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Unfruitfulness.

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TEXT:—"Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground." "Let it alone this year also." Read Isaiah v. 17, Luke, xiii, 49.

These two passages illustrate the same great truth, accountability for privileges enjoyed, is common to every form of the divine government.

In the passage taken from Isaiah, the tender care of Jehovah towards the Jews, is set forth under the parable of a vineyard. The vineyard was a source of solicitude to its owner. It was situated in a fruitful hill, fenced, the stones gathered out, planted with the choicest vines, and furnished with a tower and wine press. Every thing had been done that science and art could suggest, to increase its fruitfulness but to no purpose. Instead of bringing forth grapes, it brought forth wild grapes; just such fruit as could be gathered in the forest, without the care and expense involved in maintaining a vineyard. Satisfied that everything had been done to make the vineyard fruitful, the vine dresser appeals to the men of Jerusalem and Judah to exonerate him from all blame, connected with its failure, and at the same time, determines no longer to bestow upon it such devoted care, and then comes the explanation of the parable. For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the House of Israel, and men of Judah his pleasant fruit; and he looked for judgment and behold, oppression; for righteousness, and behold a curse.

The passage from Luke's gospel, is to the same purpose. "A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard." It was not a seedling that had sprung up as we would say accidentally, but planted by its owner, with a direct view to bearing fruit. A large measure of labour and expense had been bestowed upon it, and that for years, but in spite of all when the owner came and sought fruit, he found none. Having waited more than a reasonable time for a return, he now orders its destruction. The tree was not only barren, but occupied space to no practical purpose. It was an injury to the land—it absorbed the nourishment that should have gone to fruit bearing trees. But the vine dresser pleads with the owner for another term of probation. "Lord let it alone this year also." Great tenderness is manifested in his entreaty. He had entertained high hopes respecting it, and had formed a strong attachment for it. His heart was full of sorrow when he hears the owner say, "Cut it down." He acknowledges that the command is reasonable—does not plead for an indefinite prolongation of its life—but only asks for one year more. During that time he will put forth the most strenuous efforts to produce better results, in the hope that it may be spared. But if not, "than thou shalt cut it down."

The figure of a vineyard is often employed to describe the favourable position, of Christian Churches and nations, and to illustrate, the care bestowed upon commonwealths and communities, that enjoy the blessings of the gospel. Primarily the passage in Isaiah refers to the Jewish nation. The Almighty having long bourn with his chosen people, determined to pour out upon them His vengeance. The privileges that they had enjoyed so exclusively for centuries, were to be withdrawn, and the nation left to reap the fruit of its own actions. That these threatenings were put into executions, the past and present condition of Israel, abundantly shows. The melancholy commentations and dirges, swelling up from the heart of the nation for the past two thousand years, attest the rigour of the punishment, and the inflexibility of the divine law.

We live under the same righteous government. When mercy is spurned, and efforts for the reclamation and salvation of the guilty are rejected and despised, then justice and wrath, take the place of long-suffering patience.

These thoughts are suggested from the passages read: First. God in his gracious dealings with men expects results. To what purpose the care bestowed upon the vineyard and the fig-tree, if there is no return? What bitter mortification to find, that where fruit is expected, there is nothing but leaves!

"What could have been done more to my vineyard—that I have not done in it?" says the owner of the vineyard. It does not imply personal blame, on the part of the Almighty. It is not the reproach of the human creature, that certain other methods have not been adopted to secure results. But it is the sad reflection that after everything has been done, that divine ingenuity could suggest, men remain impenitent, ungrateful and indifferent—that no emotions are awakened, in return for the lavish expenditure of infinite goodness, and forbearance with guilty souls!

Second. God expects that the results will be to some extent, in proportion to the labour expended. Nations and Churches long favoured, should make larger returns, than places less highly blessed. "To whom much is given, of such much shall be required." Duty is measured by privilege. Ignorance does not always excuse wrongdoing, but knowledge misapplied, fearfully augments guilt. Ac-

cording to this principle, heathen countries must be tried by a different standard than Christian and enlightened lands. The very existence of the church, with its manifold opportunities for getting and doing good, places us under obligations, to leave the whole with morality and righteousness.

Third. God in His dealings with nations, churches, and individuals, after a period of probation, changes the dispensation of mercy to that of judgement. "Behold these three years I came seeking fruit and find none. Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?"

There is something very touching in the language. Justice demands summary infliction of punishment! Mercy pleads and stays the axe. We must not presume too much on God's long suffering, or think, that because He has forbore in the past, he will always forbear—that because mercy has so far triumphed, opportunities for repentance will follow us to a dying hour. No such assurance is given. This is the day of grace, the turning point for hell or heaven. That God bears so long, is unexplicable, but hardened sinners are no gamblers by the delay. They may and often do evade the penalties of human law, but never the divine. The wrath of the lamb once aroused is terrible.

"Cumberers of the ground," your condition may be changed. It is by no means hopeless. Genuine repentance, even at the eleventh hour is accepted. There is no one on God's footstool of earth, how ever profligate and wicked, but may secure the favour and friendship of heaven. But if conscience continues seared, then destruction will follow. At the bar of impartial judgment, an assembled world, will approve the righteousness of your doom!

Saving Faith Its Instrumental Cause.

1. The Instrumental Cause of Saving Faith is the Inspired Word.—"Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Men may hear the word and yet not believe, but they must hear it in order to believe. Hence the Scriptures teach, "How

then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?"

When the Apostles preached in Jerusalem, we are told that "many who heard the word, believed." When Cornelius and his household had heard the Word from the Apostle Peter, they believed in Jesus. When the Philippian jailer had heard the Word from Paul and Silas, he was rendered a true believer in Christ.

The same is true at the present day. In gospel and in heathen lands, only those who hear the Word of God, exercise a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

If the Word of God then is Adapted to Produce Faith in Christ—its adaptation to this purpose is proved by its being so used by the all wise Divine Spirit. We must know a person in order to trust him. The sacred Scriptures lead to faith in Christ, by revealing him to men. "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy," and he is manifested to the devout seeker after truth from Genesis to Revelation. The inspired Word describes to us very fully, Christ's natures, person, attributes, functions, offices, words, works, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension, and headship over the universe. It presents him as having far more knowledge and wisdom, than the most learned and astute of his generation. Even the envious Scribes and Pharisees, did not dare to charge him with ignorance or dishonesty. It remained for some "higher critics" of the present day to affirm that the Son of God was so ignorant that he did not know whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch, or, knowing to the contrary, was so dishonest as to give the sanction of his authority to a prevalent lie.

But the divine Word reveals Jesus as "holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners," as "the chiefest among ten thousand, and the one altogether lovely." It pictures Him as possessing such matchless human and divine perfections, as performing such noble and unrivalled deeds, as uttering such sweet and winning words, as enduring such vicarious and atoning agonies, as actuated by such lofty and attractive motives, as producing such grand and eternal results, and as offering to the believing sinner such precious and wonderful blessings, that the soul, filled with these divine revelations respecting Jesus, gladly trusts him as Heaven's Redeemer from death, and for glory.

But if the Scriptures move to faith by revealing Christ, they also persuade to this grace by precious promises, and cogent arguments. If the sinner is burdened, and weary, and sorely in need of rest, they represent Christ as saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." If the transgressor is deeply convicted of sin, and profoundly conscious of his own ill-desert, the Divine Word encourages him by the declarations: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost." "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." If the evil doer has wandered far and separated long from God and is doubtful as to whether Christ will receive him, Holy Writ assures him in words like these, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts and let him return unto the Lord and He will have mercy upon him, unto our God, for He will abundantly pardon." H. C. HILL, D.D., in the *Christian Observer*.



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