

ON THE DUTY OF FORGIVENESS.

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PART I.

"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."—Matt. xviii. 35.

The parable of which the text forms the conclusion, was uttered in the hearing and for the benefit of the disciples. This is evident from the first part of the chapter. At verse 21st we learn what it was that led our Lord, at this particular time, to explain and enforce the duty enjoined in the text. To that duty, indeed, attention had been directed in a previous part of our Lord's discourse, as we gather from verse 15th. Remembering this, Peter, after revolving the matter in his own mind—in all probability without having arrived at any satisfactory result—comes to our Lord and asks the question, "How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" A very proper question, truly, touching a most important branch of Christian duty, of which it is of the utmost consequence right views should be entertained.

The disciples themselves, like most of their fellow-countrymen, had obscure and seriously defective notions of their duty towards those who had wronged them. Of old time it was said, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." It was thought right to retaliate. It was accounted a just thing that one should be avenged on him at whose hands he had suffered wrong. As a law designed to regulate the public administration of justice, the saying held good, and involved a principle strictly just. The saying, however, had been misinterpreted, and perverted to the worst of purposes. It was looked upon as expressly sanctioning private revenge, a thing which here and elsewhere our Lord

exposes and condemns. The mere fact that He does so, shows it to have been a prevalent sentiment at that time, and, we may suppose, one with which the disciples, in common with those of the same nation, were infected. This, in truth, is a subject that even now, and under the new dispensation, is imperfectly understood. This question of Peter, then, we may assume, was put with an anxious desire to know the right and true, and a sincere intention to act agreeably to it. He believed, as doubtless we all believe, that in some sense or other he ought to forgive an erring brother. But he seems to have been in doubt as to the frequency with which it was incumbent on him to do this. He appears to have thought there should be a limit to human forbearance—a point at which one might justly feel reluctant to extend forgiveness—a time, in short, when, without guilt, we could steel our hearts against the offender. If such was his idea, as it is undoubtedly that of many in the present day, then, clearly, he was, as they are, in grave error. For, in reply to his question, our Lord said, "Not until seven times, but until seventy times seven;" that is, as the words obviously teach, without restriction, and without reserve as to the nature and number of the offences.

Hereupon follows the parable of which our text forms at once the conclusion and practical improvement. And it must be a cause, not less of profound grief than of utter and unfeigned surprise, that any one laying claim to the name of disciple, and professing any regard to the Master's will, can read that parable, and at the same time continue to cherish and display resent-