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EMULATION.

We frequently hear of a "noble emulation;" but it is questionable at least whether the expression does not involve a contradiction in terms. In the first place, what is emulation? It is simply and essentially a desire to be before another. We may be emulous either of excelling in what we believe to be good, or of outmatching in what we know to be evil; but in either case the motive power—the emulation—is a desire to get the better of another; in other words, to exalt and benefit self.

Now, all that is really 'noble' in our nature has entire reference to the well-being and happiness of others. True nobility is based upon self-sacrifice, not upon self-advancement. It is the servant of all, not the vain-glorious patron. It seeks the happiness of others—not for the sake of outrivalling a fellow-worker, but because it delights to see others happy. Is it not clear, then, that emulation—the crowning star in the diadem of pagan morality—implies a littleness of mind, a self-regarding spirit, inconsistent with that real nobility of soul, that god-like disposition, which it was the great purpose of Christianity to develope?

It is not denied that a spirit of emulation and rivalry has often incited men to acts of usefulness, when higher and purer motives would have failed; nor would we with niggard lips withhold the praise which every useful action may command. The hireling is worthy of his hire. All we contend for is, that genuine nobility is self-denying—that it belongs to a singleness of purpose—and that purpose the common good of all. The essential littleness, however, of a spirit of rivalry, considered as a motive to action, may be seen in its practical results. It destroys moral independence, and renders a life of usefulness or of indolence perpetually contingent upon the presence and conduct of a rival. It has no innate life—no heaven-imparted energy. Like the fabled vampire, it sucks its life blood from another's veins, and lives only in its victim's death. It cannot act spontaneously; and it co-operates only to ensnare or to destroy. If emulation has given rise to much that is useful, it has also been the prolific parent of bitter heart-burnings and envious thoughts. It has awakened animosities, jealousies, and hatred, in the bosoms of those who should have been as friends and brothers in the same good cause. Like earth-born life, it carries with it the elements of decomposition and death.

Was it the earthly fire of emulation that warmed the breasts of Howard, of Wilberforce, or of Oberlin? Or was it a living sympathy with their suffering and degenerated brethren that glowed within their hearts? If the former, then, however exalted in their own opinions, or in the opinion of an admiring world, they could not have been—as we reverently believe they were—men of God's nobility: God's messengers of glad tidings to the three great families of human wretchedness—the depraved, the oppressed, and the ignorant.

But, it may be asked, can we not be nobly emulous of doing good? Can we not nobly vie with each other in benefiting our fellow-creatures? When used metaphorically, such language may be quite allowable; but in plain and sober reason, we cannot. The very wish to do more good than another, implies an indifference to the interests of that other person, and an undue anxiety about our own, which is incompatible with the universality of true nobleness.

It is not, however, in the public or more important actions of our lives only, that this principle of Christian nobility should be observed. It is equally applicable to all, however trivial or apparently unimportant. There is often in one kind word, one look of sympathising affection, or one small act of disinterested love, more of real nobleness of spirit than in actions which have rung in the ears and found an echo in the hearts of admiring thousands. There is a 'still small voice' within, which is of more value than the acclamations of the world. And it is in the more humble duties of life—in our daily intercourse with each other—in the quiet, the sweet, the unseen circle of domestic affection, that the singleness of purpose here recommended is really most important. It is here that the more lovely and gentle feelings of our nature may be brought into a pure and peaceful existence; and it is here that we are called upon to make a more cheerful and entire surrender of our selfishness. And yet, how often may we detect ourselves yielding to its unhallowed impulse! How often do our petty quarrels, our bad tempers, our selfish indulgences, interfere with the union and harmony that should ever be associated with the thought of home! It was at home our earliest days were spent; it was at home the time of fond, innocent, confiding childhood was passed; and though this may not have been really the happiest period of our earthly existence, yet is it one to which the tired soul delights to revert with a fond and grateful remembrance. Happy are they who have that remembrance treasured within their hearts!

But to return to our more immediate subject: although emulation may be seen to be a corrupt and corrupting passion, yet, knowing that it has ever exercised a powerful influence over the world's destinies, both for good and for evil, it will be well to ascertain distinctly the source from whence it has sprung, so that we may each of us be better able to turn the original and uncorrupted stream into its native channel, and thus enjoy the benefit it is intended to confer, while at the same time we avoid the accompanying evil.