

So far as we have gone, we can only admire the Pharisees ; and it may appear surprising that this loyal, religious party should be assailed with such unmeasured condemnation by Jesus. But we shall immediately find the explanation. Conservatism, whether political or religious, has its peculiar dangers ; just as Liberalism has in other directions. If conservatism, even of what is good, refuse to adapt itself to changing conditions, and persist in hugging in its bosom, as a sacred fetich, the petrified remains of principles once instinct with throbbing life and power, it rapidly becomes a danger which may menace the very existence of Church or State. That was what happened with the originally useful and admirable conservatism of the Pharisees. It passed through a process of gradual degeneration, till, in New Testament times, it had become justly liable to the fearful indictments hurled against it by our Saviour.

It may afford a fresh and interesting line of thought to trace the stages of this process of degeneration, and thus to study the genesis of the corruption into which it ultimately led.

*I. We find the germinal element of its decay in a gradual, and almost necessary, transition from admiration of the past, which was entirely worthy, into an idolatry of that past which produced utter incapacity for a proper adjustment to the living present.*

As national humiliation was piled on humiliation, their untameable patriotism was driven to feed itself on the glorious memories of former days. Their national pride, baffled, galled, and maddened, by the bitter iron of a foreign yoke, eagerly reached back into the splendid past to extract nutriment for itself from the historic triumphs of their earlier national life. Hungrily they feasted this unconquerable pride on the theoretic privileges accorded them as Abraham's children and the chosen people of God ; on the sublimity and perfection of their national code of Mosaic legislation ; on the brilliant military achievements of David's Kingdom, and on the splendid commercial and industrial prosperity of Solomon's empire. In the thought of these things they found their only consolation now. But here lay the secret root of their danger. There is no grander heritage for man, family, nation, or Church, than that of thrilling memories of a great and noble history. But when that history becomes an idolatry and ceases to be an inspiration, it dwarfs the life, destroys elasticity, kills out energy, and fosters narrowest unreasoning bigotry. It paralyses all capacity for fruitful adaptation to the altering conditions of life and action produced by the incessantly changing movements of Providence. When a man begins to live mainly in the past of his youthful days, decay