

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT JESUS.

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III. TWO KINDS OF TEACHING.

The chief mode of approach to the personality of Jesus has always been, and must remain through his teachings. Would that we certainly knew which, and which only, are his own! We begin at once with certain immortal passages, all of which together, like so much precious gold, may be comprised within a very brief compass.¹ We have, thus, the beatitudes, the most impressive and far-reaching of all spiritual truths, gathered largely out of the scattered veins of the Old Testament ore, and here fitted as it were into a coronet. I have already raised the question who first put these great verses together. The same question arises as to the whole structure of the so-called Sermon on the Mount, as contained in Matthew.² We can hardly think it possible that all this most solid of ethical teaching was given by Jesus in a single block, either to his unlearned disciples, hardly able yet to unravel the parables, or much less to a multitude of people, in a single sitting. We have here, however, doubtless the greatest and most characteristic ideas of Jesus; about the chief end of man's life, about the relations of brotherhood, about forgiveness, about purity; about oaths and vows, about non-resistance; about alms-giving, fasting and prayer; about the true treasure; against anxiety, against harsh or hasty judgment, or perhaps even any judgment of one's fellows; about the test of character by its acts; about doing the good will of God as compared with saying the good words. The culminating sentences of the whole collection are

¹ There are about fifty verses in Mark that may be fairly called notable or universal teachings. Adding similar material found in Matthew and in Luke we may estimate the amount of this high quality at about two hundred and twenty-five verses, or four to five chapters.

² It is noticeable that the form is quite different and much more quotable than the similar material in Luke. Compare the Beatitudes with Luke vi. 20. etc.

not at the end of the section, but at the close of the fifth chapter of Matthew, where Jesus likens the divine goodness to the constancy of the sunshine, and lays down the rule that man's goodness or good will ought normally to be like God's, equally all around and constant to all men. There is no teaching higher than this. One wonders if he who first uttered it could possibly have realized how profound and far-reaching this is. Why should we insist upon thinking this?

Jesus is sometimes credited with original teaching about the Fatherhood of God. He certainly seems to have taken up, and adopted and realized this idea. Of course it was running in the thought of his people. (See 1 Chron. xxix. 10; Isa. vi. 16; Mal. ii. 10.) It was not an uncommon idea among early peoples who often assumed that men were sons of the gods. The sentences known as the Lord's Prayer bring this idea into prominence, and what is more, into familiar use. We are obliged even here, however, to notice the mixture of thought. It is a father up in heaven, a father who tempts his children, a father set over against "the evil one." The substance of the prayer is in the words "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done."³

Outside of the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest positive teachings of Jesus may be briefly summarized as follows: First and most important of all, is the Parable of the Good Samaritan.⁴ The great law of universal love, already taught in the Old Testament, but almost buried under the mass of priestly ceremonies, ritual and ecclesiasticism, needed clear illustration which this parable very beautifully furnishes. Perhaps the beauty of Jesus's story is not so much that the conduct is new or strange, as that it is told of a despised and alien class, as if a story of heroism were told to white men of a negro or a Chinaman.

The next great parable is the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke xv). This parable has always made an appeal to the imagination of the world. It is the everlasting justification of the lover of the outcast and the fallen. It is a story of the absolute radicalism of the law of forgiveness. No atonement—no sacrifice is here called for. The single essential requirement is that the wrong-doer shall repent and return to his duty.

The parables of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew xiii; Mark iv) form a cluster by themselves. They would seem to be Jesus's own words, if anything is. The interest in them to modern minds

³ See the prayer in the revised version.

⁴ Luke x. It is curious, that the early memorabilia of Mark does not contain this story.

is the rather remarkable suggestion of the doctrine of quiet development or growth, whether of the individual character, or of social and human betterment. This goes with the familiar words "The kingdom of God is within you," or shall we say, "among you," or "here"? Note also, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation." Luke xvii. 20, 21.) This doctrine, taken by itself, is very fine gold, but as we have presently to see, it is involved with much alien material. Indeed, the passage in Luke that follows these striking verses is one of the most tremendous warnings of how out of a quiet appearance the day of doom may suddenly sound.

"He that findeth his life shall lose it and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it," (Matthew x. 39) carries the memorable hint of a great law, namely "To die to live." It goes with the splendid verse quoted by Paul in Acts as from Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts xx. 35.) That is, life is not in mere getting but in outgo and expression. "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister" (Matthew xx. 26 to 28) is the same teaching. There is nothing greater. The familiar and tender text, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden" (Matthew xi. 28 to 30) deserves mention here. It is to be observed however that it probably fits in with the Messianic passages, and stands or falls according to our interpretation of them.

Memorable and characteristic is Jesus's teaching about the Sabbath (Matthew xii. 1 to 14). In short, all forms and rules are for man. Likewise his teaching about things clean and unclean (Matthew xv. 11). "That which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man."

Closest to Jesus's heart and oftenest repeated seems to have been the doctrine of forgiveness. "I say not until seven times, but until seventy times seven," (Matthew xviii. 22). Strangely enough, however, Jesus seems to threaten, in the parable of the two servants which follows, that God himself may not always forgive, as a man ought, but being wroth, will turn over the unforgiving man to the tormentors for ever!

The grand law, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, and thy neighbor as thyself," (Matt. xxii. 37) is given us very interestingly in Luke x. 25 as from the mouth of the questioner, as if indeed it were already in the common teaching of Jesus's people. It draws of course from earlier prophetic traditions, as, for example, from the beautiful teaching of Jonah.⁵

The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the

⁵ See the remarkable passages in Lev. xix. 10, 15, 17, 18, 34.

temple (Luke xviii. 9 etc.) is a plain object lesson of Jesus's constant teaching against arrogance and pretense. We find here the keynote of his life, recurring like a refrain. It is the Old Testament idea, "Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." Another of Jesus's mottoes, prominent in the Lord's Prayer and emphasized in the story of Gethsemane is the word, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt," (Matthew xxvi. 39). The words, though lacking in the other Gospels, attributed here to Jesus, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke xxiii. 34) seem to set the crown upon our highest idea of Jesus.

We have already observed that, beautiful as the highest teachings of Jesus are, they are not to be supposed to stand as the only summits of ancient thought. Not to speak of other writings, there are passages as grand in the Old Testament, for example, the words from Micah, "What doth the Lord require of thee but to deal justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." (Micah vi. 8.) The splendid passage from the Wisdom of Solomon about the heavenly wisdom also occurs to our minds, which "in all ages entering into holy souls maketh them friends of God and prophets" (vii). Also "For thou lovest all the things that are and abhorrest nothing which thou hast made." (Wisdom xi. 24.) The great teaching from 1 Corinthians xiii, about love, is quite as wonderful as anything in the Gospels. There are also certain remarkable verses about love in the Johannine writings: "Every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." (1 John iv. 7.)

One might gladly wish that Jesus's teachings matched throughout with the remarkable and universal passages which we have already cited. But our study, if candid, must now proceed to take account of a large number of passages, greater far in volume than all which we have instanced, which stir anew very difficult questions touching Jesus's personality and doctrine.*

Take first, the text "He that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation." (Mark, iii. 28, 29.) Even Professor Schmidt in *The Prophet of Nazareth*, free as he is in discarding many of Jesus's supposed sayings, leaves this as a genuine and characteristic utterance. But

* We find in the Synoptic Gospels besides the two hundred verses or more of greater teachings already referred to, perhaps four hundred verses or the amount of eight chapters, which must be classed as of distinctly lower, and some of it even dubious worth. Such is the considerable volume of eschatological teaching, as in Matt. xxiv, and the passages touching demonology. Some of this material, perhaps a third of it, or as much as three chapters, presents real ethical difficulty to the modern mind.

perhaps no word of Jesus has carried more terror, or imposed heavier suffering upon tender consciences. It constitutes almost a radical denial of Jesus's own doctrine of forgiveness. Here is "a sin unto death," not clearly described, which the Almighty will not bear with. God is not so good then, as man ought to be!

This is not a random teaching of Jesus. It runs through the warp and woof of the New Testament. In Jesus's common thought the world, so far from being a universe, is a theatre of divided powers, a scheme of dualism. There is heaven above and angels; there is hell below and devils. There are men like "the good seed," "the good ground," the good fish caught in the net; the good sheep. There are also bad men, as if by nature, like the tares in the wheat, the bad fish, the evil ground, the goats on the left hand at the judgment seat. There is a constant doctrine of opposition in the New Testament. Jesus loves the poor and oppressed. Does he love the Pharisees? It would seem not. But why not? This doctrine of antagonism perhaps will prove to account for the mode of Jesus's death. Toward a considerable class of his fellows, he never shows a touch of that graciousness and kindly forbearance which he inculcates among his own disciples toward one another. Is not this so? Look at some of the evidences of this fact. Thus Jesus likens the towns which reject him to Sodom and Gomorrah, and threatens them with the same fate. (Matthew x. 14 etc.) His teaching of hell and torment is as clear, full and tremendous as any hyper-Calvinistic divine could have made it. (Compare Matt. xviii. 8 etc.; xxiii. 33.) His teachings have been the inexhaustible arsenal from which passionate men have drawn their material for the inhuman and unbearable doctrine of eternal punishment. The faith of "Universalism" has its severest blows from the mouth of Jesus.

This type of teaching is just as conspicuous in the group of parables concerning the kingdom of heaven as anywhere else. (Matt. xiii.) The tares are burnt in the fire. "There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." This is the repeated refrain. Moreover it goes with the thought of the parables. Recall also the refrain: "Where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched." (Mark ix. 44, 46, 48.)

Do you try to urge that these numerous teachings were added by another hand? Even if this were possible, the fact remains that Jesus's disciples never understood him as putting aside or doubting the current popular ideas about the next life, the judgment of the world, and the overwhelming fate of the mass of human kind. "Are there few that be saved?" they enquire. And Jesus says,

"Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction and many there be which go in thereat." (Matt. vii. 13.) Speaking of the case of the relapse of a man from whom an evil spirit had been expelled Jesus explains that "seven other spirits more wicked than the first have entered the man. Even so," he adds significantly, "Shall it be unto this wicked generation." (Matt. xii. 45.) He teaches in parables. Why? Not, as you would suppose, in order to help people understand, but he is made to quote by way of answer to this question a tremendous passage from Isaiah, "Because they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." (Matt. xiii. 15.) Jesus warns even his disciples to "enter into life halt, or maimed, or blind, rather than to be cast with two hands or feet into everlasting fire." (Matt. xviii. 6 etc.)^o

I have mentioned three noble parables out of nearly thirty. The fact is, if you remove these three, the parable of the sower, the short ones about the kingdom of heaven, the beautiful little parable of the lost sheep, and the story of the Pharisee and the Publican in the Temple, you will have left indeed considerable interesting and suggestive matter, but you will have exhausted pretty nearly all high ethical and spiritual value from the parables.

Take, for example, the rich man and Lazarus. (Luke xvi.) There is no clear moral teaching here. The poor man goes to Abraham's bosom apparently only because he has been poor, not because he has been holy or patient. What a terrific picture of Dives in hell, where he cannot be forgiven or respited, even though his humanity is awakened to go and save his brethren! The Wedding Feast, (Matt. xxii and Luke xii), the Wise and Foolish Virgins and the Talents (Matt. xxv), picturesque as they are, are morally more or less vitiated for our use by the inhuman ending of each of them. They overshoot the ethical mark, and make the way of religion unlovely.

The parable of the Sheep and the Goats likewise blends splendid teaching, as to the true test of men's lives, with the awful and radically unjust idea of the spectacular judgment day, and the final separation of the bad and the good. (Matt. xxv.) Do these unfortunate "goats," selfish and thoughtless as they have been, deserve eternal damnation, as if they were a caste apart from the rest of humanity? Nevertheless, Jesus's mighty authority has been cited, and with overwhelming reasons, through nearly twenty Christian cen-

^o Luke is especially full of teachings quite as hard for the conscience, as the wonder-stories of the Bible are difficult for the reason. Luke iv. 24-28; vi. 23-27; x. 11-17; xi. 29-33, 46-53; xii. 9, 10, 46-49, 51-54; xiii. 2-10, 24-31; xiv. 21-27; xvi. 23-31; xvii. 26-37; xix. 22-28; xx. 9-19; xxi. 34-37.

turies for a mode of doctrine, touching our common human nature, which has helped to sanction almost every conceivable barbarity and torture. Did not God hate his enemies, as in the story of the Marriage Feast? Did he not turn over the guilty to torment? Did he not separate the bad from the good? If Jesus's word was apparently good for anything, it held good to support all this baleful eschatology. You cannot easily get rid of it and only save such material as pleases you, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. The same teaching is also explicitly in the Sermon on the Mount.⁷

I am aware that many students believe that the long chapters, especially in Matthew, touching the end of the world and the last things are a late addition to the Gospels. If this is so, Jesus surely never seems to have said a word to discourage these current ideas. You have also at once to suppose another author for a number of the parables. Grant, however, that a later hand is responsible for all this momentous teaching. This teaching had without doubt a most powerful influence in the reception and spread of the new religion. We are then confronted with another interesting problem of authorship. It was no feeble hand that composed the tremendous chapters to which we refer and these grand and awful parables. This is the hand of a prophet. It would look now, contrary to the ordinary impression, but in line with all the analogies of history, as if we had not merely the figure of one man, Jesus, all alone, but a group of remarkable personalities,—Paul, the anonymous author of the Johannine writings, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, besides those who put the Synoptic Gospels into shape. It may be true as Matthew Arnold has suggested, that Jesus was above the head of his disciples, but it begins now to look more as if the new religion must have owed its existence to a succession of great individualities, all of them worthy to be compared with the earlier prophets.

The supposition, however, of unknown but powerful writers, who may have supplemented Jesus's teachings with more or less fresh material, leaves the figure of Jesus himself even more obscure and fragmentary. Where does the authentic teaching of Jesus leave off and these others begin? No one knows or ever can know. How far was Jesus responsible for the more extreme and terrific doctrine, which was evidently in the air while he lived, and which he seems to have done nothing to controvert?

It is evident that the point of view to which we have come, though it may at first seem disappointing, brings immediate compensation. The common idea of Jesus's unique personality, or per-

⁷ See Matt. v. 22, 29, 30; vii. 13, 14, 22, 23, etc.

fectness of character, carries almost inevitably a subtle respect for the authority of all his teaching and for every motion in his attitude. Even when modern men will not quote the New Testament doctrines, however explicit they are, about devils and hell, they still use Jesus's mighty example for treating their fellows with antagonism and denunciation. There has thus been a profound ethical difficulty in the theory of Jesus's uniqueness from which we are now relieved. The fact is that our highest spiritual ideal will not permit us to believe that the sanguinary words put into Jesus's mouth could proceed from a man wholly possessed with the spirit of God. We shall have occasion to refer to this fact again.

In the recent report of a minister's farewell sermon he says: "We, all of us, forget what manner of man Jesus was." He goes on to say: "That same Jesus pronounced upon the aristocracy of Jerusalem such woes as have never been matched in the world's language of doom. That same Jesus, finding the money changers in the temple, lashed the sordid crew out of the holy place and hurled their money after them. If a minister to-day following his Master should do any of these things, he would not only be pronounced uncharitable, but ungoverned in temper, possibly insane." We ask, would not this be a fair judgment upon such a minister? Unfortunately, this use of Jesus's words and example is too common, even with most estimable people. Did such use of Jesus's authority ever do any humane service or help to overcome evil? Is it not well to free men from the bondage of a theory which thus sets up antagonisms and alienates them from one another?

[TO BE CONCLUDED.]