

A Gluttonous Man and a Wine-Bibber.

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"The Son of man is coming eating and drinking; and ye also, Behold a gluttonous man, and a wine-bibber, a friend of publican and sinners."—Luke 7:34.

Jesus Christ very seldom took any notice of the mist of calumny that drifted around him. "When he was reviled, he reviled not again." If ever he did allude to them, it was for the sake of the people who were harming themselves by uttering them.

So here, without the slightest trace of irritation, he quotes a malignant charge which was evidently in the popular mouth, and of which we should never have known if he had not repeated it; not with anger, but simply in order that he might point to the capricious inconsistency of finding fault with John and himself on precisely opposite grounds. The former did not suit because he came neither eating nor drinking. Well, if his asceticism did not please, surely the geniality of a Christ who comes doing both will be hailed. But he is rejected like the other. What is the cause of this dislike that can look two different ways at once? Not the things that it lays hold upon, but something far deeper, the dislike to the heavenly wisdom of which John and Jesus were messengers. The children of wisdom would see that there was right in both courses; the children of folly would condemn them both. If the message is unwelcome, nothing that the messenger can say or do will be right.

The same kind of thing is common today. Never mind consistency, find fault with Christianity on all its sides and with all its preachers, tho' you have to contradict yourself in doing so. Object to this man that he is too learned and doctrinal; to that one that he is too illiterate, and gives no food for thought; to this one that he is always thundering condemnation; to that one that he is always running over with love; to this one that he is perpetually harping upon duties; to that other one that he is up in the clouds and forgets the tasks of daily life; to this one that he is sensational; to that one that he is dull; and so on, and so on. The generation that liked neither piping nor mourning has its representatives still.

But my business this evening is not with the inconsistency of the objectors to John and Jesus, but simply with this caricature which he quotes from them, of some of his characteristics. It is a distorted refraction of the beam of light that comes from his face through the muddy, thick medium of their prejudice. And if we can—I was going to say—pull it straight again, we shall see something of his glories. I take the two clauses of my text separately because they are closely connected with our design, and cover different ground.

I. And I ask you to note, first, the enemies' attention to Christ's genial participation in the joys and necessities of common life.

"The Son of man came eating and drinking." There is nothing that calumny, if it be malignant enough, cannot twist into an accusation; and out of that glorious and significant fact, full of lessons and containing a strong buttress of the central truth of the gospel, these people made this charge, a "wine-bibber" and "gluttonous." The facts are facts; the inferences were slanders.

Notice how precious, how demonstrative of the very central truth of Christianity, is that plain fact, "the Son of man came eating and drinking." Then that pillar of all our hope, the Incarnation of the Word of God, stands irrefragable. Sitting at tables, hungering in the wilderness, faint by the well, begging a draught of water from a woman, and saying on his cross, "I thirst!"—here is the Incarnation of Deity, the manifestation of God in the flesh. Awe and mystery and reverence and hope and trust clasp that fact in which prejudice and dislike could only find occasion for a calumny.

By eating and drinking he declared that "for as much as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he himself likewise took part in the same." If it be true that "every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God, then it is true that no miracle of his life, nor any of the supernatural glories which we are accustomed to regard as evidence of his majesty, are more blessed, or more important as revelations of his nature, than the fact that the Son of man came eating and drinking."

But still further, mark how the fact which gave color to the slander attests that Jesus Christ presents to the world the highest type of manhood. The ideal for life is not the suppression, but the consecration, of material satisfactions and pleasures of appetite. And they come closest to the Master who, like the Master, come eating and drinking, and yet ever hold all appetites and desires rigidly under control, and subordinate them all to loftier purposes. John the Baptist could be an ascetic; the pattern man must not be.

The highest type of religion, as it is shown to us in the

perfect life, included the acceptance of all pure material blessings. Asceticism is second best; the religion that can take and keep secondary all outward and transitory sources of enjoyment, and can hallow common life, is loftier than all pale hermits and emaciated types of sanctity, who preserve their purity only by avoiding things which it were nobler to enjoy and to subdue.

There is nothing more striking about the Old Testament than the fact that its heroes and saints were kindly with their kind, and took part in common life, accepting, enjoying its blessings. They were warriors, statesmen, shepherd, vine-dresser; "they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; they married and were given in marriage." And all the while they were the saints of God. That was a nobler type of religion than the one that came after it, into which Jesus Christ was born. When devotion cools its crusts; and the crust is superstition and formalism and punctilious attention to the proprieties of worship and casuistry, instead of joyful obedience to a law, and abstinence from instead of sanctification of earthly delights and supplies.

So, protesting against all that, and showing the more excellent way, and hallowing the way because he trod it, "the Son of man came eating and drinking." Henceforward every table may be a communion table, and every meal may be a sacrament, eaten in obedience to his dying injunction. "This do in remembrance of me." If we can feel that Christ sits with us at the feast, the feast will be pure and good. If it is to such a sort as that we dare not fancy him keeping us company there, it is no place for us. Wherever Jesus Christ went the consecration of his presence lingers still; whatever Jesus Christ did his servants may do, if in the same spirit and in the same manner.

He hallowed infancy when he lay an infant in his mother's arms; he hallowed childhood when, as a boy, he was obedient to his parents; he hallowed youth during all those years of quiet seclusion and unnoticed service in Nazareth; he hallowed every part of human life and experience by bearing it. Love is consecrated because he loved; tears are sacred because he wept; life is worship, or may be made so, because he passed through it; and death itself is ennobled and sanctified because he has died.

Only let us remember that, if we are to partake of this blessed hallowing of common things, of which he has set us the example, we must use them as he did. That is, in such sort as that our communion with God shall not be broken thereby, and that nothing in them shall darken the vision and clip the wings of the aspiring and heavenward-gazing spirit. Brethren, the tendency of this day—and one rejoices, in many respects, that it is so—is to revolt against the extreme of narrowness in the past that prescribed and proscribed a great many arbitrary and unnecessary abstinences and practices as the sign of a Christian profession. But while I would yield to no man in my joyful application of the principle that underlies that great fact "He came eating and drinking." I do want at this point to put in a caveat which perhaps may not be so welcome to some of you as the line of thought that I have been pursuing. And it is this: It is no use to quote Christ's example as a cover for luxury and excess, and grasping at material enjoyments which are not innocent in themselves, or are mixed up with much that is not innocent. There is many a table spread by so-called Christian people where Jesus Christ would not sit. Many a man darkens his spirit, enfeebles his best part, binds himself to the things beyond, by reason of his taking the liberty, as he says, which Christianity, broadly and generously interpreted, gives of participating in all outward delights. I have said asceticism is not the highest, but it is sometime necessary. It is better to enjoy and to subdue than to abstain and to suppress, but abstinence and suppression are often essential to faithfulness and noble living. If I find that my enjoyment of innocent things harms me, or is getting to stimulate a craving beyond my control; or if I find that abstinence from innocent things increases my power to help a brother, and to fight against a desolating sin; or if things good and innocent in themselves, and in some respects desirable and admirable, like the theatre, for instance, are irretrievably intertwined with evil things, then Christ's example is no plea for our sharing in such. It is better for us to cut off the offending hand, and so, though maimed, to enter into life, than to keep two hands and go into the darkness of death. Jesus Christ "came eating and drinking," and therefore the highest and the best thing is that Christian people should innocently, and with due control and always keeping themselves in touch with God, enjoy all outward blessings, only subject to this law, "whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, to do all to the glory of God," and remembering this warning, "He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption."

II. Now, secondly, notice the enemies' witness that Christ is the Friend of outcasts.

As I said about the other charge, so I say of this, the facts were facts, the inferences were errors. The slanders saw, as nobody could help seeing, that there was a strange kind of mutual attraction between Jesus and publicans and sinners; that harlots as well as little children seemed to be drawn to him; and that he obviously delighted in the company of those at whose presence, partly from pride, partly from national enmity, partly from heartless self-righteousness, Pharissism gathered its dainty skirts around itself in abhorrence lest a speck should fall upon their purity. That being the fact, low natures, who always misunderstand lofty ones, because they can only believe in motives as low as their own, said of Jesus, "Ah! you can tell what sort of a man he is by the company he keeps. He is the friend of publicans because he is a bad Jew; the friend of sinners because he likes their wicked ways."

There was a mysterious sense of sympathy which drew Jesus Christ to these poor people and drew them to him. It would have been a long while before any penitent woman would have come in and wept over the feet of Gamaliel and his like. It would have been a long while before any sinful men would have found their way, with tears and yet with trust, to these self-righteous hypocrites. But perfect purity somehow draws the impure, though assumed sanctity always repels them. And it is a sign, not that a man is bad, but that he is good in a Christ-like fashion if the outcasts that durst not come near your respectable people find themselves drawn to him. Oh! if there were more of us like Jesus, Christ in our purity there would be more of us who would deserve the calumny which is praise—"the friend of sinners."

It was an attestation of his love, as I need not remind you. I suppose there is nothing more striking in the whole wonderful and unique picture of Jesus Christ drawn in the gospels, than the way in which two things which we so often fancy to be contradictory, blend in the most beautiful harmony in him—viz., infinite tenderness and absolute condemnation of transgression. To tie the fact that these two characteristics are displayed in perfect harmony in the life of Jesus Christ, as written in these gospels, is no small argument for believing in the historical veracity of the picture there drawn. For I do not know a harder thing for a dramatist, or a romancer, or a legend-monger to effect, than to combine, in one picture—and make the combination not monstrous—these two things, perfect purity and perfect love for the impure.

But, dear brethren, remember that if we are to believe Jesus Christ's own words, that strange love of his that embraced in its pure clasp the outcasts, was not only the love of a perfect Man, but it was the love of God himself. "He that hath seen Me hath seen the father." When you see Jesus Christ looking across the valley to the city, with tears in his sad and gentle eyes; and when you see harlots and sinners coming near him with new hope, and a strange consciousness of a fascination which welds; and when you see him opening his heart to all the impure, just as he laid his clean hand on the leper's ulcer, let us rejoice to believe that the Friend of publicans and sinners is God manifest in the flesh.

Then, still further, this wondrous seeking love of his for all the outcasts is the sign to us of his boundless hopefulness concerning the most degraded.

The world talks of races too low to be elevated; of men too hardened to be softened. Jesus Christ walks through the hospital of this world, and sees nowhere incurables. His hope is boundless because, first of all, he sees the dormant possibilities that slumber in the most degraded; and because, still more, he knows that he bears in himself a power that will cleanse the foulest and raise the most fallen. There are some metals that resist all attempts to vitalize them by the highest temperature producible in our furnaces. Carry them into the sun and they will all pass into vapor. There is no man or woman that ever lived, or who will live, so absolutely besotted and held by the chains of his or her sins that Jesus cannot set them free. His hope for outcasts is boundless because he knows that every sin can be cleansed by his precious blood.

Therefore Christianity should know nothing of desperate cases; there should be no incurables in our estimate of the world; but hope as boundless as the Master's, who drew to himself the publicans and sinners and made them saints.

I need not remind you how this is the unique glory of Christ and of Christianity. They have been asking the question whether Christianity is played out or not. What has been the motive power of all the great movements for the elevation of mankind that have occurred for the last nineteen centuries? What was it that struck the fetters off the slaves? What is it that sends men out among savage tribes? Has there ever been found a race of men so degraded that the message of Christ's love could not find its way into their hearts? Did not Mr. Darwin subscribe to the Patagonian Mission—a mission which takes in hand perhaps the lowest types of humanity in the world—and did he not do it because his own eyes had taught him that in this strange superstition that we call the gospel there is a power that, somehow or other, nothing else can wield? Brethren, if the church begins to lose its care for, and its power of drawing outcasts and sinners, it has begun to lose its hold on Christ. The sooner such a church dies the better, and there will be few mourners at the funeral.

The Friend of publicans and sinners has set the example to all of us his followers. God be thanked that

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