

Family Reading.

Devotional Notes on the Sermon on the Mount.

No 26.—THE ACCEPTABLE FAST.

S. Matt. vi. 16-18: "When ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance; for they disfigure their faces, so that they may be seen of men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have received their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head, and wash thy face; that thou be not seen of men to fast, but of thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall recompense thee."

The word fasting has different meanings at different times. Etymologically, it means entire abstinence from food; and this is its usage in certain cases; but it also means abstinence from different kinds of food. We need not trouble ourselves with careful definitions, as we are not living under any legal government. In regard to fasting, it is taken for granted that some abstinence in the matter of food is, to Christian men, a duty and a blessing.

In the present day, and we suppose, in all days, there have been well-meaning people who pour contempt upon any such notions. "I don't hold with fasting," they say, as though such an utterance settled the matter. "Ah," another remarks, "our theories on that subject are different," and then he eats a beefsteak on Friday morning with a shining countenance. But for all this, it is admitted by well-informed men that fasting is a blessing. Medical men declare that it is a most valuable means of health. Masters of the spiritual life regard fasting as an invaluable means of discipline. It is not an act of self-denial which is regarded as meritorious, as purchasing the divine favour—this is the mode of representation adopted by those who have no mind to subject themselves to this form of self-denial, and it is quite possible that this meaning may be attributed to it by some of those who practise it;—but this is not the significance of fasting as it is understood and practised by spiritually minded men. Upon the whole, it may be well for us to assume that the experience of the Church is of some value, and that fasting is a means of grace. John Wesley says, in one of his most remarkable sermons, "The man who never fasts is no more on the way to heaven than the man who never prays." John Wesley is not an authority for ourselves; but on a subject of this kind his testimony has value. Let us now give attention to the words of our Lord.

"When ye fast." By the law, private fasting was left to be determined according to the need of each individual. After the exile the custom became more and more general. The Pharisees used to fast regularly on the second and fifth days of the week (S. Luke xviii. 12). A few placed fasting above almsgiving. Thus Rabbi Elieser declared: "Fasting is greater than almsgiving; the former takes place in one's own body, the latter only in one's property." Among the Hebrews, fasting was one of those outward acts which betoken grief and inward self-abasement. It usually appears accompanied with signs of humiliation, such as abstinence from the use of water, of anointing oil, of razors, with the sprinkling of ashes, the putting on of mourning. (Tholuck).

These intimations will enable us to understand our Lord's cautions in the Sermon on the Mount. The object of those who fasted in the manner which He condemned would be to draw attention to themselves and to secure admiration for their abstinence and self-denial. Their unwashed faces and undressed hair would seem to declare their sorrow, their suffering, their devotion.

Now, our Lord deals with this exercise as with that of prayer. This is a matter between the soul of the worshipper and God. If you mean it to be an exhibition of your goodness before men, doubtless you will have some kind of a reward, the reward which you are seeking. But there are higher aims which ought to be had in view, and these can be reached only by shutting out the thoughts of ostentation and human applause. "Anoint thy head and wash thy face." That is to say, draw no public attention to your practice of abstinence, for in doing so you are departing from its true meaning

—a self-discipline whereby the lower nature shall be so subdued that the Spirit of God may speak to and dwell in the higher nature.

It is said that very few in these days exercise this discipline of fasting; and in a country like our own, with its extremes of heat and cold, it may be necessary to use some caution in doing so. But at least the principle is as important as ever it was—the principle of self-discipline, the principle of keeping under the body and bringing it into subjection, that the spirit may be emancipated and rise to the height of blessed communion with God, and become a ruler over the lower nature which is placed under its dominion. This lesson we may still learn. This grace we may still practice, with the assurance that our Father in Heaven will reward us.

The Fiery Red Cover.

The 4th of July Double Number of *The Youth's Companion*, just received, is so realistic that one can almost hear the boom of the cannon cracker and the clang of the great Independence Bell. Some of the literary features are, "On His Own Merits," in which a spoiled son wins the battle of life through his own exertions; "Hitty," a boarding-school story by Kate W. Hamilton; "Under False Colors," an amusing story of life in a Western lumbering town; "A Little Hero of Lundy's Lane," "A Fourth of July Cow," by Helen M. North; "He Kept His Flag Up," by C. A. Stephens; "Fourth of July under Difficulties," by James Parton. Besides these are the usual editorials on current events and a jolly page of 4th of July fun for the younger children.

Manly Christianity.

To be manly is to be strong, and if we would be really strong, we must be steadfast in the faith, and constantly watch against all that would lure us from it. Some people, nowadays, seem to imagine that it is very manly to parade their doubts about the truth of the Bible, and to sit in judgment on the oracles of God. To do so seems so honest, so intelligent, so independent. But is it so? Every anxious seeker after truth is sure to meet with doubts and difficulties in religion, and they are to the mind like gymnastic exercises to the body—a means of expanding our mental and spiritual energies, and developing our moral strength. But to be content to live in an atmosphere of uncertainty about matters of the deepest moment to ourselves and others, and never to strive to rise out of it, this is a proof of weakness of character, whilst it imperils our eternal safety.

In fact, indecision in religion, whatever may be its cause, is decidedly unmanly. "A double minded man," writes St James i. 8, "is unstable in all his ways." One who cannot make up his mind as to what course he will take in life, and which master he will serve, but is always halting between two opinions, is sure to act feebly and inconsistently. Men will have no confidence in either his judgment or his principles. Belonging distinctly to neither the Church nor the world, he is viewed with suspicion by both. Tossed about by opposing currents, he is ready to be carried down by the stream much farther from the right and safer course than he ever intended.

James the First of England and the Sixth of Scotland was a man of this stamp. Though conscious of this fatal defect, he is said to have, on a certain occasion, appointed a minister to preach before him, who was singularly apt in his choice of suitable texts. The preacher, with the utmost gravity, announced his text as from James the first and sixth, "He that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed." The witty monarch felt the force of the allusion, and said aloud, "He is at me already!" What effect the discourse produced upon his mind we are not told; but it would be well if all waverers would take the warning to themselves.—*Rev. William Burnet, in "A 1."*

—God is good enough and great enough to supply for every thing. When all abandon us, let us abandon all to him.—*Ven. Mather Borat.*

Not Always.

Reading some lines called "We and the world," saying, "Our hearts have music sweet and golden, or discord, just as we touch life's strings," the thought came to me, do we not often touch life's strings in full harmony and melody, and instead of vibrating to us the music "sweet and golden," a harsh, discordant sound comes waving back to us, filling our hearts with grief and sorrow. And often is this want of sympathy found in the one whom, of all to us on earth, should be the unfailing one. What most of life's virtues brings out the "sweet and golden" if not sympathy in our pains, sickness and sorrow?

I once heard a good, faithful wife remark that her husband was usually kind and considerate for her comforts when she was well, cheerful and bright, but the moment she became sick he showed no patience or forbearance whatever with her, and gave her no kind words of tenderness and sympathy. A friend remarked, of course he felt a deep sympathy for her, even if he did not express it; but how was she ever to know of it? And the grief and anguish caused by this withheld tenderness and compassion almost overwhelms the one who yearns for it.

It is entirely true that life is made up of little kindnesses, and while when necessary we must bear and forbear with one another, can we not touch the melodious notes of life's strings so feelingly and sympathetically as to call forth a response of mutual feeling, "for into each life some rain must fall"; but bearing one another's burdens we bring out rays of sunshine "sweet and golden?"

C.

She Did what She Could.

The following is a true story, and may interest some of our readers:

A Sunday-school teacher had been distributing some of the Church Missionary collecting cards amongst her class, trying to impress upon them that even children had the power to do something to send the Gospel tidings to the heathen, and that one way was by regularly collecting for the Society. At the same time she told them they must not forget the needy in their own land. A few months after, one little girl of twelve was missing from her place on Sunday, a very unusual thing; so the teacher went to her home, and found her little pupil very ill with typhoid fever: her mind was wandering, but one subject was uppermost, "something she had learnt about at school." She died two days later, but not before she had been able to ask her mother to give her missionary money to her teacher, and to finish her quilt for her, a patchwork one she was making for an orphanage, and which now covers a cot there bearing her Christian name of Elizabeth. The last lesson she repeated at the Sunday-school was the twenty-second chapter of the Revelation, little thinking she had only one more Sunday to spend upon earth, and that she was even then "drawing nigh unto the gates of the Holy City, to enter into the joy of her Lord."

Short as her life was, she had done what she could.

STEAMER LAKESIDE.—This new and elegant boat noted for speed and comfort, has commenced Saturday excursions to St. Catharines, at the low rate of 50 cents return, giving visitors one hour in the city. This is one of the most enjoyable and invigorating holidays that can be taken—courteous officers and an efficient crew make the enjoyment complete. We recommend our readers to try it. (See advertisement).

—"When I was a young man," Bishop Blomfield said, "and was addressing a rustic congregation, I took for my text, 'The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.' And I tried to prove to them from the evidence which Nature affords us that there must be a Creator. After the sermon, however, a farmer came to me, and addressed me in the following terms: 'Well, young man, you thinks as how there be no God; I'm very happy to say I differ from you.'"