What Think Ye of Christ?...

Sermon on Matthew 22:42.

BY

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Jesus Christ challenges the thought of this world in a way that is altogether unique and enduring. The manner of His birth, His life and ministry, His death and resurrection, as well as the doctrines He expounded, and the claims He put forth, have roused the attention of the best races of men more than anything else ever did or can do.

"Peoples and realms of every tongue
Dwell on His love with sweetest song
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their young Hosannahs to His name."

And there is little wonder that the religious leaders of His own day should be greatly exercised in regard to His claims. They were jealous of His growing popularity, they saw their own authority being menaced by His teachings, hence they sought to entangle and confound Him in debate. But Jesus put a final quietus upon their quibbling by the question of the text in the light of their own scriptures. They must either deny the authority of their own Old Testament or admit the Messiah's claims. They did not want to do either and so kept silent.

Now we are all profoundly interested in the claims of Jesus Christ. He is the most colossal figure in art and science and politics and religion. His shadow is overspreading the world, and His claims, if true, must shape our eternal destiny. How important that we be able to give a definite answer to this question and that we seek to harmonize our lives with our highest convictions of the Christ.

Let me ask: I. What think ye of His claims to Divinity? All our relations to Him will be governed by our convictions on this point. The Arians considered Him a demigod—a creature halfway between man and God, with delegated powers for the creation of the worlds! The Unitarians admit His miracles and supernatural endowments, but say He is still only a man. Renan and other skeptics believe Him to have been a superbly good man, but self-deceived as to Divinity. What think ye? What does the New Testament say of Him?

He claimed eternity of existence. In His high-priestly prayer in John 17th, He says "Glorify thou Me with thine own self with the glory I had with thee before the world was." So that before matter was created or a blazing sun had been sent whirling into space, before Seraphim and Cherubim were borne, before the universe had been peopled with intelligences, and while as yet space was untenanted and void, in the abysmal depths of eternity past, Christ was there. He also created the worlds. "Without Him was not anything made that was made." "For by Him were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, all things were created by Him and for Him." Language could not more specifically declare that matter is not eternal and that Jesus Christ is superior to, and antedates all created things. He assumed the prerogative of the forgiveness of sins in the case of the sick of the palsy, an attribute that they knew, and He knew, could only belong to Deity. He raised the dead, calling forth Lazarus from the tomb after the fluids of his body had commenced to evaporate, and lifted his own body from the grave, a fact that has never been successfully assailed during nineteen centuries. What wonder ninety-nine one hundredths of the church worship Him as Divine. Of course the Unitarians to save His moral character deny the authority of the scriptures that teach His divinity. A prominent Unitarian recently reading a paper at a convention said: "So far as the scriptures go the orthodox Christians have the best of it, and the best way to meet the difficulty is to throw overboard the authority of the scriptures." Thank you, Mr. Unitarian, when you are driven to such desperate straits we know that the New Testament, and the deity of Christ stand or fall together.

But His unique and towering character, the miracle of the ages, endorses the written record of His divinity. It is strange and touching to see how the story of His tenderness and self-sacrifice pervades, astonishes, overwhelms and subdues all grades of intellect. Strauss, the German skeptic, says He is "the being without whose presence in the mind perfect piety is impossible." Renan, the French skeptic, says: "Whatever be the surprises of the future Jesus will never be surpassed. His worship will grow young without ceasing." Theodore Parker, the American rationalist, says: "The greatest minds have seen no farther than Christ, and have added nothing to the doctrine or religion, the richest hearts have felt no deeper than Christ, and have added nothing to the sentiment of religion." Now if it takes a Shakespeare to write his plays, no one less than Christ could have imagined His character, and have given it to the world. We might as easily unbraid the rays of the sun and separate the scarlet threads as hope to take the Divine element from the story of His life. What wonder the heart of humanity should turn to Him and say in the language of Tennyson:

Be near me when my light is low
When the blood creeps and the nerves prick
And tingle, and the heart is sick,
And all the wheels of being slow.
Be near me when I fade away
To point the terms of human strife,
And on the low dark verge of life
The twilight of eternal day.

Again: II. What think ye of Christ as Teacher? Here is a man who was in public life only three and a half years, who died at thirty-three, and yet He is swaying the history and destiny of this world! How do you account for it?

Think of the authority of His teachings. He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. How did the scribes teach? With hesitancy and diffidence, as interpreters of the law. The refrain of the sermon on the mount is: "It hath been said by them of old time . . . but I say unto you." I am changing things and giving you wider, newer principles. The scribes with contemptible pettifogging discussed such questions as if a man had two heads, on which forehead should he wear the phylactery. Christ brushed aside such trivalities and discussed the fundamental questions of God and heaven, of life and duty, of sin, death and immortality in such a way that nineteen centuries have not improved upon His ideas. Here is a Jew from an obscure and despised village, who had not studied under the Rabbis of Jerusalem, nor in the Greek schools of Tarsus, who can touch and settle as if by instinct any question of ethics with the most audacious positiveness. How do you account for it?

Think of the originality of His teaching: "Never man spake like this man." Seen how he touched and gilded the questions of death and the future. He has changed the whole thought and terminology of the word on these subjects. Christ's law of self-sacrifice subdues and silences His enemies. Then think of the revolutions still slumbering in the sermon on the mount. In that sermon Christ changed the whole centre of gravity in ethics, from external to internal things. Not "blessed are the rich the rich, blessed are the powerful, blessed are the stoical." These were the virtues worshipped till He came. But instead, "blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart." Blessedness now and henceforth is to be found in the riches of character, and not in the extrinsic things of life. O Great Teacher! from what founts of wisdom didst thou draw these glorious principles that transfigure life and sweeten human society?

Think of the intellectual supremacy of His teachings. See how in the great mental combats with the religious Leaders of His day He toyed with them as a Master would puzzle a boy in the first form. He confounded the Lawyers, silenced the Sadducees and impaled the Pharisees on the horns of a dilemma. See, too, how all the human masters of thought have been indebted to Him. From Him orators have learned rhetoric poets the magic of verse, artists and novelists have caught the inspiration for their highest flights of fancy and loftiest soaring of imagination. Dante, Raphael, Angelo, Milton, Shakespeare, have borrowed from Christ their great ideas.

Dickens, the master of the pathetic, says: "The most touching story in literature is the story of the Prodigal Son," and bows the knee to Christ as his intellectual prince. Howard and Cromwell, Wilberforce, Lincoln and Henry George, all owe their great motives in social reform to Him. Can you hope to