

LITERARY.

THE IDEAL LIFE.

THE following is the very excellent address which Professor Watson recently delivered to the students in Convocation Hall. To curtail it in any way would be to destroy the fullness of the message. It is, therefore, given in full.

Matthew, v. 48: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

These words express the ideal of the Christian life. They set before our minds a standard of duty that seems to be absolutely and for ever beyond our reach. Conscious as we all are of our sins and limitations, how can we dare even to aspire after it? Will not the infinite altitude to be scaled call up in us an emotion of hopelessness and despair, and paralyze our best efforts? Were the ideal set before us finite; were we simply told to make the most of our natural powers, to equip ourselves at all points for the work of life, to acquire the knowledge and the practical experience that go to make the good citizen, and to adorn ourselves with the graces of culture and refinement; we should feel that, although much was expected of us, we yet were not commanded to realize the unrealizable. But no such limited ideal is presented to us. To be perfect is to attain the infinite. Is it not, then, worse than presumption for a weak and erring mortal to aim at infinity? In the idea of the faultless perfection of God are embodied all the highest elements which the united thought of our race has been able to conceive; and not only so, but we are conscious that in our best moments we cannot grasp even in idea all that infinitude which is summed up and realized in Him. The perfection of God includes the idea of an absolute holy will—a will in which there is no conflict, no disharmony, no evil, but only the free and spontaneous expression of goodness. It implies an infinite tenderness, that admits no faintest taint of selfishness, no harsh or discordant note to mar its faultless harmony. It means an intellectual vision that flashes over all the heights and depths of being; a vision that sees the whole universe at a glance, and is free from the haze of the past, and the unrealized vacuity of the future. The realization of perfection, as thus conceived, is manifestly impossible for man.

Yet, is there not a sense in which the ideal of infinite perfection is not altogether unattainable? Nay, is there not a sense in which it is attainable just because it is infinite? The ideal of the Greek was a finite ideal. It consisted in the perfect flexibility, grace and symmetry of the body; in culture and refinement; and in simple devotion to one's own country. Such an ideal is not to be despised. It contains in germ the higher ideal of Christianity, for it is the glory of our religion that it has absorbed into itself all the higher elements of the ethnic religions, and expanded them to infinity. What the best minds of Greece conceived to be the true life of man

Christianity accepts, but it gives to it a new and higher meaning. The Greek was not wrong in attaching importance to the perfection of the body, and in viewing physical training as essential to the production of the efficient citizen. He was not wrong in saying that knowledge and culture and refinement help to lift a man above the grossness of sense. Nor was he wrong in his devotion to the state. The weakness of Greek civilization lay rather in this, that it put culture in place of duty, the life of refinement for the life of the spirit; and therefore it never grasped the principle which enables man to be a "fellow-worker with God." Not every one has by nature a strong and healthy body, which he can train to flexibility and grace. Not every one can live the life of the scholar, or throw himself untrammelled into affairs of state. Therefore the civilization of Greece, with all its brilliancy, raised up an impassable barrier between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the cultured and the uncultured, between master and slave, man and woman. The very same people that has bequeathed to the race faultless products of art, and that first taught the world the meaning of a political constitution; degraded the sacredness of womanhood, and desecrated humanity in the slave, the scourge, the chain! And all this arose from its finite ideal of human life—an ideal that was attainable, not by all men, but only by the few who were privileged in birth, in culture and in the possession of worldly goods. The wisdom of the Greek was, in St. Paul's language, "in word, not in power." Even the universal benevolence of later Stoicism, which in form seems so similar to the Christian idea of universal brotherhood, was in its spirit essentially different; for the Stoic was tainted with a personal pride in his own righteousness, and a haughty disdain of others. His cosmopolitanism arose rather from self-isolation, indifference and contempt than from love. Christianity, on the other hand, strikes at the roots of all self-righteousness by presenting, as what the divine man in us demands, the standard of absolute perfection. Thus it breaks down the middle-wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian, bond and free. Whether free or in chains, a man may be the Lord's freeman. The ideal is not to be found realized in the princes of this world, but in him who is of a humble and contrite spirit. The work of a man is not to be measured by his attainments or his social position, but by the measure in which the Holy Spirit dwells in him. The ideal is not culture and refinement, but "holiness unto the Lord." A man whose bodily presence may be weak and contemptible, and whose language may be rude and ungrammatical, may yet be realizing the ideal; while the man of culture, in his pride and vain-glory, is immersed in the life of the flesh. Have we not all experienced a saving feeling of humiliation in the presence of some simple, self-denying Christian, who unconsciously showed us by his example what it is to "walk in the spirit." It is not what we do or acquire that constitutes true religion, but the spirit in which we live.