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BOOK
REVIEWS

A MEDITATION; LUKE VII., 47.

The Forgiveness of Sins.

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These are the closing words of a brief but powerful discourse; a discourse which was, at the same time, an instructive parable, and an unanswerable argument. A penitent woman had come to our Lord desiring to show her new-born love, soon she drew upon herself that silent criticism which is sharper than reproachful words, and the Saviour manifests his manly tenderness and shields her from further torment by uttering in her defense this vicarious vindication. In doing so He has spoken words which will for ever bring cheer and comfort to the broken-hearted sinner. We must all expect criticism. It is no doubt a good thing that our life should have to bear the constant examination of others; but there will be times when we shall be misjudged, and that even when we are not in a mood to hear the murmur of disapprobation. We know that we are sorry for our wrong-doing, and that we have an earnest longing after goodness; and yet we are unable to handle skilfully an argument in our own defence. Then we may look to our Lord as our defender; then we may hear His gentle voice: Enter into peace; fret not yourselves because of petty criticism and unjust condemnation.

We all have a habit of silently judging one another. These things which stand out in such clear, starlike light when the Lord is present are, after all common things. This man spoke within himself, he withdrew, as it were into the inner sanctuary of his own being, and there held his private conference about that which was passing in the world about him. We do the same, even when we are in company. When the busy world is with us we often retire to talk with ourselves. In this private Judgment Hall we bring up our fellow-men, examine them and pass judgment upon them, forgetting that the case has been exceedingly one-sided, for we have had it all to ourselves. Have we never, in such circumstances, heard the solemn word sounding through our souls, "Judge not that ye be not judged, for with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." In our thoughts of others we need to remember our own fallibility; how can we judge others aright who make so many mistakes concerning ourselves? How difficult in our thoughts to deal fairly with the man of a different set, or sect, or party. We are liable to so many influences that pervert our judgment, that when we call others before the tribunal of our thought, we may well tremble with a sense of our own imperfection. Let us not give way more than we can help to the Pharisaic feeling of self-satisfaction which will allow us continually to sit in judgment upon our fellows. They, too, have a silent, secret life. If we cannot measure the working of their minds and the throbbing of their hearts, how shall we judge them? What do we know of the real drama of their hidden life, of the fierce battles that have raged in their souls? God answers our thoughts. Men can only reply to us when we put our judgments into words and actions; but God can give a startling response to the unspoken thought, the unexpressed feeling. We often read in the Gospels, "And Jesus seeing their thoughts answered and said: 'What does this mean? Why did our Lord sometimes answer statements before they were made, or meet charges that were simply floating in the minds of his accusers?'" The explanation seems to be this: He was dealing with men who regarded religion

as something which belonged merely or mostly to the outer life; who thought that goodness was a slavish respect for tradition and purity; a mechanical observance of religious ceremonies. To such men He must make known, even in a way that may seem sensational, the great truth that religion is of the spirit. Redemption is the emancipation and purifying of the inward man. Thus He addresses Himself not to words and actions, which are often clever deceptions—did He not dare to call these men hypocrites, actors?—but to the real life, the life of the soul. Hence they must sometimes have felt that His piercing words scorched the very depths of their being.

When we stand in the presence of our fellow men we do not say all that we think. We give so much as we think pleasant or convenient. It is good, then, to remember that we are ever in the presence of One who knows the secret working of our hearts. As we observe the passing circumstances of our life, as we read the words of divine truth, or listen to the strong spoken word, we sometimes realize that God is speaking in our thoughts, responding to our inward questions and complaints. In the absolute sense, then, this secret world of thought is not all our own. It would be a barren world if we were left to ourselves in it. The style of our Lord's teaching implies that God comes to us in that sacred sanctuary where we flee from the world, and stand alone with self; even there we must look up and say, "Thou God seest me."

What our Lord did in this case was to lead Simon to answer himself. This was done gently and skilfully. He did not turn suddenly upon him and denounce him in terrible language as a cold-hearted hypocrite. He did not smite him abruptly with sharp, indignant remarks. No, He dealt lovingly with the man of little love; He allows the man who had misjudged a frail woman to judge himself. Jesus calmly says, "Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee." Simon throws himself into a cool, judicial frame of mind, and replies, "Master, say on." Then the prophet of Nazareth unfolds a simple parable and concludes by asking a pertinent question. "Which of the two debtors who have been freely forgiven will have the most gratitude?" The problem is not very perplexing. Simon quietly settles it; but he does not see that he is condemning himself. In quieter style we have here the wonderfully dramatic story of Nathan and David, when the prophet moved the soul of the King by telling the pitiful story of the ewe lamb, and then thundered out "Thou art the man!" So, when Simon answered the question, which of them will love Him most, "I suppose that he to whom He forgave most," Jesus puts the case more clearly: "O, Simon, thou art the man of little love; thy lack of enthusiasm, thy cold respectability has led thee wrong. It is better to be broken-hearted, and feel the gush of pure love, than to have a narrow soul kept straight and stiff by the etiquette of a formal religion. Thou hast, perhaps, with infinite pains preserved an outward respectability, but thou has never felt the glow of a mighty, passionate love."

It may be that God will some day put before us the parable of our life, and that we shall be allowed to judge ourselves. We shall be judged by principles that we have acknowledged, and professions that we have made. When Jesus places before us the parable, so beautiful yet so pathetic, does not our conscience cry, "Thou art the man?" Christ does not preach parables and ask strange

questions simply for our mental exercise. He meant to probe our hearts, to stir our souls that we may feel our lack of love, that He may break the hard crust of proud formalism, and bend us to lowly penitence at our Father's throne.

The readiness with which the Pharisee disposes of our Lord's question shows that a man may have clear idea of what is proper in transactions between man and man, while he has no deep insight into the relationship of the soul to God. Simon is compelled to confess that a creditor who frankly forgives an unfortunate debtor is a man of a generous disposition; and that the gratitude of men to their benefactors should be in proportion to blessings received; but he does not realize that we all stand on the same ground of indebtedness to God, and that our love to the Highest depends upon our large or small conception of divine mercy. He is equal to a question of morality, a matter of human duty; but he lacks the loving sympathy which gives insight into spiritual experience. So it is often with us. We have examined well the duty of man to man in business, society and politics. We believe in fairness, honor and gratitude. And these are good things to believe in; but we need a deeper sense of our responsibility to God, the need of pardon, the offer of divine love. We may be informed in many things and yet neglect the deeper life of the soul. These are the things that our Lord would force upon our attention. He, the greatest preacher, who speaks to us of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come, and brings promise of pardon and eternal life.

The distinctive claim that Jesus makes for Himself is that "The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins." This name contains the complementary truth that we all need forgiveness, the cold-hearted, respectable sinner, as well as the broken-hearted, penitent sinner. So far as the creed is concerned this is a fundamental, familiar truth; but we need a more vivid realization of it. There is an eternal law of righteousness from which we have wandered; an Eternal Father whom we have grieved. We can not by any act of our own blot out the irrevocable past or undo the effects of willful transgression. From this point of view the law is not an automatic machine, a mere course of nature; it is the expression of will, the revelation of God's hatred against sin. If we are to be brought into harmony with this law we must be reconciled to God through receiving a full and free forgiveness. Here we all stand on the same platform. The respectable as well as the vulgar; the careful moralist as well as the careless profligate; the self-satisfied formalist as well as the broken-hearted penitent. We do not, in saying this, wish to depreciate morality, education, or any refining influence; we merely contend that the requirements of divine law go beyond the surface and deal with the inmost life of man. We do not necessarily despise noble music and beautiful paintings when we say that they will not keep a man alive, he must have bread and water or he will die; so we do not condemn the refining influences which make the outer life cleaner and comelier, when we declare that they cannot minister to a mind diseased, or still the anguish of a guilty conscience. Thank God, we do not need to say "thinein the patient must minister to himself." If we have received a real gospel we are saved from that helpless cry, for Jesus is revealed as the Saviour from sin.

"Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive Me. Behold thou desirest truth in the inward