

SUNDAY READING

SERMON.

BY REV. HENRY VAN DYKE, D. D., OF THE RECTOR, CHURCH, NEW YORK.

"God, that cannot lie."—Thos. i. 2.

This verse touches a point in which God differs from man. For it is a well-known fact that man can lie, and that very frequently he does. They have a natural faculty for it, which needs only to be exercised to develop into an acquired facility. The poet has described the case very suggestively in the passage where he makes Hamlet say that playing on the recorder is "as easy as lying." Successful falsehood, like skillful playing, is an art which must be learned by practice. But merely to say "the thing that is not" is no more difficult than blowing into a flute. Any man who has breath can tell a plain lie.

One Who Cannot Lie.

Now, the text declares that what is possible to man is impossible with God. He cannot lie. And you remember, at once, a number of other places in the Bible where the same doctrine is taught. You will recall that striking confession which was wrung from the unwilling lips of Balaam when he was called to curse and compelled to bless: "God is not a man that He should lie, neither the son of man that He should repent." (Numbers, xxiii., 19.) You will hear again the majestic voice of Samuel, affirming that "the strength of Israel will not lie." (1 Sam. xv., 29.) Your memory will bring up before you those massive and solid words like pillars of granite, in which the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews shows that the Christian hope cannot be shaken, because it rests on the divine promise and oath, "two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie." And as you recollect these marked and remarkable declarations of the veracity of God, you will recognize also that the truth is one which is spread underneath the whole Bible.

It resembles a primitive stratum of rock in the earth's crust, which is lifted into sight, here and there, in the rugged summits of the old Laurentian mountains, but which exists even where it does not appear and is the foundation of all the other strata piled above it, and of the deposits which floods and glaciers have left upon them, and of the dwellings and temples which men have built upon the surface—the bed-rock of the Bible is the truthfulness of God. The revelation of His character, His law, His will which is made here rests ultimately upon the doctrine of His veracity. When the law-giver says, "This do, and thou shalt live," when the prophet says, "Thus saith the Lord, and find people who come to pass," when the evangelist says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," the one thing that is taken for granted, the one thought that lies back of the law, the prophecy, the gospel, is that God cannot lie.

Now, I want you to think for a while of this divine impossibility.

A Divine Impossibility.

And, in the first place, let us try to get it very clearly and solidly into our minds that there is a divine impossibility. There are some things that God cannot do. We fall very often into a false and foolish way of reasoning about the divine attributes, which comes, I think, from the habit of treating moral truths as if they were mathematical quantities. We argue that because God is infinite and absolute there must be nothing that He does not know and nothing that He cannot do. From the mere statement of a proposition, therefore, it would follow that God knows all, and from the mere conception of an action it would follow that He can do it.

But the same logic would lead us inevitably to the conclusion that there is nothing that God is not. If He is absolutely without bounds or limits of any kind, then He is light and darkness, and good and evil, and He is the sinner and the saint. Then we must believe the mystical words of the poet in that strange little piece called "Brahma":

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.
They reckon ill who leave me out;
—Howe'er they fly I am the wings;
I am the dumb-thought and the dumb,
And the hymn the Brahmin sings.

But the truth is that if God is infinite in this sense then He must be unknown and unknowable. He cannot have character, for character implies distinction. He cannot even have existence in any real sense, for existence is bounded by non-existence. Now, the Bible reveals that God is, and that He is a real and personal being, and that He has a moral character fixed and immutable and supreme. It seems to us difficult to imagine how He can be so difficult to imagine to make that revelation square with our metaphysics, is need be, and stand by the Bible, and trust God as He makes Himself known to my moral nature in the scriptures, and above all in the person and life of Jesus Christ.

God Must be Consistent.

And here the character is the first thing, the great thing, the dominant thing. We say that God is infinite, but first we say that He is holy and just and good and true; and the infinitude is affirmed and believed in only in so far as it is consistent with these attributes. All things are possible with God that really belong to God. It is not possible that He should act inconsistently with His character any more than it is possible that darkness should give light. His omnipotence is subject to Himself, and what He is reigned over what He does. "He is doing omnipotently," says St. Augustine, "in doing what He wills, not in suffering

what He does not will. For if that happened to Him, He would not be omnipotent. Wherefore He cannot do certain things because He is omnipotent."

Because the truth of God is perfect and supreme in all His ways, therefore He cannot lie.

Well, then, consider for a moment what this divine impossibility means. The false is opposed to the true, and the opposition is always one and the same. But we see it in different lights, and may express it in different terms. The false is fictitious or imaginary; the true is real and actual; and the difference between them is the difference between an illusion and a fact. The false is partial and incomplete; the true is perfect and exact; it corresponds to its ideal. The false circle is not a circle, but an oval; the true circle has every point of its circumference equidistant from the center; and the difference between them is the difference between an approximation and a fulfillment.

The false is deceptive, it appears to be what it is not; the true is genuine, it shows itself for what it is; a false friend is an enemy in disguise, a true friend is one who feels the love he professes, and the difference between them is the difference between hypocrisy and honesty. The false is that which changes and fails and disappoints us; the true is that which is firm, steadfast and trustworthy; a false promise is made to be broken, as a true promise is made to be kept, and the difference between them is the difference between unfaithfulness and fidelity. Now, when we say that God cannot lie, because He is true, we mean all this and more. We mean that He is real, not a dream, nor a name, but the living God. We mean that He is perfect, that everything which belongs to the divine ideal actually exists in Him, so that He alone is the true God, of whom the false divinities are but broken and distorted shadows. We mean that He is sincere, that He is what He appears to be, so that in Him the fact corresponds to the revelation, and the thought to the wish, and the feeling to the action, and the whole character to its expression. We mean that He is faithful, that what He foretells He will surely bring to pass, that what He promises He will certainly perform.

Lying a Natural Faculty of Man.

All these elements, it seems to me, enter into the Christian doctrine of the truth of God. And if they seem to you familiar and inevitable and so necessary that it is almost superfluous to mention them, let me remind you that it is not because Christianity has impressed them so deeply upon our moral consciousness. They do not exist in all religions; they do not even exist in all philosophies. When I spoke, at the beginning, of lying as a common and natural faculty of man, it was by no means a jocular or trivial remark. Human nature, as it is, is unenlightened by the divine Spirit, does not necessarily recognize the beauty and glory of truth.

Among barbarous races lying is not only a general habit, it is frequently recognized as a virtue, and even among civilized and cultured races you will find people who can see no disgrace in it except that of being found out. Many religions have been invented and believed—or at least men have believed that they believed them—in which falsehood plays a prominent part in the character and actions of the gods. Remember, for instance, the masquerades of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology, and especially the fabled performance of Hermes or Mercury, who may be called the tutelary divinity of liars.

The Bible represents the first sin as coming out of a belief that God would not really keep His word. "Ye shall not surely die," said the evil spirit, and Adam believed him. And as the first sin came out of the assumption that God might lie, so the second consisted in the fact that man did lie. "The woman tempted me and did eat." That was the first falsehood of the great harvest that was afterwards to spring from the seed that God could possibly be untrue.

"It seems to me," says Carlyle, "you lay your finger on the heart of all the world's maladies when you call it a sceptical world, an insincere world, a godless world, a world in which the whole truth of a world! It is out of all this, of social pestilences, French revolutions, charisms and what not, have derived their being, and their chief necessity to be. This must alter. Till this alter, nothing can be beneficially accomplished in looking at the miseries of the world is that this altering. Here and there one does now find a man who knows as of old that this world is a truth and no plausible lie and falsity; that he himself is alive, not dead or paralytic, and that the world is alive, insistent with Godhood, beautiful and awful even as in the beginning of days."

An Honest God, the Noblest Path of Man.

How, then, should we welcome and reverence a religion which puts truth at the very center of the universe and makes it of the essence of deity. "An honest man's the noblest work of God," says the old proverb. I have long wanted to say rather, an honest God is the noblest faith of man. It is the only foundation for sincere thinking to believe that the universe comes from such a being that it must contain realities corresponding to appearance and objects answering to our perception. Unless that is true, life itself would be a dream. It is the only foundation for right conduct to believe that the moral law comes from a being who really loves the good and hates the evil, and will certainly punish the one and reward the other as He hath said. It is the only foundation for belief that we have a revelation from the true God.

Let us ask then, whether the Holy scriptures, in which Christianity is revealed to us, have the marks of coming from such a God of truth. I do not mean, now, that we are to discuss the large question, the truth of Christianity, for that, of course, must take a lifetime, and after all, we must admit frankly, that the final and entire truth of all that the Christian religion teaches can only be demonstrated beyond

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the possibility of doubt to each soul by a practical experience which will carry us into the presence of God and into heaven or hell. But what I mean now is that honesty, veracity, sincerity, as we find them existing in the world around us, have certain general characteristics by which we recognize them, and we may expect to find these same traits in a revelation which comes from a truthful God.

A Man Worthy of Confidence.

What are they? Well, frankness is one, and spontaneity is one, and substantial consistency is one, and proved trustworthiness is one. Just consider how it is in our ordinary life. When you find that a man is in the habit of keeping his word, true to his promises which are not yet fulfilled, if he professes certain principles and acts upon them, you think that they are really his. If he gives you an account of certain things which is manifestly natural and unstudied, you are inclined to receive it with more confidence than if it had been an artificial air. If he speaks freely and candidly, without mental reserves and secret evasions, you are favorably disposed toward him, and take him for a man of truth.

Now it seems to me that all these traits are clearly marked in the scriptures which profess to bring us the revelation of character and will of the living God. There is not time to dwell on them, or illustrate them fully, but they are all there. The candor of the bible is manifest and amazing. It is the frankest book in the world. I think you will look in vain for any other sacred writings which narrate with such absolute sincerity the errors and faults of the people who claimed to be the original possessors and the principal adherents of the true religion. Nor will you find any other book in which the conditions of salvation, the requirements of divine service, and the consequences of sin are so fully and frankly stated.

Freedom of Sincerity.

And then it seems to me a thing to inspire confidence, that the different writers who give us the revelation of character and will of the living God, in their own style and manner, with no efforts to imitate their predecessors. It our witnesses should appear before a judge to give an account of a certain event or series of events, and each one should tell exactly the same story in the same words, the judge would probably conclude, not that their testimony was exceptionally valuable, but that the only event which had really happened, was that they had agreed to tell the same story. But if each man told what he had seen, as he had seen it, then the evidence would be credible. And when we read the four Gospels, is not that exactly what we find? Four men telling the same story, each in his own way, and behind those four men we know not how many of those who had seen the Lord, and accompanied with Him and remembered what He had said and done. Some saw what others did not, and some heard what others did not hear. Their differences of narrative are proof of their sincerity. False witnesses would have agreed beforehand. The discrepancies of the scriptures are difficulties in one sense, but in another and a higher sense they are supports.

Now, of course that would not be true unless there was a real and subtle with and manifest consistency of the bible with itself. But this is just what we do find in it. All the difficulties of interpretation, all the points of apparent disagreement between different witnesses of which we hear so much nowadays, taken together and piled up in a heap would be no larger, even an ant hill, while the great bulk of truth, self-consistent and self-coherent, would loom up above it like the Andes. The revelation of God in the bible is one from beginning to end. It does not change, it unfolds. It does not swerve, it advances, and Jesus Christ is He in whom the law and prophets are fulfilled, and from Whom the gospels, the acts of the apostles, the epistles and the revelation do proceed.

The Unfailing Proof.

And then, while the bible contains a great many things which cannot be verified now, as for example all its doctrines in regard to the future, which can be verified. Prophecies fulfilled—your remembrance of the great man who was asked to name the strongest evidence of the truth of Christianity, and who answered in two words, "The Jews!" Records confirmed by external and independent testimony from ancient monuments and the scrolls of forgotten histories—there are many ways in which our confidence in the veracity of the scriptures is strengthened and supported, but I think the best way of all is by putting its moral and religious precepts to the proof in this present life, and seeing whether the results which are foretold do not begin to follow our action here and now.

Let man take that word of Paul, "He that soweth to the flesh shall also reap corruption, but he that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting," and try it by the facts. Now law of the harvest could be more certain and variable. A sensual life does bring decay, rottenness to the bones, and darkness to the soul. A spiritual effort does bring life; strength and beauty and fragrance to the spring-tide come to the soul, so that the inward man is renewed day by day. Let a man take that word of Christ, "Come unto Me and I will give you rest," and unto Me and I will give you rest," and see how it works in his life. Let him come and confide in Jesus, and take the easy yoke of his service, and learn of His meek and lowly heart, and see whether peace will not descend upon his conflicts, and refreshment upon his weariness, and sweet rest upon his soul. It is in these ways that we learn the reality of truth of this religion, and if we find that it is true in regard to these innermost secrets

and mysteries of our spiritual life, we shall be convinced that it comes from the God of truth who cannot lie.

God's Warnings Against Sin.

And now, if we think thus of the divine revelation which comes to us in the bible—and I suppose most of us do think thus—what are the things in regard to which it is most important to remember that God cannot lie? First of all we ought to remember that His warnings against sin are true. They are not mere threats made for the purpose of terrifying men. They are sincere and honest statements of God will do and must do to those who die in their sins impenitent and unrepentant. It is strange, and yet there surely is reason in it, that the most solemn and awful of these declarations came from the lips of Him who was love incarnate. Not in wrath, not with loud and angry words swept by passion beyond the bounds of truth, but with a divine gentleness and that serious calm which is the very air of sincerity, Jesus foretells the future of those who do not obtain the mercy of God and show mercy to their fellowmen.

Read His Words.

And I want you to know what He says—I want you to read again, in the secret of your own chambers, His parables of judgment, and remember it anything in the world is true these words are true and will surely be fulfilled because God cannot lie. But there is another thing more important still for us to remember, and that is that all God's promises of life and salvation through Jesus Christ are true. "Whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." Him that cometh unto Me I will in nowise cast out. Whosoever will, let him come."

God offers forgiveness and grace and a celestial hope to all mankind through His son, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. He says that He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. He has provided a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and He stands with outstretched arms, saying: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden." Now I tell you as a servant of God and apostle of Jesus Christ, that offers to sincere and genuine repentance, as men count honesty and sincerity and truth. There is no reserve in it. There is no secret barrier erected by God's decree to keep you from accepting it. Let no man persuade you that God says one thing and means another. Let God be true, though every man be a liar, and ever human system be false and illogical.

Take Him at His Word.

If God says that He is willing to save unto the uttermost it is true. If He offers to save you, He will do it, and if you need grace to accept the offer He will give it to you if you ask him. He promises to give pardon and life to every one that believeth. He will do it for you if you take Him at His word.

From the shadows that veil the cross on Calvary, from the ineffable light that surrounds the throne of God and of the Lamb, I hear a voice that cries come and let him that heareth say come, and let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely. And I believe that is the voice of God, that cannot lie.



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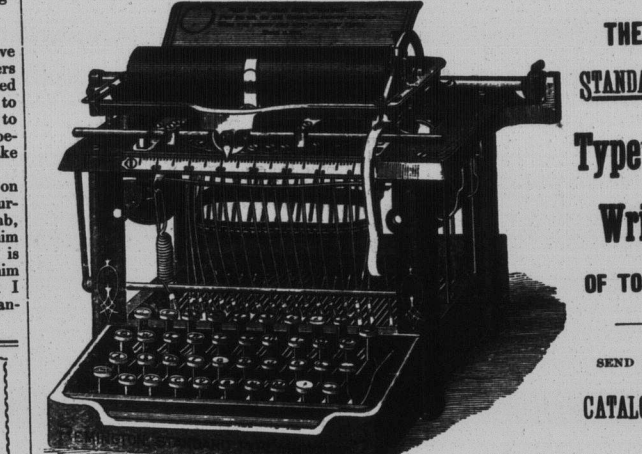
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