

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE THIRD COMMANDMENT.

Of the guilt of common profanity, by which I mean the flippant and reckless use of the Divine Name in ordinary conversation, it is not necessary for me to say much. There was a time when this practice seems to have been the mark of a fine gentleman. It is now the sign of vulgarity. There is something appalling in the consideration that we have a greater dread of violating the conventional maxims of good society than of transgressing the laws of God. When profanity was only a sin against God it was a common offence. It has disappeared since it became "vulgar." If men are guilty of it now, it is inferred that they are accustomed to live in coarse and brutal company, and it is acknowledged that, whatever their social rank may be, they can hardly claim to be gentlemen.

Except among the very lowest orders of society, the offence is now almost confined to very young men, who want to make it understood that they are no longer children, and who think that the best way to do this is to show their contempt for the habits of decent reverence which they learnt from their parents and teachers. "It is difficult," as Robert Hall has said, "to account for a practice which gratifies no passion and promotes no interest, unless we ascribe it to a certain vanity of appearing superior to religious fear, which tempts men to make bold with their Maker. If their are hypocrites in religion," he continues, "there are also, strange as it may appear, hypocrites in impiety—men who make an ostentation of more irreligion than they possess. An ostentation of this nature, the most irrational in the records of human folly, seems to lie at the root of profane swearing. It may not be improper to remind such as indulge in this practice that they need not insult their Maker to show that they do not fear Him, that they may relinquish this vice without fear of being supposed to be devout; and that they may safely leave it to the other parts of their conduct to efface the smallest suspicion of their piety."

A far more common form of irreverence in our own time is the practice of finding material for jesting in Holy Scripture. A very little wit will go a long way, if we can only make up our minds to trifle with what is sacred.

I do not believe that wit and humor are to be excluded from God's service, or that there is no place for them in the illustration of divine truth. You remember Pascal's famous sentence in the Provincial Letters in reply to the Jesuits, who charged him with turning sacred things into ridicule. "There is a vast difference," he says, "between laughing at religion and laughing at those who profane it by their monstrous and extravagant opinions. In making a jest of your morality, I am as far from sneering at holy things as the doctrine of your casuists is from the doctrine of the Gospel."

In the exposition of truth, as well as in the refutation of error, I see no reason why wit should be forbidden to render its service, as well as logic, fancy, and imagination. Why should any faculty of that nature which God made in his image be forbidden to glorify him? Who will venture to call it common and unclean? If any part of my nature is withdrawn from the service of God, I am, so far as that is concerned, not completely his.

The traditional exclusion from the pulpit of humor and wit dates from the worst and most artificial times of its history. The ancient preachers, the great preachers of the Middle Ages, the Puritan preachers, when they had the faculty, used it, and used it with wonderful effect. They did not think it necessary to be dull in order to be devout.

But, as it is possible to use wit as the friend and ally of Divine Truth, it is also possible to make Divine Truth itself the mere material of wit.

Nothing is more easy than to create a laugh by a grotesque association of some frivolity with the grave and solemn words of Holy Scripture. But surely this is profanity of the worst kind. By this Book the religious life of men is quickened and sustained. It contains the highest revelations of himself which God has made to man. It directly addresses the conscience and the heart and all the noblest faculties of our nature, exalting our idea of duty, consoling us in sorrow, redeeming us from sin and despair, and inspiring us

with the hope of immortal blessedness and glory. Listening to its words, millions have heard the very voice of God. It is associated with the sanctity of many generations of saints. Such a book cannot be a fit material for the manufacture of jests. For my own part, though I do not accept Dr. Johnson's well known saying, that "A man who would make a pun would pick a pocket," I should be disposed to say that a man who deliberately and consciously uses the words of Christ, of Apostles, and of Prophets for mere purposes of merriment might have chalked a caricature on the wall of the Holy of Holies or scrawled a witticism on the sepulchre in Joseph's garden.

Nor is it Holy Scripture alone which, from its relationship to God, is invested with a sanctity which it is profanity to violate. Wherever God reveals himself we should reverence Him, and it is a transgression of this commandment to bring into contempt any manifestation of His character and will.

I do not know that our own age is distinguished from all preceding times by the wantonness and frivolity with which it treats all that is grave, solemn, and august; but, whatever may be our comparative guilt, it is incontestable that very much of our literature is utterly destructive of that serious earnestness with which human life has always been regarded by men of any depth of moral nature, and this universal flippancy is ruinous to the spirit of reverence and betrays us too often into gross profanity. There is, no doubt, a profound sadness, a sorrowful sense of the vanity of all earthly things which often underlies the most brilliant wit and the most cynical humor. The men in whose writings these qualities have been most conspicuous have often been the victims of the deepest melancholy. It was their sense of the frivolity of the objects which create the greatest and most passionate excitement among men, the utter worthlessness and triviality of a thousand pursuits to which men devote their genius and their energy, the transitoriness of all human glory, which made them mock at the pomps and splendors, the pleasures and even the griefs of mankind. They made merry with what other men regard as most serious, not because their hearts were light, but because they saw the vanity and the unreality of the honors, and the wealth, and the greatness of the world. The sadness was often morbid. It was not the less deep and real.

But the literature of which I complain is of a very different kind. It is not written by men who are so overshadowed by the dark and gloomy aspects of the universe that they cannot but laugh at the misplaced earnestness of those who are spending money for that which is not bread, and labor for that which satisfieth not, but by men who seem utterly incapable of recognizing the difference between what is most frivolous and what is most appalling or divine.

I have read letters in some newspapers during the last few weeks from war correspondents who seemed so absorbed in their solicitude to say something smart and clever that they were altogether untouched by the agonies of wounded soldiers, the miseries of starving and homeless peasants, the tears of wives who had become widows, and of children who had become fatherless. They seem to have followed the march of great armies, and to have recorded the siege of cities and the burning of villages with only one desire—the desire to find a new stimulant for their feeble and exhausted wit.

I remember too to have seen a book, which may, indeed, be better than its title—a book called "The Comic History of England." I declare that I can hardly conceive of anything more monstrously profane. To a devout heart there appears throughout our history the perpetual manifestation of the wonderful power and goodness of God. We have as much reason to thank God for the statesmen and heroes that surrounded the throne of Elizabeth, for the courage and genius of Cromwell, for the sagacity of William III., as ever the Jews had to thank God for Joshua, for Jephthah, or for Gideon. I see his hand as clearly in the storms which raged round our coast when the Spanish Armada made its descent upon us as in the destroying angel that smote the army of the Assyrians encamped around Jerusalem. The life and history of a nation are too great to be degraded and dishonored by being made the material for mere amusement and fun. The spirit which renders that possible is inconsistent with reverence for God himself. If we love not our brother, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen; and if we feel no wonder and awe in the presence of the tragedy

of human life, we are incapable of the devout and reverential fear which should be inspired by the majesty of God.

There is another habit which is more obviously and directly a violation of this command. I mean the habit of scoffing at those who profess to live a religious life and taking every opportunity of sneering at their imperfections. It is easy enough, no doubt, to discover grave infirmities and faults in most Christian people. It is because they know that they are sinful men that they are trusting in Christ to save them. Their very confession of faith in him is a confession of their own sinfulness. They do not profess to be better than other men; they acknowledge that they have no strength to do the will of God and that they are continually breaking God's commandments. It would be brutal cruelty to make a jest of the weakness and sufferings of the patients in a hospital, to sneer at one man because he is prostrate with fever, at another because his broken arm is bound up and useless, at another because his face is still disfigured by an explosion which nearly destroyed his life. It is because they have been injured by accidents or smitten down by disease that they are there. And it is because Christian men are conscious of their sin and of their inability to escape from it without supernatural help that they are clinging to Christ to save them. You who speak so contemptuously of our failings are probably not quite free from imperfection. The difference between us is very simple. *We* have learnt that our sins have provoked the anger of God, and have entreated him to pardon us. *You* have not. *We* are conscious that apart from the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost we can never recover the image of God. *You* appear to believe that whatever virtue is necessary to you is within the reach of your own strength. If there are faults on both sides, we have a better right to scoff at you than you have to scoff at us. *We*, at least, acknowledge our weakness and guilt. You do not acknowledge yours.

Whatever may be the imperfections of Christian people, they are trying to vindicate and assert the authority and greatness of God. Their aim is that God's will may be done on earth as it is done in heaven. If you yourselves are doing nothing to maintain the remembrance among men of God's infinite majesty, take care how you scoff at those who, with whatever vacillation and infirmity of purpose, are trying to maintain it. The real effect of your scoffing is to dishonor religious faith itself and to bring God and the service of God into contempt.—*Rev. R. W. Dale, M.A.*

THE MIDDLE COURSE.

There are two tendencies in Church as in civil government—toward too much and too little government. The two extremes are despotism and anarchy. That is the happy Church that steers clear of both.

Congregationalism may be taken as the type of the latter—too little government. Its principle is that little church machinery is needed. Its leading doctrine is that the individual churches will do right. It has no courts with spiritual authority. Its councils have no authority of any kind. Its builds on the opinion that all its subjects will do right. Its pastors are members of the churches, having no authority in church meetings. It has no sessions to oversee the church members, no Presbyteries to overlook the ministers and churches, no Synods and Assemblies to correct the errors of sessions and Presbyteries. It proceeds on the theory that such courts are unnecessary as well as unscriptural, because members of the Church wish to do right, and only need advice to enable them to obey the law of God. There is in the theory a truth. Religion and religious practice are voluntary—must be voluntary. God has no unwilling subjects or unwilling service. He will not compel love. Church power is purely moral and spiritual. It appeals solely to the consciences of men. The Church cannot compel obedience to the law of God. When it says to the disobedient, "Thou art to me as a heathen and a publican," it has exhausted its influence. When the Church forgets these fundamental truths, she becomes a persecuting anti-Christ.

But, unfortunately for this theory, Christian people and Christian ministers are not wholly sanctified. They need more than advice. They need reproof and rebuke, and the Scriptures have authorized courts having the right to reprove and rebuke, and to do so in the name and with the authority of the great Head of the Church.