4.

¹⁵ Hebrews 4: 7.

¹⁶ II Corinthians 6: 2.

ment. Though the whole counsel of God is not revealed (such omniscience we cannot even glimpse), we know enough for the daily task. There is in the book of Leviticus a commandment, "Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind."¹⁷ The deaf cannot hear the curse, nor the blind see the obstacle; they are robbed of defense. Or the precept can be given wider scope, thus: "Thou shalt not slander the absent, nor plot against their peace." The book of Leviticus can teach us that to canvass cruelly the motives of the absent or the defenseless is unworthy. We are to live in decent charity. We understand what is required. But do we *obey*?

The dictates of Jesus are like beams of light. We may quarrel about His rightful name—we do so quarrel—but there is no quarrel about the life He lived. We look on Him, and doubt vanishes as to the life *we* should live. We hear the high call of God in Him: "Son, go *pray* to-day." But the hard world shuts us in, and we do not pray. Meanwhile some outcast of the earth, who has cursed God to His face, repents in dust and ashes; and, in a prayer we would hardly call a prayer, throws himself on the Divine mercy and is justified.

Thus the voice of Jesus strikes upon the chaos of modern religion like a clear bell. He shames our crude evangelism which vitiates its zeal with ignorance, vulgarity, and mercenary motive. He shames the current popularizing of religion, the truckling to the curious, the dangling of a bait to catch a crowd. He shames our orthodoxy with its petty dogmas, its imagining that the mystery of God and the ultimate verity of the Cross can be squeezed within a few poor words of man's invention. He shames our liberalism with its light rejection of the hard-won truths of generations, and its fond imagining that a new thing is therefore a true thing. He shames our psychologizing of religion with its pretense of sounding the depths of the soul by giving strange names to the levels of consciousness. Across this modern Babel, this chaos and distraction, the voice of Jesus rings like a bell. Into this fetid brawl He comes like a cool wind driven across the stars. This is His message: Do what you know to be right, and ampler truth will dawn upon

¹⁷ Leviticus 19: 14.

you as you walk. Carry your reason into sanctified energy. Fulfill your emotion in transfigured conduct. Let worship and neighborliness be the divine alternation of your life. Thus you will gain the kingdom as you help others gain it. Thus you will prove your sonship in the test of deeds.