

The Deeper Life

On Keeping Sweet

By Rev. S. G. Bland, D.D.

KEEPING sweet may be one of the easiest things in the world or it may be one of the most difficult, one of the divinest or one of the most contemptible.

There are people who find it very easy to keep sweet. They are flabby, backboneless people, people who never under any provocation strike Mrs. Charity "heareth all things" and so does another spirit very far removed from true charity. There is a spirit that shrinks from trouble, that abhors a fuss, that wants peace at almost any price. There is a most undivine time-serving and truckling spirit that will never repent or hit back or blaze out if the wrongdoer is powerful or if the righteous indignation is likely to prove costly. No one may have much to say in condemnation of such people. They seem harmless and inoffensive. They may even regard themselves as eminent exemplars of the Christlike temper and possibly by some be taken at their own valuation. In reality, it is questionable if there is any more demoralizing and pernicious element among us than the people who may be counted on to make no protest, to put up no fight, but, on the contrary, to criticize those who do. That abject, non-resisting attitude may pass for sweetness. It is an evil nature of prudence, selfishness and cowardice. Then there is the deliberate, planned, and persistent sweetness of men who are bound to make their way. Deeply ambitious or keen for popularity or success they will antagonize no one. They want to carry favor everywhere. They try like Paul, but for most un-Pauline purposes, to be all things to all men. Prudent, self-restrained, cautious, they suppress one of the noblest impulses in human nature, the indignation against evil, till they are all gone to flabbiness.

The sweetness and self-control of timidity or of calculating self-interest are not qualities to be admired or cultivated, and it is a caricature of Jesus men have in their minds if they think such qualities Christ-like. Not such was the Galilean peasant who drove the cheating traders from the temple courts and whose blazing denunciations of the head men in the church of his day brought him to the Cross. Nothing is more out of place and less admirable than sweetness and patience and gentleness in the face of successful deceit and triumphant injustice. Yet even here, self-control and self-vigilance are needed. There is so much sediment of pride and selfishness at the bottom of most of our hearts that even the most disinterested and deserved indignation is to be watched lest it grow roily. But with all deductions and qualifications, how large a place there is for a gracious and kindly and cheery temper. There is a place for resentment, but never for sulkeness. There is a place for flaming anger, but never for smouldering vindictiveness. A man or woman incapable of anger is a mental and moral defective, but how much more anger and impatience and resentment there are in the world than are needed or justified!

The self-control of the men of hot temper, the patience of the strong, the meekness of the natural fighter—these are rare and lovely and most commanding qualities. There is a peculiar fragrance in the sweetness of those who bear silently and calmly the burden of bodily infirmity or who feel almost constantly the gnawing tooth of pain and yet, like the Spartan boy with the stolen fox gnawing at his vitals, betray no suffering. Much of the irritability and impatience which we sometimes find so unjustified, which we sometimes find so unjustified,

able and so hard to bear are due to secret bitterness or pain which known by us would cure our anger. There is the strong and heroic sweetness of those who bury their disappointments and heartbreaks.

There is the divine sweetness of the man misunderstood, and misunderstood, perhaps, just when he is doing his best, to whom selfish and unworthy motives are imputed just where he has most completely given himself to an unselfish cause.

There is the high magnanimity that refuses to be soured by defeat even when the cause seems holiest and the successful opposition most perverse or indignant. The defeat of a cause is sometimes harder to bear than a personal loss. That is the last and fiercest temptation to

bitterness that some good men feel. Perhaps it is an essential and inescapable experience in the preparation of a leader of men. No man probably can win the highest and strongest influence over his fellows till they have seen him defeated and, if may be, in some measure discredited, and yet still unembittered and undepressed, his faith in God and what is just as important, his love of men untouched by resentment or cynicism.

And it is this two-fold faith which alone can keep the spirit sweet through the irritations and disappointments of life.

First, faith in the controlling, overruling goodness of God. Life would become sometimes unendurable if one could not assume that God is everything. The way in which trouble follows trouble and disaster comes on the heels of disaster and some new trial just at the moment where the old ones have brought the man to utter exhaustion. The diabolical ingenuity that accidents sometimes seem to show. The way in which one's enemies seem to triumph and one's friends may unwittingly contribute to this triumph. I do not see how some men, at least, could cleanse their hearts of cynicism and bitterness; how they could possibly preserve serenity and peace, except as they look beyond the appearance of things and hold fast to the faith that through all and in spite of all God is working out His holy and gracious purposes. This faith we are coming to see if not something that can be proved. It is not a dead sure thing. It is a venture, an attitude which the soul can take up and maintain against all opposition. Faith is not what we know but what we must take for granted or we perish. It is the only understanding of life by which we can live victoriously. If we are not to sink through life uneasy and afraid, or to harden into stoicism or sour into poisonous cynicism we must make up our minds to believe, to take it for granted, to act at any rate as if it were true, that "all things work together for good to those that love God."

And with the faith in the care of God must steadily be maintained the faith in men. To keep sweet one must hold fast faith in human nature. One must believe that men love the right, that men at bottom are good, that opposition to the right has always a large element of misunderstanding or misapprehension in it, that it is not the reform but the reformer sometimes that provokes the hostility, that many of the seemingly most cruel things are done unwittingly or in blind passion, that the old French saying, if not absolutely and without exception true, is only a great and divine truth pushed a trifle too far, that to understand anything is to forgive it.



Dr. BLAND



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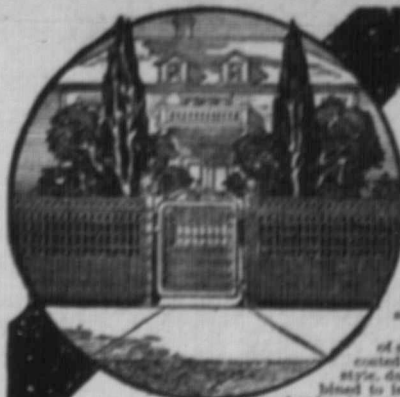
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