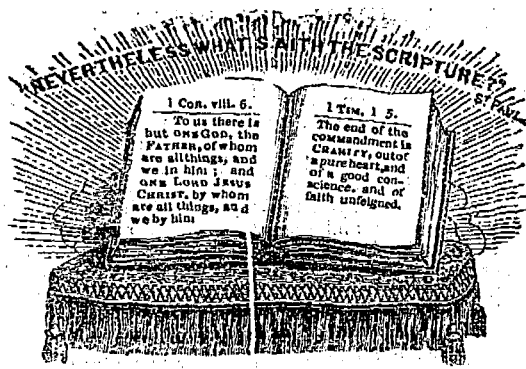


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THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST.

The example of Christ is repeatedly set before us in the New Testament. This is denied by no one, whether believer or unbeliever. And yet there is a difficulty which presses alike upon the humble disciple, and the scornful caviller. How, sighs the former, can I, weak and frail as I am, hope to resemble that matchless excellence? How, asks the latter, is Christ an example to men, if by his natural powers, or by his miraculous endowments, or by both, he was placed in a sphere of consciousness far above theirs,—made in effect, if not absolutely, to belong to another order of beings?

This difficulty, which is felt by persons of opposite tempers, deserves consideration. I believe it may be satisfactorily removed. Let it be presented in the strongest terms which it will bear;—admit that our Lord was alike by natural powers and by miraculous endowments placed above the sphere of human consciousness. It does not follow, that he is above the reach of our imitation; as may be shown, by considering the nature of example.

Example serves a double purpose. Its object and effect may be either instruction or encouragement; or both may be, as they usually are, united. An example of instruction shows us a standard to which we should as nearly as possible conform ourselves, though our capacities or circumstances may always cause a perceptible, and even a vast, difference between our aims and the result of our efforts. The standard may be unchangeable and perfect, we are frail and imperfect; still we may look to our example, as the child from observation of its parent learns how to walk or speak and is induced by a consciousness of the power of imitation to exert itself, though the thought may never arise in its mind, that its parent's freedom of motion or speech is an indication of its own ultimate ability. The example of encouragement, on the other hand, awakens the spirit of emulation. It not only shows what must be adopted as a standard, but its very existence is a proof and hint that resemblance is practicable. The child who enters a school, where he finds others like himself, conquering the difficulties of learning, is taught that he can achieve the same triumph. The sentiment of hope as well as the principle of duty is addressed, and motive is added to instruction.

Usually example partakes of both these characters. We perceive what we must try to do, and we are reminded what we can do. We have a model to imitate, and we have a model which was wrought and polished amidst circumstances and influences like our own. Such is the example of good men, of our virtuous friends, of those who have enjoyed no supernatural or special aids. But there are other examples, which we regard as embracing those principles of perfection with which we hope to gain but a distant sympathy. They appear to us rather as personifications of abstract excellence, than as the names of real existences. The fruits of the inspiration of genius or the most admirable works of art may be contemplated as models, without any hope of rivalling their perfection. In the moral world, the character of God is an example of this kind. The infinity of his nature places him beyond a thought of any, but the most distant and faint resemblance, and we derive no encouragement to be good from the pattern of his goodness. The commands, to be holy, to be perfect as our Father in heaven is holy and perfect, direct us to him, only that we may by studying his character form and rectify our notions of holiness and perfection. His is an example of infinite instruction, but of not the least encouragement.

Now if the Divine Being may be taken as an example without any embarrassment from the circumstance that was thought to raise an obstacle in the way of an imitation of Christ how much less ought this circumstance to perplex us in the latter connexion. What if Jesus was unlike us in the original endowments of his nature, or was elevated by a miraculous inspiration to a height of advantage over earthly evils which we can never occupy;—is his character less instructive? Are his virtues less resplendent? Suppose

their only manifestation had been in heaven, and we had been permitted to look into the spiritual world and observe their appearance amidst the scenes of a celestial life; would they not still have been models of the several graces which in the believer's soul might be fashioned after them?

I do not say that the example of Christ was not one of encouragement; but that if this quality be denied to it, it retains its character of instruction.

The distinction should be regarded, not only as it removes a difficulty, but as it suggests the use which we should make of our Lord's example. He has gone before us, and we should follow his steps. No matter at what distance, if we but keep the path and press on as diligently as our powers will permit. Here is a standard by which we may rectify our errors. There are motives enough along the Christian course and shining forth from its close, to animate our purpose of obedience. Experience and hope will encourage us. Let the disciple look to Jesus, the author and finisher of his faith, and learn what goodness is, what faith and patience and disinterested love and devout fidelity are. And though he may never say to himself,—because my Master bore his cross, I can bear mine; yet he will say,—as my Master walked, I must and will try to walk, for this is the right way.

The question however may arise in some minds—what then was the need of the example of Christ? If it only fulfil the same office as the character of God, to teach us what should be our standard and model, without stimulating our energies to bring ourselves to the same form and measure of excellence, was it not unnecessary and even superfluous? No; for two important advantages result from such a manifestation of example as Jesus gave. First, it was seen amidst the circumstances of human society. The spirit of Divine excellence, like "the word" of Divine power and truth, "because flesh and dwelt among men," and they "saw its glory" as they could never have seen it, even if the heavens had been opened and they had looked into the homes of the celestial spirits. However just might have been our conceptions of the Divine character, it would still have been difficult for us to imagine how such character would appear under the trials and changes of mortal life. We might have excused ourselves from imitating it by the plea, that as it did not belong to earth, it could not be copied on earth. Jesus has shown how it could adapt itself to the circumstances of frail humanity, and breathe the air of mortal corruption without imbibing the slightest taint. He has anticipated and destroyed the excuse of the indolent, while he has enlightened the honest inquirer after goodness.

For, the other advantage which should be noticed in such a manifestation of divine excellence is, that it is this manifestation, which has given us a knowledge of God. We are indebted to Jesus for our ideas of the character which resides in the Infinite Mind. If a voice from the skies had proclaimed the words, "Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" would they have been understood? The life of Christ was wanted to explain them. Men must look on the image before they can form a just conception of the Original. Here then the example of Christ obtains a new value; since it is not only a model, but a copy. It teaches us what we should strive to be, by teaching us what God is; and thus doubly executes its office of instruction.

While therefore I do not exclude the idea of encouragement from the example of Christ, I believe I have shown that if any one think this idea is incompatible with such a difference of powers and conscious state as that which distinguished the Son of God from his disciples, he may yet perceive the abundant reasonableness of the command to follow in the steps of the Lord Jesus. Look then to your Master, Christian, as the great example, in whom you may behold what you should imitate, though you may never rival nor approach it. Learn of him, whose life was instruction, whose character was religion, and who sealed the teaching of his life not less than the teaching of his lips by the death of the cross.

E. S. G.

CHRISTIAN COMPREHENSIVENESS.

A comprehensive character is the only really great character possible among men. And, being that which holds the fullest agreement and sympathy with God, it is one, we are persuaded, that is specially valued and cherished by Him. We shall find also, by inspection, that all the defective modes of character in Christian men are due to the fact that some partial or partizan view of the duty sways their demonstrations. Sometimes one extreme is held, sometimes the other, and accordingly we shall see that, excepting cases where there is a fixed design to brave the laws of all duty, the blemished characters go in pairs.

Thus one man abhors all prejudice, testifies against it night and day, places all his guards on the side opposite, and, as prejudgments of some kind are the necessary condition of all judgments, it results, of course, that he falls into an error quite as hurtful and more weak, ceasing to have any fixed opinion, or to hold manfully any truth whatever. Another, seeing no evil but in a change of opinions holds his opinions by his will and not by his understanding. And as no truth can penetrate the will, he becomes a stupid and obstinate bigot—standing for truth itself, as if it were no better than falsehood.

There is a class of Christians, who specially abhor a scrupulous religion. It is uncomfortable, it wears a superstitious look, and therefore they are moved to assert their dignity, by venturing out, occasionally, on acts or exhibitions that are plainly sinful. And then when they return to their duty (which they are quite certain finally to omit) they consent to obey God; not because of the principle, but because of the importance of the occasion! In expelling all scruples, they have made an exile of their consciences. A man at the other extreme will have it for his religion to be exact in all the items of discipline, and will become so conscientious about mine, anise and cummin, that no conscience will be left for judgment, or mercy, or even for honesty.

Some persons are all for charity, meaning by the term a spirit of allowance towards the faults and crimes of others. Christ, they say, commands us not to judge; but they do not observe that there are things which we can see without judging, and which, as they display their own iniquity, ought to be condemned in the severest terms of reprobation. Charity will cover a multitude of sins—not all. The dearest and truest charity will uncover many. Opposite to such, we have a tribe of censorious Christians, who require us to be bold against sin, who put the harshest constructions on all conduct, scorching and denouncing as surely as they speak. If they could not find some sin to denounce, they would begin to have a poor opinion of their own piety. These could not even understand the Saviour, when he says "neither do I condemn thee."

Some Christian professors are so particularly pleased with a cheerful spirit, and so intent on being cheerful Christians themselves, that they even forget to be Christians at all. They are light enough, free enough,—the longitude of face they so much dread is effectually displaced. Indeed the godly life, prayer, sobriety itself, are all too sombre for their kind of piety. Opposed to these we have an austere school, who object to all kinds of relaxation, and have even some scruples about smiling. A hearty laugh is an act of positive ungodliness. They love to see the Christian serious at all times. Their face is set as critically as the surveyor's needle, or they carry it as nicely as they would carry a full vessel. But there is a certain measure of sourness in all human bosoms, which, if it cannot be repented by smiles, becomes an active leaven. The face that was first serious changes to a vinegar aspect, and this reacts to sour the sourness of nature, till finally it will be found that the once amiable person has become nervous, acrid, caustic and thoroughly disagreeable.

We have a class of disciples who appear to sum up all duty in self-examination. They examine themselves till they are selfish, and extinguish all the evidences for which they look. They inspect and handle every affection till they have killed it, and become so critical, at length, that no feeling of the heart will dare venture out, lest it should not be able to stand scrutiny. Another class have it for a maxim

never to doubt themselves. 'Let us do our duty,' they say, 'and God will take care of us.' So they delve on, confident, presumptuous, ignorant of themselves, guarded against no infirmity. But they might about as well do nothing in the name of duty, as to go on with a spirit so ill regulated, and, if they knew it, so very nearly wicked.

There is a class of disciples who especially love prudence. It is the cardinal virtue. They dread, of course, all manifestations of feeling, which is the same as to say that they live in the absence of feelings; are the wailing up of the soul's waters, the kindling of its fires, when no jealousy is awake to suppress them. If they are watched, they retreat to their cell—joy, love, hope, pity, fear—a silent, timorous brood, that dare not move. The prudent man becomes thus a man of ice, or since the soul is borne up and away to God only on the wings of feeling, sinks into a state of dull negation. Then we have another class who detest the trammels of prudence, and are never in their element, save when they are rioting in emotion. But as the capacity of feeling is limited, it comes to pass in a few days that what they had is wholly burnt to a cinder. Then, as they have a side of capacity for bad feeling still left, new signs will begin to appear. As the raptures abate and the high symptoms droop, a kind of despair begins to lower, a faint chiding also is heard, then a loud rail, then bitter deprecations and possibly imprecations too; charges are leveled at individuals, arrows are shot at the mark, and the volcanic eruptions thrown up at the sky are proofs visible and audible of the fierce and devilish heat that rages within. This is fanaticism; a malicious piety, kindling its wrath by prayer and holy rites. How manifest is it that each of these extremes, embracing its opposite, would rest in a balanced equilibrium on the two poles of duty, and be itself the wiser and the holier, for that which is now its mischief and its overthrow.—Dr. Bushnell.

A GREAT MAN.

The highest and noblest conception which we can form of a great and good man, is one who understands the power of his own soul, and is continually exerting that power for the promotion of good; who cherishes a deep and solemn sense of the sacredness of duty; and never hesitates to discharge that duty, be the consequences ever so injurious to his interest; who in matters of religion lends nought but a deaf ear to the loud voices of sects; nought but a blind eye to all party creeds; but scans the works of nature, the revelations of scripture, and the yearnings of the human heart; who gives all truth a welcome however it may conflict with his pride; who is ever ready to execute inflexible justice, how muchsoever it may affect his just interest; who rebukes all evil doings; however high the transgressor may stand; whose sympathies always espouse the cause of the oppressed; the down-trodden and the injured.—Colin.

RIGHT IS MIGHT.—As sure as God liveth, as sure as the Holy one of Israel is the Lord of Hosts, the Almighty—right is might, and ever was and ever shall be so. Holiness is might; meekness is might; patience is might; humility is might; self-denial and self-sacrifice is might; faith is might; love is might; every gift of the Spirit is might. The cross was two pieces of dead wood, and a helpless unresisting man was nailed to it; yet it was mightier than the world, and triumphed, and will ever triumph over it. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not pure holy deed, or word, or thought. On the other hand, might, that which the children of earth call so, the strong wind, the earthquake, the fire, perishes through its own violence, self-exhausted and self-consumed; as our age of the world has been allowed to witness in the most signal example. For many of us remember, and they who do not, have heard from their fathers, how the mightiest man on earth, he who had girt himself with all might, except that of right, burst like a tempest cloud, burnt himself out like a conflagration, and only left the scars of his ravages to mark where he had been. Who among you can look into an infant's face, and not see a power in it mightier than all the armies of Atila, or Napoleon?—Archdeacon Hare.