

## Devotional Service.

By REV. T. J. PARR, M.A.

### FEB. 5.—"IDLE IN THE MARKET-PLACE."

Matt. ix. 1-6.

#### HOME READINGS.

Mon., Jan. 30. The idle talent ..... Matt. 25: 24-30.  
Tues., Jan. 31. Idle works ..... Matt. 12: 33-37.  
Wed., Feb. 1. Sowing, morning and evening ..... Gal. 6: 7-9.

Thurs., Feb. 2. Entering activity ..... 2 Cor. 11: 23-28.  
Fri., Feb. 3. The night cometh ..... John 9: 1-17.  
Sat., Feb. 4. Laborers are few ..... Matt. 9: 36-38.

Here is a striking parable, one of which is most understood in its meaning as it is remarkable in its form. It has twentieth century lessons, has this first century parable. And what teaching of the great Master, parabolical or otherwise, has not its application to modern life? Christ spoke not for the first century merely, but for all time; not for Palestine only, but for the whole world. The narrative for the week's study forms a part of Christ's answer to Peter's question, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" In that question lurks the spirit of the hireling. There seems to be a demand for so much pay for so much work. Instead of regarding reward for service as a favor, the question seems to claim it as a right. It is against this necessary spirit, worldly and unchristian, that the parable is directed. It is not intended to teach that all workers in the Kingdom of God receive equal reward; for we are instructed in other places in the Bible that this is not the case. Nor is it the purpose of the Master to imply that the performance of great service for Him necessarily insures a great reward, although that may be true. The heart of the whole parable is a stern rebuke against the hireling spirit of the world into the affairs of the Kingdom of Heaven. The spirit in which one renders service for God determines its character. The motive, the intent, is the essential thing. Christ wants love of Him, not love of reward, to inspire men.

Having pointed out the motive of the parable, learn now some of its plain and practical teachings which give us so well presents, for it is the practical view of the moral situation which is most helpful to our busy Leaguers.

1. PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL.—For many centuries, and all alone, the Jews had been laboring in the Lord's vineyard; while the Gentiles, wholly given up to every species of idolatry, had been standing unhired and idle—living without God or divine hope in the world. They were now about to be admitted to equal privileges with the Jews. They were to be received into the fold of the Church which recognizes no distinctions, but which is as wide as God's mercy. Christ shows that the Jews, by their own wilful and wicked procedure, forfeited the favor of God and were dismissed from the glorious honors and gracious rewards of service. Building our hopes on any external religious advantage is vain. "God is spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth," "I'm a Methodist"; "I'm a Baptist"; "I'm an Episcopalian"—all this is useless. Outward religious forms amount to nothing, unless there is personal faith in Christ and loyal service in His name. The Jews, failing to serve, were discharged. The Gentiles, unhired but willing to work, were summoned and received. Here is the true test of the perpetuity of any institution. Serve and you live; cease to serve and you die. Epworth Leaguer, this applies to you. O, Epworth Leaguer, thou youthful, mighty giant, in this is found your life or death!

2. SELFISHNESS AND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS REBUKED. In Peter's question there are traces of a selfish and self-righteous spirit. He and his companions had not left great possessions to follow Jesus as the rich young ruler had, with whom he was probably comparing himself. They were fishermen, and earned a precarious livelihood from the treacherous sea. And yet he puts in a claim of merit and reward under cover of devotion to Christ. He says, "Behold we have forsaken all, and followed thee," asking, "What shall we have therefore?" As if it were not enough to have Christ for his reward. "What shall we have?" In modern parlance, "What money is there in it?" a question which points more to his personal profit, than to his soul's welfare, or Christ's honor. Peter must be put right, and all people of like mind. So the great Teacher related the parable which declares that those who stand on the value of their works alone, forfeit their Lord's favor; that those who enter the Lord's vineyard merely for the grapes they can eat, or for the worldly advantage which such a situation will afford, shall be dismissed from this position, while those who work but one hour in the true spirit of Christian service obtain their reward, salvation, is not of works, but of grace. "Not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us."

3. NOT IDLENESS, BUT CHRISTIAN ACTIVITY REQUIRED.—"Show me thy faith by thy works" is the demand of James; "Be careful to maintain good works" is the counsel of Paul, and the testimony of the whole Bible is, that faith without works is dead. We are not called into the vineyard to sit idle, to fold our hands and slumber. In amending our habits, in cultivating our hearts, in resisting temptation, in conquering besetting sins, in fighting the good fight of faith, in being instant in season and out of season, in keeping our banner flying, and in winning, step by step, the way to heaven, how much have we to do! An idle Christian is as much a contradiction in terms as a dishonest, a false, or a Sabbath-breaking Christian. No Christian liveth for himself—in a world bleeding from so many wounds, so afflicted with sorrow, and suffering, and oppression, and ignorance, and wrong, and crime, where sinners perish around us in a great shipwreck, crying, "Help, we perish." Instead of having nothing to do, Leaguers, might we not wish to have a thousand heads to plant, and a thousand hearts to feed, and a thousand hands to work, the zeal of Paul, the wisdom of Solomon, and the years of Methuselah!

4. IDLENESS IN THE MARKET-PLACE.—In that crowd in the market-place of idle men, some were talking, some laughing, some yawning, some sleeping, some playing, and yet none working in the vineyards, a picture of the world surely, where people, busy in their daily toil for bread, keen in pursuit of wealth, or pleasure, or fame, yet have not one hour to spare for the things that belong to salvation and their everlasting peace. Busy and yet idle! We might go to the counting-room, the crowded shop, the silent study, the public assembly, the festive hall, the applauding theatre, the whirling ball-room, and say, "Why stand ye here idle all the day?" For a man is idle unless he serves God in the activities of his life. God calls men from such busy trifling, from the life of laborious idleness to a service which is as pleasant as it is profitable, as graceful as it is dutiful, saying, "Work while it is called to-day, seeing that the night cometh when no man can work."

The case of the men hired at the eleventh hour affords no encouragement to procrastination. They had not been hired, they had not been called till that late hour, but they instantly responded. The parable teaches promptness, not procrastination. He would be a strange man in this day and age who could truthfully say, "I have never heard the Gospel message—I have not been

called—no man hath hired me." The call has gone forth—"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

#### WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS:

What God does: Rom. 3: 24; 1 Cor. 4: 7; Eph. 2: 8; 2 Tim. 1: 9; Titus 3: 5.  
What we must do: 1 Chron. 22: 16; Prov. 10: 4; Eccl. 9: 10; Isa. 52: 1; Amos 6: 1; Rom. 12: 11; Eph. 4: 28; Luke 2: 49; John 17: 17; 9: 4; Prov. 6: 6; 24: 30-32; Titus 2: 14.

### FEB. 12.—"THE JOY IN FINDING THE LOST."

Luke 15: 1-10.

#### HOME READINGS.

Mon., Feb. 6. The joy of the shepherd Matt. 18: 12-14.  
Tues., Feb. 7. The joy of the sower ..... Luke 10: 1-17.  
Wed., Feb. 8. The joy of sower and reaper ..... John 4: 35-38.  
Thurs., Feb. 9. Joy amid persecution ..... Luke 21: 30-42.  
Fri., Feb. 10. Returning with joy ..... Ps. 121: 1-6.  
Sat., Feb. 11. Lasting joy ..... Dan. 12: 1-3.

In this fifteenth chapter of Luke are three parables. Each states the joy experienced over a saved soul—joy on earth, joy in heaven. Each narrative represents the sinner in a peculiar condition; for the parable of the lost sheep represents the stupid and bewildered sinner; that of the lost piece of money, the sinner unconscious of himself and of his own real worth; that of the prodigal son, the conscious and aggravated case. Indeed, the first two parables are an inseparable pair. They are a double star; you cannot tell how much light comes from the one, or how much from the other. They are alike, for in each there is a loss, a seeking, a joyful finding. They differ in the extent of the loss, the manner of the loss, and the toil of recovery. Again they are alike in teaching the lesson as to the lost condition of the sinner, the power and willingness of God to save, and the importance with which God and angels regard each sinner's salvation. They vary in different views of the sinner. He is a lost sheep, a lost coin, a foolish and wasteful son. He is dead and helpless like the tarnished coin. The shepherd represents Christ's active and atoning work for man's salvation; the woman's activity illustrates the work of salvation in the soul itself—enlightening, cleansing, transforming to fit it for acceptable service, and close relationship with God.

1. THE SHEPHERD'S SEARCH.—Beautiful and heart-touching as this picture is, of the shepherd away among the barren mountains searching minutely in every ravine and thicket, it wants a little explanation, says Maclaren, in order to be brought into correspondence with the fact which it expresses. For his search for his lost property is not in ignorance of where it is, and his finding of it is not his discovery of his sheep, but the shepherd's discovery of the shepherd. We have to remember wherein consists the loss before we can understand wherein consists the search. God's possession of man is not simply His possession by creation. There is only one way in which spirit can own spirit, or heart can possess heart, and that is through the voluntary yielding and love of the one to the other. So Jesus Christ, who, in all His seeking after us men, is the voice and hand of Abinighy love, does not seek that He has found a man until the man has learned to love Him. For He loses us when we are alienated from Him, when we cease to trust Him. The search, then, is for love, for trust, for obedience. The shepherd's seeking is shown in the way by which the love in Jesus Christ moves round about our closed hearts, looking for an entrance. He left the ninety and nine that were safe on the high pastures of the mountains of God, and came down among us, out into the wilderness, to seek and to save that which was lost. And here, in our midst, that unseen Form is passing along and speaking to