THE GREAT FIELD AND THE GREAT SOWER.

Sermon by Rev. J. H. Greenough, M. A., Preached Sab. a the London Missionary Society at the City Temple, Wednesday, May 13

MATT. XIII. 37, 38.—"He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, the good seed are the children of the Kingdom."

These words are found in our Lord's exposition of one of His parables, the well-known parable of the wheat and the tares, in which He warned His disciples that the good and evil would always be found growing together until the end of the world; that the real children of the Kingdom, and those who had but an assumed part in it, would ever appear side by side, and often bear so close a resemblance externally that the keenest search would fail to distinguish and separate them until the great separation was made by the unerring Judge at the last. How the history of the church has shown one long fulfilment of that prediction, how tares have always sprung up even among the best of the wheat, how hypocrites have worn the dress of saints, and corrupt lives borrowed Christ's name only to scandalize Him, you know sufficiently well. I wish not to dwell on that. I leave the main teaching of the parable, to fasten your thoughts on this subsidiary and explanatory words in which our Lord defines the sphere of His work, for in this sentence there is, perhaps, the most compact, and not the least comprehensive, missionary sermon that was ever preached. It is one of those words dropped incidentally, as it were, which opens out His mind to us and reveals the vastness of its thoughts and purposes more clearly and convincingly than most of the texts which are cited for that particular purpose. It was like a flash of heavenly light in which the disciples might have seen much that was hidden from them. The claim of Divinity was there, the universal Lordship, the magnificent confidence in Himself as the coming Master and Saviour of the world. It was a thought which girdled the globe and enfolded all the generations of men. They might have known then what they only discovered afterwards, that it was not the throne of David or Jewish Messiahship that He aspired to, but to all power in heaven and earth; that He was not simply the hope of Israel, but the desire of all nations; that His workshop was not bounded by local mountains and rivers, but co-extensive with human habitations. In fact, He announced in these words the illimitable purpose of an illimitable love. "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world."

I.

We have here disclosed to the very outset the ever present missionary thought, the breadth and universality of His interests, saving thoughts, and sympathies. The mind which seemed on most occasions bent upon and wholly engaged with the limited healing and teaching work that lay immediately before it was all the while stretching itself out through immeasurable regions of service and labor. It is wonderful how from the very beginning He combined the nearer claims with the remoter outlook, the passing touch with the world-wide view, the love of the individual with anxiety for the race, the pity for the single lost or suffering soul with a compassion and a longing which flung their mantle of mercy and healing over all the nations of men. They are people who tell us that His purpose grew, that His world widened as He marched along. What will they not tell us who carry their pictures to the Gospel story, instead of going there to learn the truth? The picture painted of Him there is the picture of one who from the first was in all things what He would have His church to be. Nurse, Healer, and Comforter among the sorrowing and woe-stricken in His daily path; Trainer of disciples and Teacher of all truth, itinerant Preacher going about among the neglected villages of His own Galilee; Town Missionary weeping over the sins and guilt of great cities; and over-arching all, never absent from His mind, the greater end to which He was forever hastening, the "salvation of a world." The eyes which seemed to be concentrated on the little land of Israel were really going over all the earth searching among all the tribes of men for the sheep which were one day to compose the one fold under the one Shepherd. He could give all His heart to that which was near, and yet have all His heart left for that which was far away. He could hold a little child in His arms as a mother does, so closely and lovingly that there was no room there for anything else, and at the same time those arms were embracing in imagination and hope all the throbbing hearts in the world. He could fix His pitiful eyes and lay His healing hand on each solitary sufferer that lay grieving at His feet as if the whole fountains of His sympathy were being poured forth there, while He was thinking in His inmost heart of the time when He would lay those same healing hands on all the woes of humanity; the vaster thought always encircled the limited sphere of activity. He seemed to be giving most of His thought and wisdom to the training of a mere handful of disciples, when in fact He was purposing to distribute His thoughts through that little band to countless generations yet unborn. He prayed for them, and not for the world, as if their sanctification was His one care; yet He finished that memorable prayer with the words: "That the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me." He claimed to be the Christ, but He rarely called Himself the Christ, because that meant the Messiah of the Jews; the name which He gave Himself and loved best was "Son of Man," because that made Him the property of all.

He spoke sometimes as if He had come just to seek and save the lost sheep of the house of Israel; but then, as if impatient of that narrow thought, He lifted up His eyes with the wonderful far-off look which took in all the kingdoms of the earth, and exclaimed: "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold, them also I must bring." The fire of patriotism burned in His human breast. Dear, immeasurably dear, to Him were the Jews—His own people—the chosen of God and heirs of the promises, none ever loved them as He did; yet race made no difference to His sympathies, some of His sweetest were spoken to people of other nations. The Syrophenician woman drew from Him almost tears of admiration; the faith of the Roman centurion made His heart thrill with an ecstasy of thankfulness; the coming of the Greeks who desired to see Jesus was welcomed with an outburst of impassioned joy, and he foresaw men coming from North, South, East, and West to sit down with Abraham in the Kingdom of God when some of the children of the Kingdom would be cast out. No men were foreigners to Him. All souls were His possession, His sympathies bridged oceans and united continents, His pity melted down all barriers, His love annihilated space, and all His thoughts moved forward to the time when "if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me." That, my brethren, is the Christ of the Gospels and the Church Universal; and every single church must include in their work and aims every part of this image if they would be true representatives of Him. The church which has no missionary interests has dwarfed Him into a local Saviour and forgotten that He is the light and life of the world, it has left out that great thought which encompassed and pervaded all His thoughts. To have the mind of Christ is to have the mind which grasps the home field and the foreign field in one, which yearns to save the one soul close at hand and burns with fervent desire to save the world, which prays in the same breath for the outcast within a stone's throw of one's daily walks and for the heathen outcasts thousands of miles away. We have but a partial vision of Christ when we follow Him in His limited walks, and not in His illimitable thoughts, when we confine our prayers and philanthropies to the immediate circle in which we move, when we hear only the cries for help which beseech at our own doors, and are deaf to the moans and sighs and million-toned sounds of anguish which come from afar. None can know the depth of Christ's love who do not feel its breadth, and to be in close fellowship with Him is to let our pulse go wheresoever He goes, and that is everywhere.

We thank God for all who serve Him no matter how confined their outlook. Blessed are they who do saving work anywhere, though their sympathies stretch no further than a village or a town, but they have only touched the hem of the Master's garment. Far more blessed and Christ-like are they who have sat so long at His feet and felt the beating of His large heart so often that their pities have been expanded, their prayers and interests broadened out, and their love made more like that love of His which was deeper than thought could sound for each single soul, yet extensive as the ocean breaking with saving purpose on every shore. Yes, more blessed are those who can say with Him, "The field of our compassions is the world."

II.

In these words our Lord expresses His grand conception of the essential oneness of the human family. "The sower is the Son of Man." He is of no nation, because all nations are as one to Him; the Jew is forgotten in the race. "The field is the world"; there is the same receptive soil everywhere. Humanity is one in its capacities and needs which are universal, all comprehending terms. They write the King's name on every face; they sweep away all national distinctions, difference of color and language, degrees of civilization and intellectual development as mere surface coloring that hides the deeper unity. They declare concerning the lowest and most degraded child of man:

Trust me, 'tis a clay above your scorning,
With God's image stamped upon it, and
Kindling breath within.

"The field is the world," He said, because He knew from the first what we are only finding out after nineteen centuries, what social science announces to us in its somewhat pompous phraseology as the solidarity, homogeneity, fraternity, and what not of the human race, the truth, which in fact foreign missions rather than philosophy have rediscovered for us—that men are substantially one, whether beneath the polish of the Greek or the paint of the barbarian. With a looking glass and a little imagination you can see the whole human race. Everywhere there are essentially the same emotions, the same longings and regrets. Everywhere the same selfish elements, and thoughts which are higher than self. Everywhere there is some sort of conscience, some imperishable sense of right and wrong. Everywhere the heart of man is a surging sea of unrest and unsatisfied yearnings, and voluminous depths of hope. Everywhere it is susceptible to the touch of love moved by persuasions of kindness, thrilled by the voice of pity. Everywhere it can be stirred by appeals to its forgotten and invisible higher self. In every tribe and nation men are found willing to die in defence of some noble truth, or blind, foolish error. Everywhere man confesses by a hundred unmistakable signs that he cannot live by bread alone. Everywhere he is a praying creature, building altars, shrines, and temples, believing in the unseen, and groping in the darkness for the feet of God. Everywhere there is some reverence, some wandering upward look into the immensity of mystery, some cry for help and guidance. Everywhere man is a sinning, fallen being, unable to rise of himself; yet a receptive and infinitely improvable being, who may be purified and lifted up and redeemed; waiting in the darkness for the light which will make his world new, waiting in the slumber of his degradation for the kiss of the Prince of Truth to awaken him to a sense of dignity and start him on some higher path. All that is true of the worst, and most of it is true of the best. Man at his highest reach is ever a falling creature unless upheld continually by the grace which raiseth him. Without Christ, in the very centre of our civilization man descends to the level of the savage, and almost lower. When the power of the Cross is not felt, very splendours become the cloak of a hideous shame, and our wealth and culture drag in their train rottenness and corruption. There are godless haunts both in Whitechapel and Belgravia, whose vices would put the barbarian to the blush; and there is no need to go to Africa, or any further than London or Paris, to see how deep down man can sink when he has no belief in God to hold him up. Take Christ away from our modern life, and all its brilliance, genius, intellectual power, and philosophical sentiments would not save it from rapid degeneration into polished licentiousness and brutality, or into a whitened sepulchre full of dead men's bones. The proudest development has need to confess:

Unsustained by Thee I fall
Weaker than a bruised reed;
Send the strength for which I call,
Help I every moment need.

And our art and science and opulence, if they knew themselves better, would join hands with the lowest of the race, and confess:

A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
On Thy kind arms I fall;
Be Thou my strength and righteousness
My Saviour, and my all.

Yes; man is essentially one at his noblest and his meanest, in his possibilities upward and downward. He needs the same Divine power to raise him and to keep him raised. Jesus knew all that was in men, because He loved them all so dearly, and because He knew that there was a grand identity in human hearts. He was confident that the truth and love and Divine drawings which were able to save one would, in time, be able to save all. The same pity would meet all, the same needs would urge all, the same consciousness of weakness would ultimately force all to Him, and the same Cross would attract all. And so He is for ever saying to us: "Carry my Gospel everywhere. Trust not in mental machinery or civilizing agencies; trust only in the Cross and the power of My grace. For there is the same soil, the same nature everywhere, and everywhere you will find hearts responsive to My pleadings, dead without Me, alive with Me, waiting for the good seed, and able through My Spirit to yield the fruits of righteousness. Remember that your field is the world."

III.

Our Lord shows us hear the immeasurable scope of His purpose, or, if we may so express it with due reverence, the grandeur, magnificence, and sublime comprehensiveness of His ambition, which claimed all for Himself, "The field is the world," nothing less than that. We are accustomed to the thought, and it does not startle us. But read it from the standpoint of Galilee, and then! When he spoke thus He was the obscure Jewish prophet, hardly known save by a few peasants and fishermen. Yet His hand was laid already on all the nations. Already He sees His truth going forth everywhere, pushing away error, night, and superstition, superseding and displacing all that had been called truth, all that had been, in fact, partial truth, adumbrations of the form Divine, "streaks of heaven's light thrown fitfully athwart the darkness." He sweeps away all competitors. "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man, there is no other." No master of souls except Himself, no one else who can sow the children of the Kingdom, no one else who can prepare the real grain for the angel reapers. He only can make men partakers of the Divine nature and enable them to bring forth fruit unto perfection; and therefore He purposes to scatter the seed in all places among all minds and hearts, whether they be dark or enlightened, whether they be coarse or refined. He will sow it among the Jews, though in religious things they are the most illumined of all people, and he will sow it among the most degraded savage whose gods, like themselves, are brutish. They all need it, need it in the same measure and degree; there can be no true vision of God without it, no soul cleansing and purity, no renewed nature, no immortal love, hope, and joy, no real human dignity, no ascending power, and no salvation. And this, my brethren, is the very essence of christian thought and belief. It is the basis of all mission work, as it is the foundation of our personal trust and assurance. Our religion brooks no competitors. It is not one among many, it is the one. To doubt that is to deny our Lord's Divinity, and make His Cross of none effect. There may be faint shadows and problematic guesses of the true, but the true is revealed in one face alone. In the new doctrine of comparative religions touches His absolute supremacy, we reject it as blasphemy. There are books written entitled, "Christ, and other Masters." To me there is an irreverence in the very phrase, there is a covert attack on His Divine claims. We know no master that may be named alongside Him. One is the Master, and we assert for Him the mastership of the world. Forgive me if I indulge in a personal recollection. Long years ago, in the first flush of my devotion to Christ, I read the American Emerson, and was charmed with his beauty of language and suggestive aphorisms until I came to these words:

One was born in a manger,
And one by Avon's stream;
One grew up by the banks of the Nile,
And one in the Academe.

Then the charm was gone. I shuddered. It was like a blow struck in the face of my Lord. To place Him in a line with the very best of men, with Shakespeare and Plato, with Moses or Mahomet or Buddha, is hardly less offensive to an adoring faith than the act of those who once crucified Him between malefactors. He is out of all comparison.

Who that one moment has the least descried Him
Dimly and faintly hidden and afar,
Doth not despise all excellence beside Him,
Pleasures and powers that are not and that are.
Ah! amid all men bears himself hereafter,
Smit with a solemn and a sweet suspense,
Dumb to their scorn, and turning on their laughter
Only the dominance of earnest sense.

It is inconceivable to me that any real christian, any earnest lover of Jesus, can speak of other religions as if they were well enough for the people who hold them, and advise us to let these people alone, because they will be saved by such light as they have. We do not deny or forget that in every religion there has been, and perhaps is still, something true. Doubtless in the most degrading conceptions of God there have been just faint glimmerings of light that came from above. In all gropings after the unseen there is a feeble motion of the Divine spirit in men, and a proof that the Holy One broods invisible over the heads of all. We are not permitted to forget these things if we wished, because so many learned writers are eagerly forcing them upon our attention. But these writers always neglect to tell us how utterly blind and unknowing the heathen people are to the glintings of truth which are to be found in their systems, and how utterly barren these truths have been in producing saving fruits. But that we know far too sorrowfully and well. And I, my brethren, could not believe in Christ at all, save as a wise teacher and superior moralist, if I thought that any other system could do any part of what He came to do. No, if they can purify the heart, and cleanse the conscience from guilt and give the assurance of pardon, and reconcile the alienated child to the Father, and renew the nature, and sanctify the will, and fill the soul with righteousness, and peace, and joy. In a word, if they can save men in the real deep sense of that word, then all that He did and suffered—His Incarnation and His Cross, His Resurrection and the giving of His Spirit—were a useless expenditure, a Divine waste, a grand superfluity, a much ado about nothing. If Jesus is not the only Saviour, He is no Saviour at all. If He is not the absolute truth and the whole truth, we are not sure that there is any truth in him at all. On this every devout christian takes his stand. If there is no other foundation on which we can build our hopes, neither is there any foundation save in Him for others. If He is not a necessity to the world, we might do without Him. Could you do without Him? Imagine the horror of great darkness which would pass across your vision if He were gone. Picture the gloom of Heaven above, the tastelessness of all human joys, the destruction of all human hope. Think of the barrenness of life, and the unrelieved awfulness of the grave. Even to hint at such a thing is to make you feel as if something were about to break within your heart. From yourselves you get the answer to the question, What is the world without Christ? You know that the world without Him is dead, because to you He is life, and you would rather die than lose Him, and you know that there is no other name given under heaven whereby we must be saved. Ah, yes! And surely all to whom His name is dear, who have felt His sceptre of love laid upon their wills and affections, and yielded themselves to His Mastership, are one with Him in His world-embracing purpose; they are ever thrilling and burning with impassioned desire to bring all other hearts under His rule, they are one with Him in His searchings and His pities. There is in them a sense of unsatisfied longing and of very pain, because of all those places in the earth which have not yet heard the sound of His feet, and those millions of souls to whom His voice is still unknown; and they are ever praying the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth more laborers into the great harvest field which Jesus called "the world."

SOME TENDENCIES OF THOUGHT IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES.

BY R. A. WAYLAND, D.D.

Any one who has been accustomed for fifty years or more to listen to the preaching in evangelical pulpits, must realise that a change has taken place. This change has been distinctly along the line indicated by the author of the epistle to the Hebrews (12: 27): "This word, 'Yet once more,' signifieth the removing of those things which are shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain." Things that are made, the things of man's devising, man's deductions from indisputable truth, all these belong to things which may be shaken; but the things which are not made, which belong to eternity and to the essential frame of the universe, these remain.

As I look back over half a century, I note several particulars in which there have been changes in the thinking and preaching of evangelical Christians, extending to the incidental and the temporary, but not affecting the essential and the eternal. Men look with no less reverence, nay, rather with a deeper and more intelligent reverence, upon the Bible; but they feel themselves not only at liberty, but compelled to distinguish between the spirit and the letter, between that which is the work of God and that which is the work of man. They believe that the Divine Spirit dictated Psalm 23 and 51 and 139; they believe that David was the sole author of the Psalms in which every calamity and curse is invoked upon his enemies. Never again it may be hoped, shall we see good men going through unheard of exegetical agonies in the effort to harmonize the imprecatory Psalms with the Sermon on the Mount. We distinguish between the acts which were commanded by God, and those which were in violation of the spirit of God's commands; between God's treatment, for example, of the institution of the family, which he ordained and cherished and fortified by every sanction, and God's treatment of slavery, which he permitted, regulated, restricted, discouraged, with a view to its ultimate extinction.

Men realize, as they did not once, that God, in addressing himself to men, forms his language somewhat according to the mental habits and peculiarities of those to whom he speaks. If he is speaking to an agricultural people, or to a people living in a country diversified with hills, between which the water flows in streams which an hour's rain fills to overflowing, or to people living by the seaside, his teachings derive coloring from these varying circumstances. When he is speaking to a people whose only idea of a king is of an absolute monarch, who could not conceive of any other kind of governor, to whom the idea of a ruler elected by the ruled and carrying out their will would be unmeaning, God represents himself as an absolute ruler. Men have learned to see all things in the light of the nineteenth century and of the new genius of government. They have learned that though the fathers were excellent men, it by no means follows that their interpretation of the scriptures were infallible. Rather men believe in a progressive interpretation which owes much to human experience.

I do not know of any point at which there has been a more marked change than in reference to the work of Jesus Christ. It was once believed that God was angry with the sinner, I may almost say that he hated the sinner, and that Jesus Christ interposed, becoming the object of the wrath of God in order that the feelings of God might be changed, and that he might love men. The theology of good men on this point might be summed up in a verse of Dr. Watts', which I remember was quoted approvingly fifty years ago by Dr. Nehemiah Adams, of Boston, in his letter on Unitarianism:

"Rich were the drops of Jesus' blood,
That calmed his Father's face,
That sprinkled o'er the burning throne,
And changed his wrath to grace."

That "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," that Jesus Christ lived and died because God loved men, was a truth which has come gradually into recognition.

We used to deceive ourselves by arguing according to the sound of words, with little reference to their sense. It used to be said that sin is an infinite evil, being committed against an infinite Being; that, therefore, it deserved an infinite punishment, and this punishment must be either suffering inflicted upon finite men for all infinity, or suffering inflicted upon an infinite Being for a finite time. It did not occur to men that, when they began to argue from Infinites to Infinites, they were using terms which, from the very nature of the case had no meaning to them, and that they could not solve the equation, because it had so many infinities, that is, unknown quantities.

That men have come to take a juster view on all these subjects is largely due to the fact that they distinguish between the letter and the spirit, between the fervid, glowing utterances of the highest and most impassioned poetry, and the calm deliverance of prose.

There is a change in men's views as to what constitutes salvation. In a former day, salvation consisted in being delivered from the guilt of sin and the consequent agony and punishment. Now, to be saved means all this and much more. It means to be introduced to a life of holy and beneficent usefulness; it means to have every power devoted to the service of God and the good of men. To be saved is to be a saviour; he who is only saved is not saved at all.

There is a very different way of looking at the future state of the unsaved. It is no longer held that there is physical anguish in the spiritual world. The fiercest fire could have no effect upon a disembodied spirit; rather, the suffering is moral. And, still more, it is not an arbitrary infliction at the hands of God. God does not say, "I will punish men." The elements of their punishment are wrapped in within the sin. As bodily disease follows the transgression of bodily laws, not by any arbitrary decree of nature, so moral suffering follows moral wrong doing. God never damns men; it is men who damn themselves. This view is infinitely more impressive morally than the older belief. If the punishment of men proceeds from themselves, they are deprived of all opportunity for complaint. Their mouths will be stopped. They may say, "My punishment is greater than I can bear," but not "My punishment is greater than I deserve."

There has been, even within very recent years, a change in reference to the missionary motive. Formerly many embarked in missionary work because they believed that without the knowledge of the gospel the heathen were passing in a dismal procession, I know not how many million in a year, into a world of endless suffering. To day men look upon the condition of the unevangelized heathen as a matter which they may, which they must, leave in the hands of God. They find the missionary motive no longer in the future woes and groans of the heathen, but in those utterances: "The love of Christ constraineth us"; "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments"; and "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature."

There is a great change in our estimate of religious experience. Formerly there must be "a very thorough law work," leading to great distress of mind, prolonged striving against the Spirit, following by a sudden rapture as intense as had been the preceding suffering. The process was the all important thing. Men have learned that the process is valuable only as it leads to a result, that no phenomena are of any value that are not followed by a changed life, and that this "is the love of God that we keep his commandments."

There has grown up a much greater modesty in interpreting the ways and the words of God. Men are much more ready than in a former day to recognize their own marked limitations, and to say, "I do not know," and to wait for the brighter light. Theologians do not feel themselves bound to explain that which Omniscience has left involved in impenetrable mystery.—The Standard.

"FOLLOW ME."

BY JAMES BUCKHAM.

Oh! tender is the breast
That beats for you and me
That in sweet heaven could not rest
But braved dear love's most bitter test,
And bled upon the tree.

And shall I fear to tread
The path he glorified?
Nay! while the cross, though dark and dread,
Is crowned by the halo of his head,
My Lord shall be my guide!

—*Sunday School Times.*

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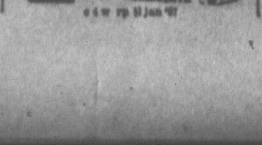

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James E. Nicholson.

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