THE CULTIVATION OF THE DEVOUT LIFE.

BY REV. F. B. MEYER, B. A., OF LONDON.

The consideration of this subject is manifestly well-timed. Indeed, it would be difficult to suggest one more pertinent to the special exigencies of our age, which, to say the least, and from two causes, is not friendly to the cultivation of the devout life. Of late the attention of the Christian church has been torn between questions of belief on the one hand, and methods of dealing effectively with social questions on the other. And whilst each of these is undoubtedly of prime importance, yet it must be acknowledged that too exclusive an attention to either tends to divert attention from that experimental study of the Word of God, that quickened spiritual consciousness, that heart-growth in the grace and knowledge of God, which can alone keep men sound in faith, because they are sound in love, and which must pervade all schemes of Christian activity, if they shall avail to assuage the intolerable agony of the world.

We must, at the outset, premise that we cannot cultivate that which does not exist; nor can we by cultivation develop life, unless it has been already originated by the operation of the Lord and Giver of Life. To implant life is the prerogative of God. The genius of man can only lead forth into rare and beautiful development qualities the promise and germ of which had been inserted by the thought and skill of the Creator. Before we attempt the culture of the devout life, we must be well assured that the germ of it is present within our souls. If we have it not, no cultivation whatever will avail to produce it. If we have it, we must have received it as a distinct gift from the Spirit of God. This is the regeneration, which is not merely a change of nature, a definition that might imply that the natural man can be so transformed and improved as to bring forth the fruits of righteousness and true holiness, but is the communication of that Divine life to man, which is not in him by nature, but which is implanted in him by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word. This is the primordial germ of the devout life, the cultivation of which is our theme now.

It is also needful to remark that the devout life is an altogether different thing from "the religious life," so called of monasticism. This is not the devout life that we desire. These are not the methods of its culture. Not in the sequestered valley where the great abbey bell calls to incessant prayers, but in the dusty lane and wrangling mart; not the ruthless starvation of any of the natural powers with which our nature is endowed, but in their restraint and right ordering; not in the creation of extraordinary mortifications, but in the use of those opportunities for self-denial which occur in the routine of our ordinary existence; not in severe separation from men, but in their midst, as salt, and light, and air, must be lived and cultivated and matured that devout life of which we speak.

The devout life which cannot laugh with little children, and join the lads in manly and healthful games, and take the lead in all innocent delights, which fill the summer glades with ringing laughter, and the long winter evenings with varied interests and pursuits; that heart culture which is too absorbed in the things of eternity to notice the things of time, and which looks sourly on the life of the great world of man: all this is an alien to the spirit of our Master Christ, and it is a mimicry of the genuine life for which we plead—a dangerous falsehood, because half the truth; a delusion and a snare, which may seriously mislead earnest men.

At the same time, the age imperatively calls for a higher standard of Christian living. It is getting weary to death of our professions and sermons, of our discussions and divisions, of our incessant appeals to a great historic past, and of our scrupulous elaboration of formularies. It demands life, and life more abundantly. The lives of Christians are the best apologetics for our faith. It was by these that the world was first arrested with awe and wonder, then roused to mad fury, and, finally, compelled to acknowledge itself converted. And what happened during the four first centuries of our era must take place again, if we are to win this age for the kingdom of God. On the part of ministers and people, of the leaders and of the rank and file of our churches, there must be a heightened ideal of Christian living, and an earnest, sustained, and Spirit-nerved endeavor to realize it day by day. Hence the necessity of considering the cultivation of the devout, or devoted, life.

I.—Of the four helps to the cultivation of the devout life, of which we are to speak, the first is manifestly separation from all known evil on the part of Christian individuals and communities.

And here we may recall a line of argument, of which the Apostle Paul made double use, and which is specially pertinent to our position as custodians of the rite of Believers' Baptism. It is a position of which we have no need to blush. The days have passed in which any one need shrink to own himself a Baptist. There may be amongst us many things which mar the brightness and power of our testimony, but as to the substance of our testimony there is no reason for shame. Many other bodies of Christians are equally true, with ourselves, to the maintenance, in its simplicity and purity, of the institution of the Lord's Supper. But alone, amongst the rest of our sister churches, do we maintain, in its original form, the institution of Believer's Baptism as delivered by the Lord to His Apostles, and practised in the early Church. That this is so is becoming increasingly acknowledged by all thinking and educated men. And in this lies the strength of our position at the present moment.

In many quarters throughout the Christian Church a great deal has been lately said about the identification of Believers in the Death and Resurrection of our Lord, following in the line of the Apostle's thought, as when he says, "We died with Christ" (Rom. 6: 8); "If one died for all, therefore all died" (2 Cor. 5: 14); and again, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2: 20); and again, "He quickened us together with Christ, and raised us up with Him" (Eph. 2: 6). Now teaching like this leads straight down to the baptistery, which may be fitly called "the grave of Jesus," and where the believer lies for a moment with the Lord in the likeness of His burial, appropriating by his own open and deliberate choice the position which is his in the mind and intention of God. The Act of Believers' Baptism is the appropriation in time of a position which belongs to us in the plans and purposes of eternity. It is the confession of a desire to be dead with Christ to the seductions of the flesh and the fascinations of the world; to be indifferent to the praise and blame, the flatteries, and the threats of men; and to rise into that serene and holy existence, the resurrection life on which our Lord has entered, and of which He has taken possession in our name.

But it is obvious that our position as the custodians of this sacred rite lays redoubled responsibility upon us. When arguing against their indulgence in the sins of the flesh, the apostle reminded the Roman Christians of the fact of their burial with Christ in His grave. He had never seen them, but he was sure that they had been baptized by burial beneath the water, in the likeness of Christ's death; and it was on this that he rested his argument. Reminding them of that solemn moment when, in the act of baptism, they professed identification in Christ's death, he bade them recall its significance. When Christ died, He died unto sin once, and once for all. He passed into a world where sin and death were unknown. He was forever freed from the conditions imposed on Him as a dweller in a world of sin and sorrow and death. But if Christians dare to appropriate herein a position of oneness with their Master Christ, they must maintain the same standard. They must not allow sin to reign in their mortal body, or obey it in its lusts. They must reckon themselves to be dead indeed unto sin. They must know that their old nature has been so far cancelled in its fatal power over the spirit as that they should no longer be slaves to its fatal tyranny. (Rom. 6).

Sinless perfection is an impossible dream. It is impossible to suppose that we can ever be perfect in this life, one of the conditions of which is an ever-increasing light, for as our light grows we are continually coming to discern evil where once we found no cause for self-condemnation. And as to perfection, which is the attainment of the perfect stature of Christ, it is likely that in the eternal noon of heaven we shall have still to cry, as the glory of our Master is ever growing upon our view, "Not as though I had already attained, or were already perfect, but I follow after." But though we can never be absolutely free from evil, it is our duty to be free from all known evil, so soon as we become aware of its presence in heart and life. The judgment, confession, and excision of known evil is the prime law of the Christian life. On our obedience to this depend our joy of heart, our power in service, and our growth in the Divine life. And surely we are pledged to obey it by the very rite which gives us our name. If any Christian are bound to free themselves from all that savours of the world, the flesh, and the devil, it is ourselves.

The first step, then, in the cultivation of the devout life is the presentation of the entire nature to Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire, and who, albeit that He is the merciful High Priest, holds in His hand the sharp two-edged sword.

Before each of those marvellous outbreaks of national religion, described in the Chronicles of the Kings, there was a definite putting away of sin, accompanied by humble confession. So has it been repeatedly since. And if a day should ever come in which the Baptist community throughout the United Kingdom should agree to spend the consecutive hours in humiliation, confession, and the putting away of all questionable entertainments, of all worldly means of obtaining money,—(applause)—of all dependence on the devices of naturalism, and of all sensational and fantastic expedients for gaining a congregation, influence, and prestige; of all harsh and uncharitable judgments of each other; resolving henceforth to carry on the Lord's work in ways which the Lord himself could bless—that day would be the birthday of blessing, and would do more for the cultivation of the devout life in individuals and communities than any number of the most brilliant sermons or most stimulating and helpful books. When once we have individually cleansed ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, and have collectively abandoned the frivolous expedients on which we have too much relied for carrying on the Lord's work, we shall begin to realise the blessedness and power of the "devout life," and the Church shall look forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and "terrible as an army with banners."

II.—The next step in the cultivation of the devout life is to devote ourselves to Christ.

The devout man is he who, by a solemn vow or covenant, has devoted himself to God. The reason and measure of our devotion to Christ are given in His devotion for us. As He gave His whole being to us, so are we to give our whole being to Him. And this act of devotion should be a definite, final, and irrevocable event in our spiritual history. "Of Him and through Him, and to Him are all things; I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service," (Rom. 12: 1.) It is well if the general ideas of consecration exist in solution in the mind, but it is much better if they crystallise in one solemn and definite act.

It is useless to dream of a devout life until the soul has taken up its true attitude to the claims of God. So long as these are acknowledged only in part, there must be failure, unrest, and bitter disappointment. But when a man has dared to say "I have but one Master, Christ: I have but one aim, to do His will; I have but one resource, His strength; I have but one reward, His well-done; henceforth let no man trouble me, I bear branded in my body the marks of Jesus"" when a man has come to that, he has become free of all the world, and has taken up a position in which the cultivation of the devout life may go on by leaps and bounds.

III.—It is, in the next place, of the highest importance to recognize that the chief agent in the cultivation of the devout life must be the Holy Spirit Himself.

We are apt to hold too much as an article of our creed, and too little as a matter of daily experience, the personal agency of the Spirit of Christ in our inner being reproducing the character of Christ. But the attaining and maintenance of the devout life, without Him, is as impossible as that of the moorland waste should yield the fragrance and hues of the garden without the skilled and patient care of the husbandman. Men catch sight of an ideal of the devout life, with a distinct resolve that it shall not remain as an ideal, but shall be translated into the real. They vow that in some true and solid sense it shall be reflected in their experience and life, as the forms of the hills are reflected in the silvery waters of the Highland loch. Though they admit that they may never be satisfied with their measure of likeness, yet why should they not be much more like Him to-day than ever before, even though to-morrow may bring a shade of disappointment and shame? Yet how often are such resolutions extinguished in the despair of repeated failure, for want of knowing that self cannot lift self, but that when once the nature has been surrendered, through the open gate of a will, not annihilated or destroyed, but yielded, the Divine Husbandman will come to take possession and to till the soil.

There is everywhere in Scripture the demand for struggle and effort. But these activities of the renewed man do not work towards God, but from Him. The nature is the temple in whose inner shrine He dwells; the workshop in which He toils. We are bidden to work out our salvation, but it is only because He works in both to will and to do. The Apostle labors even to an agony, but it is only because of the Divine energy pulsing in his soul.

The agency by whom this inner work is wrought is the Spirit of God. He alone is acquainted with every element in our characters, with every detail of our position. He alone can reach, and touch, and manipulate the hidden springs of thought and will. Now, in this dispensation, the Blessed Trinity has been manifested under two forms—first as the Word made flesh, second, as the secret Invisible Spirit, like the wind we cannot see. Not the former, but the latter, is the most powerful revelation of God. And it is under the immediate presence of this marvellous power that we live. And He it is who is prepared to dwell in us in fulness, moving our wills, inspiring our words, energising our lives, and cultivating the soil of our inner life. Beneath His culture, if only we are true to it, not withdrawing ourselves, listening to his slightest whispers, translating into prompt obedience His smallest suggestions, sacrificing the flesh with its inclinations in the one absorbing passion of devotion, there shall come a marvellous transformation over us—"instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree, and instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle tree; the desert place shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

IV. Lastly, we must make use of all means within our reach. We can only rapidly touch these as we close.

(1) We must cultivate the quiet mind. The perturbed waters soon lose the color of the hills, the lustre of the stars; but not sooner than does the disquieted heart miss the vision, and mar the work of God within its depths. Two things are deadly foes to the cultivation of the devout life—self-conscious pride and unquietness of heart. When the woodlands are filled with trampling feet and noisy clamor, all their varied life is still, to reveal itself only when quiet is restored. So when feverish desire and anxious cares and restless ambitions crowd in upon the inner chambers of the being, a pause is put to the cultivation of the devout life, which requires calm, and stillness, and peace. God's peace, which is always sent in answer to trustful prayer, must keep all intruders from the door of the heart in which the Divine Workman is maturing His fairest processes. And let us remember that it is possible to have a quiet heart in the midst of a very unquiet life. Happy are they who acquire the holy secret of preserving a state of inward recollection amid many outward and conflicting claims, and whose hearts are kept in perfect peace, being stayed on God. When the turbid streams of earthly business come in contact with such they will drop all their discoloring silt, as does the Rhone in passing through the still deep waters of Geneva. There was truth in the three words in which a holy man once described the devout life—Flight, Silence, Rest.

(2) We must secure a portion of every day, and, where possible, at the commencement of the day, for solitary communion with God. Service in the church cannot compensate for the neglect of the closet. To have kept this vineyards of others will be a poor satisfaction if we stand amid the tangled growths of our own, the result of our own carelessness and neglect. It is a grave question whether any of us spend time enough alone with God, and whether the greatest reform and the best would not be one in the periods and methods of daily private prayer. If the story of our lives were to be truly written, should we not be ourselves startled to see how scanty are the minutes spent at the alter, how hasty and fragmentary our petitions, how hurried and perfunctory our study of the Word of God? We do not stay long enough on the quay to see our vessels return with rich freightage, or linger long enough at the shrine to accustom our eyes to discern the ethereal vision. What wonder that our lives are so dwarfed when compared with those of men like Bishop Andrewes, spending the greater part of five hours each day in prayer and devotion; or John Welsh, who thought that day ill-spent which did not witness eight or ten hours of closest communion; or of Jonathan Edwards, as great an athlete in the arena of prayer as he was in that of doctrine and debate. I was rebuked the other day by the example of Bishop Dupanloup, who, amid the duties of his great diocese, found time for three hours of daily prayer.

Nor during such hours should we neglect the Word of God, the ladder of communication between God's mind and ours; reading it not in search of subjects and texts, but as devout and humble disciples.

(3) We must also avail ourselves of subsidiary means. Amongst which there should be mention made of the regular attendance on means of grace, especially at meetings for prayers, and as often as possible at the table of the Lord; also the constant perusal of Christian biography; and, certainly, the setting apart of days for self-examination, prolonged meditation, and waiting upon God. These, combined with a vigilant self-watch, ever more merciless with itself than with others; with the habit of instant and frank confession of sin; and with a constant recollection of the presence and keeping power of Christ, cannot but prove to be important conditions in the culture of the devout life.

In these earnest endeavors for the cultivation of the devout life, let us ever remember that our final aim is not to secure our own comfort or reward. If such were the case the very selfishness of our motive would invalidate all our attempts. Our aim is not self-centred, but that we may better promote the glory of God, and serve the cause of man.

Surrounded, as many of us are, by the seething multitudes of our great cities; looking out, as we all do, on the vast populations of heathendom, our heart yearns for the olden power, by which great multitudes were made obedient to the faith; but when we investigate the inner experience of those who wielded it, we find that in every case it was associated with and sprang from lives of remarkable holiness and devotion. John Livingstone, the renowned Scotch worthy, says of it: "There is sometimes some what in preaching that cannot be ascribed either to matter or expression, and cannot be described what it is or from whence it cometh, but with a sweet violence it pierceth into the heart and affections, and comes immediately from the Lord; but if there be any way to obtain such a thing, it is by the heavenly disposition of the speaker." Our own hearts witness to the truth of these words. Power with men is that which we desire, nay, is that which we are bent on having, at whatever cost. And since it is clear that one part of that cost is the possession of a holy character, let us from henceforth give ourselves, with renewed and unintermitting earnestness, to its acquisition and development, accepting every suggestion, and adopting every means which may promote our aim and assist us in the cultivation of the devout life.

How the Work Spread.

BY MRS. ANNIE A. PRESTON.

There was a revival in Clinton. It was a hard, almost hopeless field, and there was a serious conflict, but faith and vigorous work prevailed; for after two months of extra meetings the eternal power of truth was triumphant, the multitude of prayers that had been offered for the community and for individuals were owned and served, and many souls were brought into the kingdom.

While the wonderful work of grace was going on, Ruth Waldrrn, a young girl from a neighboring town, happened to pass a night at the house of a relative in Clinton Village, and almost as a matter of course attended one of the meetings. She was a bright, capable, gay young girl who had never had any religious home influence, had never attended church regularly nor been a member of a Sunday-school. There are too many such families, prosperous, well-to-do people, intellectually sharp and keen, often influential and polished, who never enter a church and take no interest in religion or its ministers unless death invades their households.

Ruth had never been spoken to about her soul's salvation and had never thought about being a Christian until the earnest words of the pastor awakened the thought.

"I have not taken Christ for my Saviour! If I was to die what would become of me? Is it not a contemptible way of living to receive and enjoy all the blessings and comforts of this life without in any way making acknowledgment to the Giver."

The thought startled her. She went home with a seed planted in her heart that sprouted rapidly into life. The first germ silently proclaimed to the girl, "You are a sinner!" The germ developed, and every leaf and twig and branch but repeated the accusation, "You are a sinner," until it seemed to pervade every fiber of her being and to fill her whole soul.

What was to be done about it? She had no idea, and so she went on with her thoughtless round of visits, sociables, and parties that all amounted to the same inevitable amusements, the resort of the unaspiring and easily-satisfied everywhere—dancing and card playing. Coming home from these gatherings she would sit up until two and three o'clock in the morning reading the Bible and trying to find out how she was to obtain a new heart and begin leading a new life. She grew thin and pale, and her wan, sad face created comment among her friends, but no one surmised the true state of affairs. And she dared tell no one of her distress of mind; had she done so there was not a person among her friends and associates who could have pointed her in the right way.

One evening, at the dancing-school, she heard some one remark that there was to be a donation party the next evening at the village parsonage, about four miles away.

"Why can not we go?" she asked, hastily. "We have not been ourselves at the upper village this winter."

"Sure enough," chimed in one of her companions, "let us get up a sleigh ride and all go and astonish the minister. I will carry him a fat turkey, and we will carry butter, and I will take a cheese," and the merry plan ran around the room, Ruth stimulating it with more zest than she had shown for weeks.

There was a heavy snow-fall that night, and all the next day the wind blew so that the roads running north and south were well-nigh impassable, but over from the West Farms came a four-horse team with a huge sled load of young people with their bountiful gifts, to the profound astonishment of the good minister and his family.

Very few others came, and the kind hostess was sorely perplexed to know how to entertain these gay young people, since dancing, card-playing or "kissing games" were out of the question. "But I am so glad they came," she said to her oldest son, "and I do want them to enjoy the evening."

Meanwhile the good pastor, quite complacently seating himself by Ruth, who was curled down in a corner of the sofa, feeling as if "I am a sinner" was bristling out all over her, said:

"You are as lively and social as usual over at West Farms, I suppose. Do you find time for an occasional prayer-meeting at the school-house?"

"Oh, dear, no sir," said Ruth. "We are all such sinners over there"—at that a group of young people turning over an album by the centre-table giggled, thinking Ruth was attempting to be facetious at the minister's expense. But she went on bravely: "Indeed, sir, I mean it. We are all sinners, but I am the worst of them all because I know that I am a sinner, and I realize that we are all rushing on, unprepared, to eternity, and although I am thinking of it constantly I am keeping it to myself and not doing anything about it, and that makes me responsible for them all."

"Oh, Ruth, I am worse than you are," put in Belle Nye, hastily, "for my Aunt Ellen is one of the new converts at Clinton, and she wrote me all about it, and said she was praying that the revival might spread onward through this town even, and she wanted me to tell my friends that now was the time for them to seek Jesus, but I have not said one word about it until now, and all the time I was desiring to be a Christian."

"I suppose more people wish that than we have any idea of," said Rob Ellis, timidly. "I was over to Clinton to have my horse shod the other day and the blacksmith, who used to be a very wicked man, has been converted, and he tells every one who comes into the shop of the peace and joy that fill his heart. I came home thinking if religion could so change such a rough, bad man as that, it might do wonders for us at the West Farms, but I haven't said anything about it before."

So the confessions went from mouth to mouth like a flame. The weight of sin was burdening them. They had been bearing the conviction in secret. They each had in some way received the impression from Clinton, and each individual's purpose in coming to the donation party was the hope that he or she might have an opportunity to talk with the pastor.

"We shall have to pray," said the minister. "Let us all kneel."

They did so, gladly. The good man prayed, his wife prayed, the boys prayed, and when Ruth's heart-felt broken petition next found voice sobs broke forth from all parts of the large, square, parsonage parlor.

The Lord sent down showers of blessings, and it was a rejoicing company that went back to the West Farms along the drifted highways. The result of this beginning was a revival, when forty heads of families were converted. The children were brought in, and the outcome was a church organized and a church edifice built at the West Farms.

Family Prayer.

It is a surprising fact how many Christian homes there are in our land in which is never heard the voice of prayer. Let me say to all parents who do not pray with their children: It is utterly impossible for you to train them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord if you neglect this important duty. It is the desire of all true Christian parents to see their children, early in life, come into the fold of Christ and give their hearts to the Lord. But how can we expect this if we do not set a Godly example before them and do not train them up in the way they should go. Nothing can have a greater influence over a child for good than to be gathered around the family altar and listen to the prayer of an earnest Christian father; one in whom they have great confidence, and whose daily walk, conversation and example proves to them that he is, indeed, a child of God, and that there is a reality in religion. The trouble with a great many fathers, and the reason why they do not pray with their families, is because they do not pray in secret. They never pray. A father who is a true and loving disciple of Jesus, and who lives a faithful and consistent Christian life, before his family, will never neglect to pray with them.

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