

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

THE DIGNITY OF OBEDIENCE.

A PAPER READ BEFORE AN OPEN MEETING OF COLLEGE STREET
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, N. S. S. A.

The Word of God, as revealed to us in the Old and New Testaments, supplies us with numerous illustrations of the pains and penalties of disobedience, and of the dignity and reward of obedience, which ought to serve for our guidance and encouragement. From the days of "righteous Abel" to the closing scenes of the life of Him who is the "Sun of Righteousness," we have forcible attestations that obedience to the will of God, and the natural laws and forces which He has set in motion for our welfare and usefulness on earth, carry with them a *dignity* which is the earthly part of that reward whose after part is in heaven. The highest and noblest illustration of the dignity of obedience is to be found in Phil. ii. 5-11, where Jesus our Saviour is held out to us as an example of perfect obedience, for "He made Himself of no reputation, and took on Him the form of a servant. He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death." The dignity of this obedience is attested and rewarded by the Father, who hath "highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of 'Jesus' every knee should bow." This unparalleled example of humility and obedience in our Saviour, and the loving justice of God our Father as the rewarder of merit, should give us every confidence that any labor or sacrifice, if undertaken from proper motives, right principles, and mature judgment, will not be in vain, but will be successful in their object, and draw down from on high blessings spiritual and temporal.

Biography, sacred and secular, shows to us the dignity and nobility of consecrated service, either in the Master's cause or in philanthropic effort for the well-being and liberty of mankind at large. The obedience referred to, and which has a dignity peculiarly its own, has no relationship to that obedience which is impelled by fear, compulsion, or the love of money, but rather that noble characteristic which has the love of God for its foundation, and the God of love for its author. Servile obedience is akin to slavery, and entirely foreign to that "perfect love" which "casteth out fear" and "worketh obedience," and which is the ruling principle and incentive to noble effort, high-souled sacrifice, and laudable ambition.

The *motives* which draw forth the best and noblest examples of obedience among men, and add a dignity to the act, may be classed under three heads, viz. *Loving Obedience, Obedience through Gratitude,* and *Obedience to Constituted Authority.*

I. *Loving Obedience.*—The feeling of love, in its purity, is the highest and holiest incentive to obedience. Under its hallowed and benign influence labor is made easy, privation a pleasure, and self an entirely secondary consideration. It is a trait more or less common to humanity, savage or civilized, and wherever portrayed, calls forth the best feelings of the soul,—the wish is anticipated, the desire complied with, and the injunction obeyed,—and all with a willingness, zeal, and devotion, as lasting as its object. History, sacred and profane, public and private, abounds with illustrations of this. But a still higher and more heavenly experience is realized when the soul is filled and all aglow with love to God as well as man, and where this has been the ruling motive of obedience, what deeds have been done, what sacrifices made, and what privations endured! The noble army of martyrs who valued not their lives when put in the balance with obedience to the law of God and the dictates of conscience,—are a testimony of this. Love to God, and a desire to save souls, has led many a hero to leave home, friends, and lucrative positions in order that they might plant the standard of the Cross among the heathen, and cause the Sun of Righteousness to shine on the dark places of the earth, which hitherto were the abodes of horrid cruelty and superstition, but now heavenly 'harvest-fields,' yielding golden sheaves of precious immortality to be gathered in at that great day when the Lord of the harvest will appear. Blessed will the reapers be who have listened to the Master's call and obeyed His voice:

Go work to-day! the fields are white to view,
The harvest truly great, the laborers few;
To you the call is given, Reapers, obey!
Work mightily, while yet 'tis called to-day!

The night approacheth, when no man can work,
And sin and vice do in the darkness lurk.
The fields are many, and the world is wide,
O'er trackless forests, deserts, stormy tide,
Proclaim THAT LOVE which makes all mankind kin,
And saves the soul though steeped in direst sin;
Which frees the captive, gladdens the oppressed,
And leads the erring to the Saviour's breast;
Where pardoning mercy, love, and joy are given,
To make this earth a sweet foretaste of heaven!

But the dignity of obedience, proved from this high and consecrated standpoint, need not hinder us from looking nearer home, and in our very midst, for examples; for the life of every true Christian is a daily witness of that love which "worketh obedience." By its impulse the naked are clothed, the hungry are fed, and to the poor the Gospel is preached,—by its injunction in the working of the "Golden Rule," commerce is placed on a firmer and surer basis,—by its benign and compassionate influence Christian countries are noted for their philanthropic institutions, where the weak and helpless are protected, the erring reclaimed, and the guilty punished. What a glorious dignity is lent to the Christian's character when all his actions are in unison and accordance to the spirit of the "new commandment" of the Master to "Love one another;" and which, if taken as a rule of obedience, will encircle every act with a halo of light which is heavenly, and an influence for good as lasting as eternity!

II. *Obedience through Gratitude.*—This beautiful trait of character is somewhat akin to the former, and generally springs from some benefit received, some kindness rendered, or some word "fitly spoken," which fills the heart of the one to whom the service has been rendered with feelings of grateful solicitation to do a service that may in some way compensate for the benefit or good received. What a change for the better to all concerned would be wrought in many a home if the children but gratefully remembered the many acts of kindness rendered them at the hands of their fathers and mothers, and would seek, by grateful obedience to their loving commands, not only to show respect and honor to their earthly parents, but also to their Father in heaven, and thereby add dignity to an obedience which God has promised to reward by "length of days." We have all, more or less, felt the impulse of that obedience which springs from gratitude, though it seems not entirely confined to the experience of humanity, but even to permeate some families of the brute creation, such as the horse, the dog, and other domestic pets, rendered happy under the influence of human kindness, and which seek to show their gratitude in many ways of "dumb eloquence,"—none the less real or touching on account of their lack of speech. The faithful dog will die in defence of its master, or risk its life to do his bidding, and for a gracious smile will lick his very feet! A stranger to gratitude is generally estranged to every feeling which renders noble our human nature; and such a man may deservedly meet with abhorrence and contempt, and be allowed to suffer the "stings and arrows" of outraged humanity. What, then, will be our excuse if we, as professing Christians, neglect to do the will of Him who hath done so much for us, when we are very ready, and justly so, to condemn ingratitude in our fellow-men? The question is before each of us, and must be answered, either here by our willing obedience, or hereafter with the conscious blush of shame upon our face, and the judgment of the Master ringing in our ears: "I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof; I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh."—Prov. i. 24-26.

III. *Obedience to Constituted Authority.*—When God at first created man He gave him dominion and power over every living thing that then existed; and when others were added to the family of man, fathers and leaders, patriarchs and prophets were appointed for their guidance and government, and thus precedents were formed upon the principles of which nations arose, countries were populated, and conquests made, the strongest power generally dictating to and ruling over the weaker, either by force of arms or the sheer necessity of adverse circumstances; and thus even among tribes a law of precedent was established, and to-day the ruling nations of the earth can be counted on the four fingers of the hand. The bone and sinews of a nation's strength are centred in her laws, and in a wise recognition of constituted author-

ity by her subjects. A nation without proper laws and responsible lawgivers is open to anarchy, revolt, and rebellion, and a by-word among those nations whose laws are respected, whose lawgivers are revered, and whose franchised subjects are fully alive to the welfare of the State. It would be wisdom in a people to submit for a time to laws somewhat tyrannical, rather than, by undue impatience, stir up anarchy, which knows no law. The laws of a well-regulated nation, however, have power and influence over the meanest as well as over the highest of her subjects, protecting impartially the interest of all the rich as well as the poor, the strong as well as the weak, the makers of the law as well as the breakers thereof. But this state of security and stability can only be rightly sustained, and made permanently secure, by the individual realization of the obedience which every member of the community owes to *Constituted Authority*.

Without the strong arm of the law, regulating and protecting the affairs of the State, and dignified by loyal obedience in the people, peace and prosperity would soon be a thing of the past, commercial enterprise an impossibility, and the sacredness of human life a delusion. Our army, heretofore our strength—would become an unwieldy mob, its watchword "Plunder and Rapine;" our cities, hitherto our honor and pride, would then become dens of infamy, and safe hiding-places for vagabonds and thieves.

This state of things, however, is entirely reversed where the influence of well regulated and responsible authority is felt and acknowledged. The whole system of government goes on with the smoothness and regularity of well-oiled machinery—not a screw loose, not a cog or pin wanting—everything answering to the conception of its author, and honorable success and prosperity is its certain fulfilment. In the working of this machinery all have their proper sphere, from the humble laborer in his lowly cabin, to the great statesman armed with power and fenced with authority. A king and a parliament would be a farce without a people to rule and govern; good laws, with none to obey them, would be a parody on national influence, and a burlesque on humanity.

Prominent places of preferment, either in a political, social, or commercial point of view, are prizes aimed at more or less by all, and it is only those who desire to rise that will rise, and having risen, their position can only be maintained by adhering to the laws and rules laid down by constituted authority, and thus is established a sliding-scale of rank and talent, which is at once a bond of security and a reward of merit.

In every sphere of human life there is a certain amount of honor and dignity, and by the recognition of this, "classes" in society are formed, within the circle of which happiness, and even contentment, can be obtained, but beyond which the daring adventurer generally feels himself uncomfortable or despised, unless it be that by a display of superior talent and application he has earned the right to rise. The law of obedience, however, must be understood and recognized if we would aim to rise—an obedience not only to the laws of God, but to the laws of nature and of man.

We are hemmed in on every side by LAW—even in our members there are laws which demand obedience, and the disobedience of which, in the light of reason and judgment, will bring sure and painful retribution. There is not an enviable position in life which has not been attained by strict obedience and application: our pulpits are only worthily filled by those who have obeyed the Master's call and recognize His authority as the Head of the Church; our armies are never more successful than when led to the field by men who have risen from the ranks by obedience and courage; as a rule, the successful merchant is he who has advanced, step by step, to his high and influential position by application and obedience to those in authority. The humbler the position, the more need is there to advance, and greater is the reward. A celebrated poet has said that "sweet are the uses of adversity," but it is only so to those who can perceive that there is a dignity in every position of life—even in the manly attempt to rise from the lowest by having a higher in view.

Ignorance is our birthright; and unless we are willing to practise obedience from our earliest till our latest breath, ignorance will follow us with its pains and penalties from the cradle to the grave. We are always learning; and there is no "royal road" to learning but by obedience—obedience not only to the