



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

The ministry of comfort

James Russell
Miller

770
Miller

Library of _____
_____ Weyerhaeuser,
Date _____ 189 _____
No. _____

AND  GEOLOGICAL LIBRARY
CX
SACHUSETTS

The Ministry of Comfort

REV. DR. MILLER'S BOOKS.

**SILENT TIMES.
MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE.
THE EVERY DAY OF LIFE.
THE BUILDING OF CHARACTER.
THINGS TO LIVE FOR.
THE STORY OF A BUSY LIFE.
PERSONAL FRIENDSHIPS OF JESUS.
THE JOY OF SERVICE.
STRENGTH AND BEAUTY.
DR. MILLER'S YEAR BOOK.
GLIMPSES THROUGH LIFE'S WINDOWS.
THE GOLDEN GATE OF PRAYER.
THE HIDDEN LIFE.
YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS.
THE MINISTRY OF COMFORT.**

BOOKLETS.

**GIRLS; FAULTS AND IDEALS.
YOUNG MEN; FAULTS AND IDEALS.
SECRETS OF HAPPY HOME LIFE.
THE BLESSING OF CHEERFULNESS.
A GENTLE HEART.
BY THE STILL WATERS.
THE MARRIAGE ALTAR.
THE SECRET OF GLADNESS
UNTO THE HILLS.
LOVING MY NEIGHBOUR.
HOW? WHEN? WHERE?
SUMMER GATHERING.
THE TRANSFIGURED LIFE.**

**THOMAS Y. CROWELL & COMPANY,
NEW YORK.**

The Ministry of Comfort

BY

J. R. MILLER

AUTHOR OF "SILENT TIMES," "MAKING THE MOST
OF LIFE," "THINGS TO LIVE FOR," ETC., ETC.

*" There was never a night so dreary and dark
That the stars were not somewhere shining."*

New York

THOMAS Y. CROWELL & CO.
PUBLISHERS

ANDOVER-HARVARD
THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

H 78,024

Feb. 20, 1951

770
Miller

Copyright, 1901, by T. Y. Crowell & Co.

(Widener)

PREFACE

A THEOLOGICAL professor used to say to his students, "Never fail in any service to have at least a word of comfort. No congregation, however small, ever assembles but there is in it one person in sorrow, who will go away unhelped, if in Scripture lesson, hymn or prayer there is nothing to lift up a heavy heart."

No book for devotional reading would be complete, however full of other lessons, if it contained nothing for those who are in sorrow. In this little volume special prominence is given to the ministry of comfort, in the hope that the book may make some hearts braver and stronger in the hard and painful ways of life. It is affectionately dedicated to those who are called to pass through trial.

J. R. M.

Philadelphia, U. S. A.

50
wisener

TITLES OF CHAPTERS

I. GLIMPSES OF IMMORTALITY	<i>Page</i>	3
II. WHY TROUBLE COMES		17
III. "BUT HE FOR OUR PROFIT"		27
IV. LOVE IN TAKING AWAY		43
V. TROUBLE AS A TRUST		55
VI. SOME BLESSINGS OF SORROW		73
VII. COMFORT IN GOD'S WILL		85
VIII. JESUS AS A COMFORTER		99
IX. GOD HIMSELF THE BEST COMFORT		113
X. THE DUTY OF FORGETTING SORROW		125
XI. EFFECTUAL PRAYER		143
XII. THE EFFACEMENT OF SELF		159
XIII. ONE DAY		171
XIV. THE CULTURE OF THE SPIRIT		185
XV. THE SECRET OF SERVING		197
XVI. THE HABIT OF HAPPINESS		211
XVII. THINKING SOBERLY		225
XVIII. STUMBLING AT THE DISAGREEABLE		237
XIX. THE DUTY OF THANKSGIVING		249
XX. MANNERS		261
XXI. THINGS WHICH DISCOURAGE KINDNESS		275
XXII. PUTTING AWAY CHILDISH THINGS		287

Glimpses of Immortality

[1]

*“ E’en for the dead I will not bind my soul to grief ;
Death cannot long divide.
For is it not as though the rose that climbed my garden
wall
Has blossomed on the other side ?
Death doth hide,
But not divide ;
Thou art but on Christ’s other side !
Thou art with Christ, and Christ with me ;
In Christ united still are we.”*

CHAPTER FIRST

Glimpses of Immortality



CONSCIOUSNESS of immortality is a mighty motive in life. If we think only of what lies in the little dusty circle about our feet we miss the glory for which we were made. But if we realize even dimly the fact that we are immortal, a new meaning is given to every joy of our life, to every hope of our heart, to every work of our hands.

The realization of this truth of immortality in our personal consciousness is partly at least a matter of education. We may train ourself to think of our life in its larger aspect. We may allow our mind to dwell only on material things, and keep our eyes on the narrow patch of earth on which we walk in our daily rounds. Or we may persist in lifting our thoughts to things that are un-

The Ministry of Comfort

seen and eternal. This really is most important in the truest religious training and discipline, and we should lose no opportunity to get glimpses of things that are imperishable.

A literary friend tells of an experience with an oculist. Her eyes were troubling her, and she asked him if she did not need a pair of new glasses. He replied, after making an examination, that it was rest her eyes needed, not different lenses. She assured him that this was an impossible prescription, telling him a little of what she must do day by day. After a moment's thought, he asked her if she had not some wide views from her windows. She replied enthusiastically that she had—that from her front porch she could see the noble peaks of the Blue Ridge, and from her back window the glories of the Alleghany foothills. "That is just what you want," said the oculist. "When your eyes get tired with your reading or writing, go and stand at your back window or on your front porch, and look

Glimpses of Immortality

steadily at your mountains for five minutes—ten will be better. This far look will rest your eyes.”

The friend finds in her oculist's direction a parable for her own daily life. “Soul of mine,” she says to herself, “are you tired of the little treadmill round of care and worry, of the conflicts with evil, of the struggles after holiness, of the harrowing grief of this world,—tired of to-day's dreary common-places? Then rest your spiritual eyes by getting a far vision. Look up to the beauty of God's holiness. Look in upon the throngs of the redeemed, waiting inside the gates. Look out upon the wider life that stretches away illimitably.”

It is such an outlook that the thought of immortality gives to us. We live in our narrow sphere in this world, treading round and round in the same little circle. Life's toils and tasks so fill our hands, that we scarcely have time for a thought of anything else. Its secularities and its struggles for bread keep us ever bent down to the

The Ministry of Comfort

earth. The tears of sorrow dim our vision of God and of heaven. The dust and smoke of earth's battles hide the blue of heaven. We need continually to get far looks to rest us, and to keep us in mind of the great world that stretches away beyond our close horizons. The glimpses of eternity which flash upon us as we read our Bible or look into Christ's face, tell us anew what we so easily forget, that we are immortal, that our life really has no horizon.

It is very inspiring to think of human life in this way, as reaching out beyond what we call death and into eternity. Dying is not the end—it is but an incident, a phase or process of living. It is not a wall, cutting off our path—it is a gate, through which we pass into larger, fuller life. We say we have only three-score and ten years to live, and must plan only for hopes or efforts which we can bring within this limit. But, really, we may make plans which will require 10,000 years, for we shall never die.

Life here is short, even at the longest. It

Glimpses of Immortality

is but a little we can do in our brief, broken years. We begin things and we are interrupted in the midst of them, before they are half finished. A thousand breaks occur in our plans. We purpose to build something very beautiful, and scarcely have we laid the foundation when we are called to something else, or laid aside by illness, or our life ends and the work remains unfinished. It is pathetic, when a busy man has been called away suddenly, to go into his office or place of business or work, and see the unfinished things he has left—a letter half written, a book half read, a picture begun but not completed. Life is full of mere fragments, mere beginnings of things.

If there is nothing beyond death, but little can come of all this poor fragmentary living and doing. The assurance, however, that life will go on without serious break, through endless years, puts a new meaning into every noble and worthy beginning. The smallest things that we start in this world will go on forever.

The Ministry of Comfort

St. Paul tells us at the close of his wonderful chapter on the resurrection, that our labor is not in vain in the Lord. Beyond our narrow horizon a world of infinite largeness awaits us. Nothing done for Christ shall fail or be in vain. All good things shall live forever. The seeds we sow here which cannot come to harvest in earth's little years, will have abundant time for ripening in the measureless after years. The slowest ripening fruit will some day become mellow and luscious.

There is comfort in this for those whose life seems a failure here,—crushed like a trampled flower under the heel of wrong or sin, broken, torn. There will be time enough in the immortal days for such broken lives to grow into strength and loveliness. Think of living a thousand years, a million years, in a world where there shall be no sin, no struggle, no injustice, no failure, but where every influence shall be inspiring and enriching, for in the immortal life all growth is toward youth, not toward the decrepitude of

Glimpses of Immortality

age. The truth of immortality gives us a vision also of continued existence in love and blessedness for those who have passed from us and beyond our sight. We miss them and we ask a thousand questions about them, yet get no answer from this world's wisdom. But looking through the broken grave of Christ, as through a window, we see green fields on the other side, and amid the gladness and the joy we catch glimpses of the dear faces we miss from the earthly circle.

What a countless multitude of mothers there are, for example, whose little children have been lifted out of their arms and borne away! The bud did not have time to open in the short summer of earth. It is carried from us, still folding in its closed-up calyxes all its possibilities of loveliness, power and life. Sorrow weeps bitterly, almost inconsolably, over the hopes which seem blighted, and cuts on the marble shaft an unopened bud, a torn branch, or some other symbol of incompleteness. Yet when

The Ministry of Comfort

we believe in immortality, what matters it that the bud did not open here and unfold its beauty this side the grave? There will be time enough in heaven's long summer for every life to put forth all its loveliness. Faith in immortality lifts the veil and eyes of love find these sweet infant faces again in the beautiful land.

*“ I wonder, O I wonder, where the little faces go,
That come and smile and stay awhile, and pass
like flakes of snow—
The dear, wee baby faces that the world has
never known,
But mothers hide, so tender-eyed, deep in their
hearts alone.*

*“ I love to think that somewhere, in the country
we call heaven,
The land most fair of everywhere will unto
them be given.
A land of little faces—very little, very fair—
And everyone shall know her own and cleave
unto it there.*

Glimpses of Immortality

*"O grant it, loving Father, to the broken hearts
that plead !*

*Thy way is best—yet O, to rest in perfect faith
indeed !*

*To know that we shall find them, even them, the
wee white dead,*

*At thy right hand, in thy bright land, by liv-
ing waters led ! "*

Only yesterday an anxious friend was speaking about the dear ones gone. Are they sleeping in unconsciousness? Do they love and remember in that other land? Are they greatly changed? Shall we find them again, and when we do will they be so much the same that we shall know them, and that we can go on with the old story of love begun here? The New Testament teaching about death and immortality would seem to answer these questions. It shows us Jesus himself beyond death, and he was not changed. He had the same gentle heart. He had not forgotten his friends. Surely it is the same with our dear ones who have passed from our sight. Death did not take

The Ministry of Comfort

from them one line of beauty. It ended nothing in them that was worth while. The things in them which we loved here are lovable qualities in them still. We shall find them again and shall get them back unchanged, and then we shall go on once more with the sweet life of love that began so happily here. George Klinge puts it beautifully thus :

We are quite sure

*That God will give them back—bright, pure and
beautiful.*

We know he will but keep

Our own and his until we fall asleep.

We know he does not mean

To break the strands reaching between

The Here and There.

He does not mean—though heaven be fair—

*To change the spirits entering there, that they
forget*

The eyes upraised and wet,

The lips too still for prayer,

The mute despair.

He will not take

The spirits which he gave, and make

Glimpses of Immortality

The glorified so new

That they are lost to me and you.

.

God never made

Spirit for spirit, answering shade for shade,

And placed them side by side—

So wrought in one, though separate, mystified—

And meant to break

The quivering threads between.

Thus it is that looking through the window of Christ's rent tomb we have a vision of life as immortal and in the truth of immortality we find boundless inspiration, comfort for every sorrow and gain for every loss.

Why Trouble Comes

[15]

*“ There was never a day so misty and gray
That the blue was not somewhere above it ;
There is never a mountain-top ever so bleak,
That some little flower does not love it.*

*“ There was never a night so dreary and dark
That the stars were not somewhere shining ;
There is never a cloud so heavy and black
That it has not a silver lining.”*

CHAPTER SECOND

Why Trouble Comes



HERE is always a mystery in sorrow. We never can understand certainly why it comes to us. We cannot but ask questions when we find ourself in the midst of trouble. But many of our questions must remain unanswered until earth's dim light becomes full and clear in heaven's glory. "What I do thou knowest not now," said the Master; "but thou shalt understand hereafter."

Some good people make the mistake of supposing, when any trouble comes upon them, that they have displeased God in some way and that he is punishing them for it. This was the thought in the minds of the disciples, when they asked the Master for whose sin, his own or his parents', a certain man had been born blind. Jesus answered that

The Ministry of Comfort

the blindness had been sent for no one's sin, but for an occasion of good and blessing, for an opportunity of revealing the mercy and gentleness of God. When we have sorrow or suffering, our question should not be, "What have I done that God is punishing me for?" but, "What is the mission of this messenger of God to me?"

If we would always greet pain or trouble in this way, with welcome, reverently, in Christ's name, we should be in an attitude for receiving whatever blessing or good God has sent to us in it. There is no doubt that whatever trouble comes to us, comes from God on an errand of love. It is not some chance thing breaking into our life, without purpose, without intention. It is a messenger from God, and brings blessings to us. Our trouble is God's gift to us. No matter what it may be—duty, responsibility, struggle, pain, unrequited service, unjust treatment, hard conditions—it is that which God has given to us. No matter through whose fault or sin it may have come to us,

Why Trouble Comes

when the trouble is ours, we may say it is a gift of God to us. Then being a gift from God, we may be sure that it has in it for us a divine blessing. As it comes to us it may have a stern aspect, may seem unkindly, even cruel, but, folded up in its forbidding form, it carries some treasure of mercy.

It is easy to find illustrations of this truth. The world's greatest blessings have come out of its greatest sorrows. Said Goethe, "I never had an affliction which did not turn into a poem." No doubt the best music and poetry in all literature had a like origin, if we could know its whole story. It is universally true that poets "learn in suffering what they teach in song." Nothing really worth while in life's lessons comes easily without pain and cost.

Readers who find in certain books of Christian experience words which are bread to their spiritual hunger, which cheer and strengthen them, which shine like lamps on their darkness, showing them the way, do not know what it cost the writer to prepare

The Ministry of Comfort

these words, how he suffered, struggled and endured, in order that he might learn to write the sentences which are so full of helpfulness. This is one of the rewards of suffering—the power to light the way for other sufferers.

Many of the beneficences which have brought greatest good to the world have been the fruit of a bitter sorrow or a loss which seemed overwhelming. When Dr. Moon of Brighton was at the very ripeness of his powers and the summit of his achievements, he became totally blind. It seemed a terrible calamity that a man so brilliant, fitted to be so helpful to humanity, should have his career of usefulness thus ruthlessly ended. For a time his heart was full of rebellious thoughts ; he could not and would not submit. He could see no possible goodness, nothing but unqualified misfortune, in the darkening of his eyes which had put an end to his career among men. But in his darkness, he began to think of others who were blind and to ponder the question whether there might not

Why Trouble Comes

be some way by which they could be enabled to read. The outcome of his thought was the invention of the alphabet for the blind, which is now used in nearly every country and in every language, by means of which three or four millions of blind in all parts of the world can read the Bible and other books. Was it not worth while for one man's eyes to be darkened in order that such a boon might be given to the blind of all lands?

In personal experience, too, countless sweetest blessings and joys are born of sorrows. For many a man the things of earth on which he has set his heart are blighted, that his affections may be lifted to things heavenly and eternal. There are many who never saw Christ until the light of some tender human beauty faded before their eyes, when, looking up in the darkness, they beheld that blessed Face beaming its love upon them.

*"Through the clouded glass
Of our own bitter tears we learn to look
Undazzled on the kindness of God's face.
Earth is too dark, and heaven alone shines
through."*

The Ministry of Comfort

A writer tells of a little bird which would not learn to sing the song its master would have it sing while its cage was full of light. It listened and learned a snatch of this, a trill of that, a polyglot of all the songs of the grove, but never a separate and entire melody of its own. Then the master covered its cage and made it dark; and now it listened and listened to the one song it was to learn to sing, and tried and tried and tried again until at last its heart was full of it. Then, when it had caught the melody, the cage was uncovered and it sang the song sweetly ever after in the light.

As it was with the bird, so it is with many of us, God's children. The Master has a song he wishes to teach us, but we will not learn it. All about us earth's music is thrilling and we get but a note here and there of the holy strain that is set for us. Then the Master makes it dark about us, calling us aside to suffer, and now we give heed to the sweet song he would teach us until we can sing it through to the end. Then when we have

Why Trouble Comes

once learned it in darkness, we go out into the light and sing it wherever we move.

*“ The clouds which rise with thunder slake
Our thirsty souls with rain ;
The blow most dreaded falls to break
From off our limbs a chain ;
And wrongs of man to man but make
The love of God more plain,
As through the shadowy lens of even
The eye looks farthest into heaven
On gleams of star and depths of blue
The glaring sunshine never knew.”*

When we think thus of troubles, as bearers of God's best blessings to us, they begin to wear a benigner aspect to our thought. They come not to us lawlessly, breaking into our life with their loss, anguish, and terror, without God's permission. They do not come laden with hurt and marring for us. They come as God's servants, and they bear in their hands divine blessings. They come not as avenging messengers to inflict punishment, but as angels of love to chasten us, mayhap to cure us of follies and sins,

The Ministry of Comfort

to lead us nearer to God, to bring out in us more of the beauty of Christ. No trouble of any kind ever comes to us but it brings us something that will be a blessing to us if only we will accept it.

But we must receive these divine messengers reverently, with hospitable welcome, as of old men received and entertained angels who came to their doors. Too often sorrow's gifts are not accepted, the messengers are not welcomed, and they can only turn and bear away again the blessings which they had brought in love, but which we would not take.

It is a serious thing to have troubles come to us and not be graciously welcomed by us. We turn Christ himself from our doors when we refuse to admit what he sends to us, though it be a sorrow or a loss. We thrust away heavenly treasures, shutting our heart against them. The only true way to deal with trouble is to open our door to it as coming from God on an errand of love, its hands filled with priceless gifts for our true enriching.

“ But He for Our Profit ”

[25]

*" I have no answer for myself or thee,
Save that I learned beside my mother's knee ;
' All is of God that is, and is to be ;
And God is good. Let this suffice us still,
Resting in childlike trust upon his will
Who moves to his great ends unthwarted by the ill.' "*

CHAPTER THIRD

“But He for Our Profit”



TRouble is not accidental. It does not break wildly and lawlessly into our life. No matter what its immediate cause or source, it is under direction. There is nothing lawless in the universe. This is our Father's world and all things and all events are under his control. We need not fret ourselves over scientific laws or the inferences from them, for God is greater than his own creation and is never hindered in his purposes of love by the outworking of the laws he has established, which in any case are but his ways of working. Jesus spoke of the terrible cruelty and wrong which culminated in his death on a cross as “the cup which my Father hath given me.”

*“ I know that never blooms in vain
A flower in any woodland lair,*

[27]

The Ministry of Comfort

*That not a single drop of rain
Is lost upon the desert air.*

*“ I know that never is there whirled
Against the shore a grain of sand
But, in the building of the world,
Serves to complete the perfect plan.”*

It is comforting to think of trouble, in whatever form it may come to us, as a heavenly messenger, bringing us something from God. In its earthly aspect it may seem hurtful, even destructive; but in its spiritual out-working it yields blessing.

Take the matter of chastening. It is always painful, but we know that the object of our Father is our good, the correction in us of things that are wrong, and the bringing out in us of qualities of divine beauty which otherwise would not be developed. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it very plainly in a remarkable passage. He reminds us that we are God's sons, and exhorts us not to regard lightly the chastening of the Lord, nor to faint when

“ But He for Our Profit ”

we are reprov'd of him: “ For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. . . . God dealeth with you as with sons.”

Referring to our acceptance of the chastening of earthly parents, he says: “ We had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence; shall we not much rather be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us as seemed good to them; but he for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness.” The wisest and most loving earthly father may not always chasten either wisely or lovingly, but whatever chastening our heavenly Father may minister to us, we know that he has in mind only our good, our profit. Then follow these words which interpret for us the purpose of all the trials that God sends into our life: “ All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous, but grievous: yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exer-

The Ministry of Comfort

cised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness."

The teaching is clear and positive. Painful in the human experience, as it must always be, we know that in its outcome chastening always works good. We do not know how much we owe to suffering. Many of the richest blessings which have come down to us from the past are the fruit of sorrow or pain. Others sowed in tears and we gather the harvest in joy. We should never forget that redemption, the world's greatest blessing, is the fruit of the world's greatest sorrow. In our own personal life it is true that in all chastening our Father's design is our profit, and that suffering rightly endured yields the fruit of righteousness.

Take the process of pruning—the figure which our Lord himself uses. The husbandman prunes the branches, but not without wise purpose. The Master's words, referring to this process in spiritual husbandry, are rich in their comfort for those on whom the knife is doing its painful work.

“But He for Our Profit”

For one thing, we are told that the Father is the husbandman. We know that our Father loves us and would never do anything unloving or hurtful. We know that he is infinitely wise, that he looks far on in our life, planning the largest and the best good for us, not for to-day only, but for all the future, and that what he does is certainly the best that could be devised. In every time of sharp pruning, when the knife cuts deep and the pain is sore, it is an unspeakable comfort to read, “My Father is the husbandman.”

Another inspiring thought in all such experience is, that it is the fruitful branch which the Father prunes. Sometimes good people say when they are led through great trials, “Surely God does not love me, or he would not so sorely afflict me.” But it takes away all this distressing thought about our trouble to read the Master’s words, “Every branch that beareth fruit he cleanseth it.” It is not punishment to which we are subjected, but

The Ministry of Comfort

pruning, and it is because we are fruitful that we are pruned.

Still another comfort here is revealed in the object of the pruning—"That it may bear more fruit." The one object of all God's culture is fruitfulness. The figure of pruning helps us to understand this. When one who knows nothing of such processes sees a man cutting away branch after branch of a tree or vine, it would seem to him that the work is destructive. But those who understand the object of the pruning know that what the gardener is doing will add to the vine's value and to its ultimate fruitfulness.

Dr. Marvin R. Vincent tells of being in a great hothouse where luscious clusters of grapes were hanging on every side. The owner said, "When my new gardener came he said he would have nothing to do with these vines unless he could cut them clean down to the stalk; and he did, and we had no grapes for two years, but this is the result." There is rich suggestiveness in this

“ But He for Our Profit ”

interpretation of the pruning process as we apply it to Christian life. Pruning seems to be destroying the vine. The gardener appears to be cutting it all away. But he looks on into the future and knows that the final outcome will be the enrichment of its life and greater abundance of fruit.

There is another Scripture teaching which many Christians seem to forget in time of trial. It is this, that every trouble which comes into the life of a believer enfolds in its dark form some gift from God. There are blessings which it would seem can be given only in pain and earthly loss, and lessons which can be learned only in suffering. There are heavenly songs we can never learn to sing while we are enjoying earth's ease. We can be trained for gentle ministry only in the school of loss and trial. In our short-sightedness we dread the hard things of life and would thrust away the bitter cups. If only we knew it, these unwelcome experiences bring to us rich gifts and benefits. There are blessings we never can have

The Ministry of Comfort

unless we are ready to pay the price of pain. There is no other way to reach them save through suffering.

*" God draws a cloud over each gleaming morn ;
Would we ask why ?
It is because all noblest things are born
In agony.*

*" Only upon some cross of pain or woe
God's son may lie ;
Each soul redeemed from self and sin must
know
Its Calvary.*

*" Yet we must crave neither for joy nor grief,
God chooses best :
He only knows our sick soul's best relief,
And gives us rest."*

There is a quite common misconception regarding answers to prayer, a misconception which would be corrected if we understood better the meaning of trouble as it comes into our life. In our time of suffering or sorrow we cry to God for relief, asking him

“But He for Our Profit”

to take away that which is so hard for us to endure. We do not remember that this very trial is a messenger of good from God to us. When we ask our Father to free us from the painful experience, we do not realize that we are really asking him to recall an angel of mercy who has come with rich gifts in his hands for us.

What should our prayer be in such a case? There is no harm in our asking even earnestly and importunately that the suffering may pass, but we should always ask reverently, leaving it to God to decide what is best. Then the prayer should be that if the trouble is not taken away we may be strengthened to endure it and may not fail to receive its blessing. This is the promise, indeed, that is made. We are not told that God will either remove our burden or carry it for us. If there is a benediction in it for us, it would not be a kindness to lift it off. The assurance is, however, that he will sustain us as we bear our load. This may disappoint some who turn to God with their

The Ministry of Comfort

trouble, thinking only of relief from it. But when we remember that God has a design in the trouble, a loving purpose, we know we cannot afford to lose it. To be freed from it would be to miss the good that is in it for us. We grow best under weights. So in love and wisdom God leaves the load on our shoulder that we may still carry it and get through it the gift which he sends us in it. He then gives us strength to bear it—strengthens us under its weight.

We have the same teaching in the word “comfort” itself, whose meaning is oftentimes greatly misunderstood. Many persons looking for comfort in sorrow, expect that the bitter cup will be taken away, or, at least that its bitterness will be alleviated. But the word comfort is from a root which means to strengthen. Hence it contains no promise that in any way the burden will be made lighter, or the grief less poignant. God comforts us by giving us strength to endure our trial. For example, when we turn to him in bereavement, he does not restore

“ But He for Our Profit ”

our beloved, nor make the loss appear less—which could be done only by making us love less, since love and grief grow on the same stalk—but gives us new revealings of his own love to fill the emptiness, and to put into our heart new visions of the life into which our friend has gone, to help us to rejoice in his exaltation to blessedness.

We have an illustration of the divine comforting in the way our Lord himself was helped in his great sorrow. As he entered the experience, he prayed that the cup might pass, yet praying submissively. The prayer was not answered in the form in which it was made. Instead of relieving him of his suffering, strength was ministered to him, and as we listen we find the intensity of his supplication subsiding into sweet acquiescence. Thus he was comforted, and passed through all the bitter trial of the cross without one other cry for relief, his heart filled with perfect peace. It is thus that usually God's comfort comes to his people—not in the lifting off of their weight

The Ministry of Comfort

of sorrow or pain, but in strengthening them for victorious endurance.

It is well that all who are called to suffer should get a clear and definite conception of the meaning of trouble, that they may know how to meet it. Since it comes always bearing some gift of love, some blessing from God, we should receive it as God's messenger, with reverence, with a welcome in our heart, though it bring pain or grief, and should be ready to take from it whatever benefit it brings. The reason many persons find so little comfort in their troubles is because they do not accept them as sent from God, nor expect to receive blessing from. They think only of getting through them in the best way they can, and then of getting over them at length, as nature's slow processes bring healing.

But there is a better way. God's comfort can keep the heart sweet and unhurt in the midst of the sorest trials, and bring the life through the darkest hours, shining in transfigured beauty. A genial author writes:

“But He for Our Profit”

“Strangely do some people talk of getting over a great sorrow—overleaping it, passing it by, thrusting it into oblivion. Not so. No one ever does that, at least no nature which can be touched by the feeling of grief at all. The only way is to pass through the ocean of affliction solemnly, slowly, with humility and faith, as the Israelites passed through the sea. Then its very waves of misery will divide and become to us a wall on the right side and on the left, until the gulf narrows and narrows before our eyes, and we land safe on the opposite shore.”

Love in Taking Away

[41]

*" Be strong, my soul !
Thy loved ones go
Within the veil. God's thine, e'en so ;
Be strong.*

*" Be strong, my soul !
Death looms in view.
Lo, here thy God ! He'll bear thee through ;
Be strong."*

CHAPTER FOURTH

Lobe in Taking Away



ONE of the finest examples of comfort in sorrow given in the Scriptures is in Job's case. In quick succession had come the messengers of misfortune and disaster, telling him of troubles and losses, last of all reporting the death of all his children. When this climax of sad tidings was reached, Job rent his garments, fell down upon the ground and worshipped. Instead of losing sight of God under the crushing blows which had fallen upon him, as so many good people do at first, in time of great sorrow, he turned at once to God, falling at his feet in reverence and homage. His faith failed not. Everything had been taken—all his earthly blessings had been stripped off. Yet in his grief and bereavement he said, "The Lord gave, and

The Ministry of Comfort

the Lord hath taken away : blessed be the name of the Lord."

It is easy enough to say that God gave, and then to bless his name. God is always giving, and we readily see goodness and love in his gifts. It would have been easy for Job, as his prosperity increased, adding to his possessions, covering his fields with flocks, to say, "It is God who gives all this," and then to add, "Blessed be his holy name." It would have been easy as, one by one, his children came, bringing gladness and brightness into his home, to praise God for them, and to say, "The Lord gave—blessed be the name of the Lord."

But it was not so easy now, when all this prosperity had vanished, and when his children lay dead, to put the new chord into the song and say, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away : blessed be the name of the Lord." Yet that is just what Job did. It was the Lord who had given him all that had made his life happy, and it was the same Lord who now had taken every-

Love in Taking Away

thing away—the same Lord and the same love.

There seems to have been in the stricken father a trust which was not shaken by all the calamities which had fallen upon him in such swift succession. He was kept in perfect peace. He had received good at God's hands in countless ways, and when trouble and disaster came he saw no reason to change his thought of God as his friend. He did not complain, nor blame God, but accepted the losses of property and now the sudden smiting down of his children, with unquestioning confidence. It was the same Lord and the same love that had first given and now had taken away.

There is immeasurable comfort in this truth for all who are called to give back again the gifts which God has bestowed upon them. God is a giving God, but he is also a God who sometimes takes away, and, in taking away, he is not changed in his character nor in his feeling toward us, his children. He loves us just as truly and as

The Ministry of Comfort

tenderly when he takes away the things or the beings we love as he did when he gave them into our hands. They were sent to us in love, and for our good they came with their blessings for our life. Then the taking away is also in love, and has good and a blessing in it.

This is true, for example, of the friends we have. We are sure of the goodness that gives them to us. They bring divine blessings from God. We say of them, "The Lord gave—blessed be the name of the Lord." We have no doubt whatever concerning the goodness of God in giving our friends to us. But, by and by, they are taken from us. One of every two friends must some day see the other called away and must stand, bearing an unshared grief, by the other's grave. Can we finish Job's song of faith then, and say, "The Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord?" Can we believe that there is as true and holy love in the taking away as there was in the giving?

Love in Taking Away

It is not necessary that we be able to discover or to see clearly the goodness in the experience of loss or sorrow. It is here that faith comes in. We believe in God as our Father, and we may trust his goodness, even when it seems to be tearing down what awhile ago it built up, when it takes from us what on a day bright with love and blessing it gave. The simplest faith is that which asks no questions and does not care to know the reasons for God's ways. Oft-times we cannot find reasons—God does not show us why he does this or that.

Yet while we may not be able fully to understand, we may conceive of elements of goodness even in the taking away. For one thing, we know it is better for our friends in that home of love into which God calls them than it ever could have been here. The true thought of Christian dying is that it is a phase or process of life. The sorest misfortune that could come to anyone would be never to die. There are developments of life which can be reached only by passing

The Ministry of Comfort

through the experience of dying. Happy as our friends may have been here, and rich and beautiful as was their life, we know that they have entered sweeter, deeper joy, and that their life is fuller and richer where they now are with Christ. True love in its very essence is unselfish, and it ought to mean much to us in reconciling us to our loss, to know that our friends have been taken into larger blessedness. We ought to rejoice in their new happiness and in the greater honor which is shown to them in their receiving into heaven.

Then they are kept safe and secure for us in the home of God. We really have not lost them, although they have been taken out of our sight. They lose nothing of their beauty or their excellence of character in passing through death. The things in them which made them dear to us in this world they will have when we shall see them again. Indeed, they will have grown into rarer beauty and into greater dearness when we find them again.

Lobe in Taking Away

“ God keeps a niche

In heaven to hold our idols ; and albeit

He brake them to our faces and denied

That our close kisses should impair their white,—

I know we shall behold them, raised, complete,

The dust swept from their beauty.”

We know, further, since God is love, that when he takes our friends into richer life, he will send compensation to us, too, in some way. Even the loss and the sorrow will yield their gain and their ministry of good, unless by our attitude of mind and heart we miss the blessing. It is possible for us to fail to get the good God sends, shutting our heart against it. But there is no doubt that in every loss a gain is offered to us. When God takes away one blessing he gives another. Perhaps the withdrawal of the human object of love makes more room in the heart for God himself. Or the taking away of the strength which has meant so much to us, trains us to more self-dependence, thus bringing out in us qualities of which hitherto we had been unaware. Or the sorrow

The Ministry of Comfort

itself deepens our spiritual life and enriches our experience, giving us a new power of sympathy through which we may become better comforters and helpers of others.

Then the taking of our earthly loved ones from our side through the gates of blessedness, makes heaven more real to us because they now walk there. A mother said it had been a great deal easier for her to pray, and easier to be a Christian and to think of Christ, the year since her baby died, because she knew it was with him. Thus, in many ways, does new blessing come in place of what has been taken away.

Once more, we know, too, that God never really takes away from us, out of our life, any gift or blessing that he bestows. The flower we love may fade, but the flower is in our heart and is ours forever. A picture is lent to you for a little while and then is removed, but while it hung on your wall and you gazed at it, it found its way into your heart and now none can ever take it from

Love in Taking Away

you. Your friend walked with you a few or many days, and then vanished as to his human presence, but the threads of his life are so inextricably entangled with yours that he and you can never be really separated. What God takes away is but the form which our eyes can see. This he keeps for us for a time until it has grown into fuller beauty and until we have grown, too, into larger capacity for love and for appreciation, and then he will give it back to us.

*“ To give a thing and take again
Is counted meanness among men ;
To take away what once is given
Cannot then be the way of heaven !*

*“ But human hearts are crumbly stuff,
And never, never love enough,
Therefore God takes and, with a smile,
Puts our best things away awhile.*

*“ Thereon some weep, some rave, some scorn,
Some wish they never had been born ;
Some humble grow at last and still,
And then God gives them what they will.”*

The Ministry of Comfort

So it is only for a little while that God takes from us our loved ones. We shall have them again, made into immortal beauty. The hopes we mourn as having perished are yet in Christ's hands. He will keep them safe for us and at length will give them back to us in radiant and imperishable loveliness. In this life we see only the beginnings of our good things—we see them but in bud and blossom; the full fruit, the ripeness we shall not get till we enter the other and better life. One of the surprises of heaven will be our finding there the precious hopes, joys, and dreams which seemed to have perished on earth—not left behind, but all carried forward and ready to be given into our hands the moment we get home.

*“ Let us hope on though the way be long
And the darkness be gathering fast,
For the turn in the road is a little way on
Where the home lights will greet us at last.”*

Trouble as a Trust

[53]

- “ Applauding crowds thy words may greet,
Or marvel at the gift
That calls such music from the quiv’ring strings ;
But thou wilt never touch one heart
Till thou hast felt its sufferings—or in part.*
- “ Then teach us, Son of God, to bear
As thou thyself hast borne,
That from our deepest pain the power may spring
That makes our brother strong—the power—
Of sympathy and love, heav’n’s richest dower.”*

CHAPTER FIFTH

Trouble as a Trust



NE wrote to a friend who for some time had been a sufferer, "God must love you very dearly to trust, so much pain and sorrow to your care." The thought of suffering as something entrusted to us by God is a very suggestive one. We may not be accustomed to think of it in this way. Yet there is no doubt that every trouble that comes to us is really a trust, something committed to us to be accepted by us, used as a gift of God and then accounted for.

It is thus, indeed, that all life comes to us. Nothing is our own to use for ourself only. We receive our talent or talents, not to be spent on ourself or as we please, but to be increased by proper use, held for the honor of the Master, employed for the benefit of

The Ministry of Comfort

the world, and then returned to our Lord when he calls for the accounting.

Money is to be regarded likewise as a trust—not our own, but our Master's, to be used for him in doing good to others. The same is true of all blessings that we receive. We dare not use any of them, even the smallest, for our own pleasure or comfort alone; if we do, they cease to be blessings to us. Even the divine mercy, the greatest of all God's gifts, which is granted so freely to every penitent, can become ours only on condition that we shall dispense it to others. When we ask to be forgiven we must pledge our Father that we will be forgiving. The forgiveness we receive is not for ourself only, but is a trust to be used, to be given out again to others.

This is the law of all life. Everything that is put into our hands, from the tiniest flower that blooms in our window to the infinite gift of eternal life, is entrusted to us that we may share its beauty or its benefit with those about us. It is bestowed upon us, not

Trouble as a Trust

as a treasure to be appropriated, but as a blessing to be dispensed. To try to keep it altogether for ourself is to lose it; we can make its blessing really our own only by holding it and using it for the good of others.

Suffering in every form comes under the same law. It is a trust from God. It may have, and doubtless has, its peculiar meaning for us. But we must listen for its message in order that we may speak it out again so that others may hear it. It brings in its dark folds some gift of God expressly for us, but not for us to hold selfishly or to absorb in our own life. Whatever is spoken to us in the darkness of sorrow, we are to speak out in the light. What we hear in the ear as we listen in the hour of grief or pain, we are to proclaim upon the house-tops. What is revealed to us in the darkened room, when the curtains are drawn, we must go and tell others in their hours of need and trial. In all trouble we are stewards of the mysteries of God.

The Ministry of Comfort

Pain is a wonderful revealer. It teaches us many things we never could have known if we had not been called to endure it. It opens windows through which we see, as we never saw before, the beautiful things of God's love. But the revealings are not to be hidden in our own heart. If we try thus to keep them we shall miss their blessing; only by declaring them to others can we make them truly our own and get their treasure for ourselves. Only what we give away can we really hold forever.

No doubt God's children are oftentimes called to suffer in order that they may honor the divine name in some way. This is illustrated in the case of Job. Satan sneeringly asks, "Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will renounce thee to thy face."

Trouble as a Trust

It was necessary that this challenge of Satan's should be met and disproved, and hence the great trials through which Job was called to pass. His sufferings were not for the cleansing of his own nature, or the correction of faults in his character, but in order that he might show by his unshaken faith that his serving of God was not for earthly reward, but from true loyalty of soul.

May we not believe that oftentimes the primary reason why good men are called to suffer is for the sake of the witness they may give to the sincerity of their love for Christ and the reality of divine grace in them? The world sneers at religious profession. It refuses to believe that it is genuine. It defiantly asserts that what is called Christian principle is only interested selfishness, and that it would not stand severe testing. Then good men are called to endure loss, suffering or sorrow, not because there is any particular evil in themselves that needs to be eradicated, but because the Master needs

The Ministry of Comfort

their witness to answer the sneers of the world.

This suggests how important it is that all who claim to be Christ's followers shall guard most carefully the manner of their witnessing when they are passing through any trial. They do not know how much depends upon the victoriousness of their faith and joy in the hour of pain. Suppose that Job had failed, that he had not retained his integrity in the time of his sore trial; how Satan would have triumphed! But may it not be that in some sickness or loss or sorrow of ours, a like importance attaches to our faithfulness and submission, to our victoriousness, and that our failure would bring grief to the heart of Christ and cause the adversary to reproach God's name?

Then, whatever the unknown and inscrutable reason may be why we are called or permitted to suffer, there is always a duty of witnessing from which we cannot be exempted. Yet do many people think of this? We all understand that we are to confess

Trouble as a Trust

Christ in our life before men, in our conduct, our words, our disposition, in our business, in our conflict with evil. But are we accustomed to think of a duty of confessing Christ in time of sorrow or trial? Too often those who in all other experiences are loyal to Christ seem to break down in trouble, their faith failing. There is nothing in the way they endure pain or loss to show that they have any support or help which those who are not Christians do not have. No light from heaven seems to break into their earthly darkness. No unseen hand appears to come to them in their struggle to hold them up. The comforts of God do not have any meaning for them. The voices of hope have no cheer for them.

But it is not thus that the friends of Christ should testify for their Master in their times of trial. The divine promises cover every experience. We are assured of the presence of Christ with us in every dark path, in every lonely way. We are clearly taught that the love of God never fails his chil-

The Ministry of Comfort

dren, that it is as true and tender in times of affliction as it is in times of gladness, that it is the same when blessings are taken away as when they are given. We know that all things work together for good to them that love God. It is made plain in the Scriptures that no tribulation can harm us if we abide in Christ, that we shall be preserved blameless through the most terrible trials, if our faith in Christ does not fail. Many of life's events are full of mystery—we cannot understand them, nor can we see how they are consistent with God's love and wisdom. But we have the most positive assurance that some time we shall understand, and that in everything we shall see divine goodness.

With such comforts for every experience we should never be cast down, however great are our trials. We should let the divine consolations into our heart, and believe them implicitly. We cannot but feel the pangs of grief—God will never blame us for our tears, but in our deepest afflictions our

Trouble as a Trust

faith should not fail, and the songs of joy should not be choked. People are looking upon us and, consciously or unconsciously, watching to see what Christ can do for us in our sore stress. To witness truly for him we must suffer victoriously, be more than conquerors through him that loved us.

We say that we believe on Christ and in the immortal life; what does our believing do for us? Do we endure our trials in such a radiant way that those who see us are led to believe in Christ and to seek his love and help for themselves? If trouble is something committed to us as a trust we must accept it reverently and submissively, we must endure it patiently and sweetly, we must take the divine comfort and let it sustain and strengthen us, and we must pass through it songfully, unhurt, with life enriched. Thus shall our trouble honor Christ and be a blessing to others.

There is a strange story of Abraham which illustrates one way in which trial must be endured if in it we would honor God. The

The Ministry of Comfort

old patriarch was bidden to take his son, his only son, the son of his love and of promise, and offer him on an altar as a burnt-offering. The record says that God gave this command to Abraham to prove him, that is, to see if his faith would endure the test. And God was not disappointed in his friend. After it was all over, the angel of the Lord said to Abraham, "Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, . . . in blessing I will bless thee." Abraham accepted his trial as a trust from God and was faithful, did not fail God. Then who can tell what a blessing his faithfulness has been to the world through the centuries? Other people have been taught by Abraham's example to give their children to God unquestioningly, willing that he should use them as he will, in whatever form of service will best honor him and most greatly bless the world.

We are always in danger of selfishness in grief or sorrow. We are apt to forget our duty to those about us. Some good people

Trouble as a Trust

drop out of their hands the tasks of love which filled them in the days of joy, and feel that they cannot take them up again. Some allow their life to be hurt, losing its sweetness, its joy, its zest. There are those who are never the same after a sore bereavement or a keen disappointment. They never get back again their winningness of spirit, their interest in others, their enthusiasm in duty. They come out of their trial self-centred, less joyous as Christians, less ready to do good.

But not thus should trouble affect us if we accept it as a trust from God. Not only should we endure it victoriously, sustained by Christ, but we should emerge from it ready for better service and for greater usefulness than ever before. We are told that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. He learned in his own experience of sorrow how to sympathize with his people in their sorrows and how to comfort them. One of the reasons for trouble is that in it we may be prepared for helping others in their

The Ministry of Comfort

troubles. Sorrow is a school, and we meet it as we should only when we learn the lessons and go out fitted for being a richer blessing in the world.

The problem of all true living is not to miss pain or trial, but in all experiences, however hard or bitter, to keep our heart ever sweet and our ministry of good and helpfulness ever uninterrupted. The keenest suffering should make us only the gentler in spirit and send us out to be yet more loving and thoughtful—a benediction to every one we meet.

*“ Such a heart I’d bear in my bosom
That, threading the crowded streets,
My face should shed joy unlooked for
On every poor soul one meets ;
And such wisdom should crown my forehead
That, coming where counsels stand,
I should carry the thoughts of justice
And stablish the weal of the land. ”*

In one of St. Paul’s epistles we are taught that God’s comfort also is given to us in

Trouble as a Trust

trust. We do not receive it for ourselves only, but that we may give it out again to others. To the Corinthians the apostle wrote in an outburst of joyous praise : " Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort ; who comforteth us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." Thus the intention of our heavenly Father, when he finds us in sorrow and ministers comfort to us, is not merely to get us through the trial, to strengthen us to endure for ourselves the pain or loss, but also to prepare us for being comforters of others. When we have been helped to say, " Thy will be done," in some great trial, and have been enabled to go on rejoicing in tribulation, we have a secret which we must tell others. We must go to those whom we find in grief or trial, and sitting down beside them, let them know what God did for us when we were in like experience, giving

The Ministry of Comfort

them the words of God which have helped us.

When we pray for comfort in sorrow it should be with this motive, that we may get a new blessing to take to others. To ask to be comforted merely that we may be able to endure our own pain or grief is to pray selfishly. But when we pray that God would teach us the lessons of comfort that we may teach them again to others, that he would help us to overcome that we may help others to be victorious, our prayer pleases him and will be answered.

Thus our lesson gathers itself all into this : We are " stewards of the mysteries of God. . . . It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." When God sends us pain or sorrow we are to be faithful. We are to accept our trust with love and to think of it as something of God's committed to us. However heavy the burden, it is a gift from God and has a blessing in it for us. We must never forget that in our hardest trial we have something of God's in our hands

Trouble as a Trust

and must treat it reverently and get from it whatever good God has sent to us in it. Then we must think of it also as something which is not for ourself alone, but which we are to share with others.

It is a law among physicians that whatever new discovery in medical science one makes he must communicate it to the whole profession, that all may use the new knowledge for the alleviation of suffering or the saving of life. It should be a law of Christian life that every good or blessing one may receive from God, any new revealing of truth, any new lesson, should be used for the helping of others in the name of Christ.

*“ Oh, strengthen me, that while I stand,
Firm on the Rock and strong in thee,
I may stretch out a loving hand
To wrestlers with the troubled sea.*

*“ Oh, teach me, Lord, that I may teach
The precious things thou dost impart;
And wing my words, that they may reach
The hidden depths of many a heart.*

The Ministry of Comfort

*" Oh, give thine own sweet rest to me,
That I may speak with soothing power
A word in season, as from thee,
To weary ones in needful hour."*

Some Blessings of Sorrow

[71]

*' The clouds which rise with thunder slake
Our thirsty souls with rain ;
The blow most dreaded falls to break
From off our limbs a chain.
And wrongs of man to man but make
The love of God more plain.
As through the shadowy lens of even
The eye looks farthest into heaven
On gleams of star and depths of blue,
The glaring sunshine never knew."*

CHAPTER SIXTH

Some Blessings of Sorrow



It may seem strange to some to speak of the blessings of sorrow. We would say at first thought, "Surely nothing good can come from anything so terrible." Yet the word of God assures us, and the experience of the ages confirms the assurance, that many of the richest and best blessings of life come out of affliction.

One of the most striking visions of heaven granted to the revelator on Patmos was that of a glorified company who seemed to surpass all the other blessed ones in the splendor of their garments and the radiant honor of their state. They were arrayed in white robes, carried palms in their hands, and stood nearest the throne and the Lamb. We would have said that these were the children of joy, that they had come up from

The Ministry of Comfort

earth's scenes of gladness, that their condition in life had been one of exceptional ease and freedom from trouble, that they had never known a care or a grief. But when the question was asked, "These which are arrayed in the white robes, who are they, and whence came they?" the answer was, "These are they which come out of the great tribulation." They were the children of earth's sorrow. They had been brought up in the school of trial.

This vision would seem to teach us that those redeemed ones who on earth have had the most affliction, in heaven attain the highest honor. Their robes are whitest, indicating surpassing purity. They bear palm-branches, emblems of victory, showing that they have overcome in life's struggles. They are nearest Christ, too, among the glorified, verifying the promise that they who suffer with him shall also reign with him.

The Scriptures contain many words which receive confirmation in this glimpse within the gates. We are told that we must through

Some Blessings of Sorrow

much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. The way into a life of spiritual blessedness is through pain. In the messages to the seven churches we have glimpses of great privileges, blessings, and honors which are within the reach of the followers of Christ. One shows us the tree of life in the paradise of God. In another we see a crown of life waiting to be put upon the head of him who is faithful. In another the lifting of the veil reveals to us hidden manna, and a white stone, with a new name written on it. In another it is power that is promised, authority to rule. Other of these visions show us white garments and the name written in the book of life, an honored place in the temple of God, and, last of all, a seat beside Christ on his throne. But all of these heavenly prizes are shown to us beyond a field of struggle, and he who would win them must first fight the battle and be a victor. "To him that overcometh," runs the promise in every case. Not to overcome would be to miss the prize. Not to have the trial and the

The Ministry of Comfort

struggle would be to stay in lower, lesser blessedness.

We do not know what we owe to our sorrows. Without them we should miss the sweetest joys, the divinest revealings, the deepest experiences of life. Afflictions are opportunities. They come to us bearing gifts. If we can accept them they leave in our hand heavenly treasures. Not to be able to receive the bearer of the blessings is to miss the blessings and to be poorer all the rest of our days.

Many of the finest things in character are the fruits of pain. Many a Christian enters trial, cold, worldly, unspiritual, with the best possibilities of his nature still locked up in his life, and emerges from the experience a little later, with spirit softened, mellowed, and enriched, the lovely things brought out. A photographer carries his picture into a darkened room, that he may bring out its features. He says the light of the sun would mar the impression on the sensitized plate. There are features of spir-

Some Blessings of Sorrow

itual beauty which cannot be produced in a life in the glare of human joy and prosperity. God brings out in many a soul its loveliest qualities when the curtain is drawn and the light of human joy is shut out.

Afflictions sanctified soften the harshness and asperity of life. They tame the wildness of nature. They consume the dross of selfishness and worldliness. They humble pride. They temper human ambitions. They quell fierce passions. They show to us the evil of our own heart, revealing our weaknesses, faults, and blemishes, and making us aware of our spiritual danger. They discipline the wayward spirit. Sorrow draws its sharp ploughshare through the heart, cutting deep and long furrows, and the heavenly Sower follows with the seeds of life. Then by and by fruits of righteousness spring up. Sorrow has a humanizing influence. It makes us gentle and kindly toward each other. It has been said that "The last, the best fruit which comes to late perfection, even in the kindest soul, is tenderness

The Ministry of Comfort

toward the hard, forbearance toward the unforbearing, warmth of heart toward the cold, and philanthropy toward the misanthropic." In no other school do our hearts learn the lessons of patience, tolerance, and forbearance so quickly as in the school of suffering. Harsh feelings are softened, and kindly charity takes the place of resentment. Many a household is saved from disintegration by a grief which bows all hearts before God and wakes up the slumbering affections.

Ofttimes, indeed, sorrow is one of the secrets of happy home life. It is a new marriage when young parents stand, side by side, by the coffin of their first-born. Grief is like a sacrament to those who share it, with Christ beside them. Many homes have been cured of harshness of spirit and sharpness of speech, and saved from pride, coldness, and heedlessness, by a sorrow which broke in upon the careless household life. Most of us need the chastening of pain to bring out the best of our love.

Some Blessings of Sorrow

Another of the blessings which come from trial is the finding of one's soul. It was in his great distress that the prodigal "came to himself." Many people walk in a dream, as it were, till in some trouble they are aroused to see the reality of things. They are happy in their earthly gladness, satisfied with their human ambitions, unaware meanwhile of the fitting nature of this world and of the eternal stability of the spiritual world. They are living in a dream, as it were. Then sorrow breaks in upon them. One who is very dear is lifted out of the circle and glorified. At once revealing comes. They see how mistakenly they have been living, and how perilously.

One tells of a company of tourists on the Alps who were overtaken by night, and after groping in the deep darkness for a time, were compelled to settle down and wait until morning. A thunderstorm arose during the darkness and a vivid lightning flash showed them that they had stopped on the very edge of a precipice. Another

The Ministry of Comfort

step forward and they would have fallen to their death. The lightning flashes of sorrow oftentimes reveal to Christian people the peril in which they are living, and lead them to turn to safer paths. Many a redeemed one in glory will look back to the time of a great grief as the time of seeing God which led to penitence and faith.

Another result of sorrow, when it is accepted, is in preparing us to be better messengers of God to others. Jesus himself was made ready to be a sympathizing and helpful Friend by his human sufferings. He understands our grief because in his own life he was acquainted with grief. He is able to be a comforter to us because he himself was comforted. St. Paul tells us that the reason God comforts us in our trouble is that we may become comforters of others in their afflictions. We have a new power with which to bless others when we have come from an experience of grief. An emptied heart is a wonderful interpreter of others' bereavements. The power to be a true help-

Some Blessings of Sorrow

er of those who are in trouble, a binder-up of broken hearts, is the most divine of all enduements. Surely, then, it is worth while to pay any price of pain or suffering, in order to receive the divine anointing for such sacred ministry.

True comfort has a strange power to heal, to bind up hearts' wounds, to turn sorrow into joy. The Christian home which has been broken by bereavement, under the wise tuition of Christ and the gentle influences of the divine love, is made to have a deeper happiness than ever it had before. The truth of immortality brings back the missing ones, as it were, and they sit again in their old places. The vacant chairs seem filled once more, and the love of the absent ones appears as real and as tender as it did when they were here. Christian faith nullifies the sad work of death, and binds again the broken ties.

“ There is no vacant chair. The loving meet—

A group unbroken—smitten, who knows how ?

The Ministry of Comfort

*One sitteth silent only, in her usual seat ;
We gave her once that freedom. Why not now?*

*“ Perhaps she is too weary and needs rest ;
She needed it too often, nor could we
Bestow. God gave it, knowing how to do so best.
Which of us would disturb her? Let her be.*

*“ There is no vacant chair. If she will take
The mood to listen mutely, be it done.
By her least mood we crossed, for which the
heart must ache,
Plead not nor question ! Let her have this one.*

*“ Death is a mood of life. It is no whim
By which life's Giver mocks a broken heart.
Death is life's reticence. Still audible to him,
The hushed voice, happy, speaketh on, apart.*

*“ There is no vacant chair. To love is still
To have. Nearer in memory than to the eye
And dearer yet to anguish than to comfort, will
We hold her by our love that shall not die.*

*“ For while it doth not, thus she cannot. Try!
Who can put out the motion or the smile?
The old ways of being noble all with her laid
by ?
Because we love, she is. Then trust awhile.”*

Comfort in God's Will

[83]

*Almighty ! Listen ! I am dust.
Yet spirit am I, so I trust.
Let come what may of life or death,
I trust thee with my sinking breath.
I trust thee, though I see thee not
In heaven or earth or any spot.
I trust thee till I shall know why
There's one to live and one to die.
I trust thee till thyself shall prove
Thee Lord of life and death and love.*
ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS.

CHAPTER SEVENTH

Comfort in God's Will



GREAT secret of comfort lies in "Not my will, but thine." When we can say this and abandon ourself and all in our life that causes perplexity or care, into the hands of divine wisdom and love, the struggle is over and the peace of God is already keeping our heart in quietness and confidence. This was the secret of the comfort which came to our Lord himself in Gethsemane. He was face to face with the most terrible experience any soul ever met in this world. The record says he was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. "Being in an agony he prayed." The holy Sufferer pleaded that the cup of bitter anguish now being held to his lips might pass from him. Never was more intense prayer offered to the Father. But amid the anguished plead-

The Ministry of Comfort

ing was heard the self-restraining word of submission, "Not my will, but thine, be done." There was something more important than the granting of the suppliant's request—it was that the purpose of God for him that hour should go on unhindered.

It is interesting to trace the course of the Gethsemane prayer and to see how the note of submission gains the ascendancy over the pleading for relief, until at length the struggle ends in acquiescence and perfect peace. The first supplication was, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." A little later Jesus returned again to his pleading and we hear this petition from his lips: "O my Father, if this cannot pass away, except I drink it, thy will be done." The fierceness of the struggle in the Sufferer's soul was being mastered by the spirit of submission to the divine will. Soon the agony was over. The victory had been won. We have at least an echo of the comfort which filled the heart of

Comfort in God's Will

Jesus in his word to Peter, a little later, when that warm-hearted but rash disciple had drawn his sword to resist the betrayal and the arrest of his Master, "The cup which the Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" There was no word now of supplication for the passing away of the cup. Jesus had made way for his Father's will and was comforted.

There is no other way by which true comfort can come to any heart in time of sorrow but by acquiescence. So long as we cannot say, "Not my will, but thine, be done," the struggle is still going on, and we are still un comforted. Comfort is peace, and there is no peace until there is acquiescence in the will of God. Whatever the sorrow, therefore, if we would find divine comfort we must seek to bring our will into complete harmony with our Father's will.

There are reasons why we should do this in every grief or sorrow. One is, that God has a plan and a purpose for our life. There is something he would make of us, and some-

The Ministry of Comfort

thing he would have us do. What this divine thought for our particular life is, the divine will discloses. Every time we resist this will and refuse to accept it at any point, we mar the beauty and completeness of our own life. God's purpose for us runs through whatever sorrows or sufferings there may be in our lot ; in all our experiences God's will for us is the bringing out of his image in us. Only by acquiescence in the divine will can we have our life fashioned after this heavenly pattern.

Another reason why we should let God's will work without resistance, without complaining, in our life, is that God is our King and has a sovereign right to reign over us. Insubmission is rebellion. Not only should our submission be complete, without condition and without reserve, in the smallest as well as in the greatest matters ; it should also be cheerful and songful. Chafing and murmuring grieve God. The moment we recognize the will of God in either a duty or a sorrow we should accept

Comfort in God's Will

it with delight. In no other way can we please God and have his benediction of peace.

Another reason for submitting to the divine will in time of trouble is that God always seeks our good. He is our Father, and would never send into our life anything that would harm us, nor take from us anything that would leave us poorer or less blessed. We are sure, too, that his wisdom is perfect, and that he knows what really is good for us. We ourselves do not know. We cannot follow the influence of this or that in our life, nor know whither such and such a course would lead us. We have no wisdom to choose our own lot, and we would far better let God decide for us what is best.

*“ I would not dare, though it were offered me,
To plan my lot for but a single day,
So sure am I that all my life would be
Marked with a blot in token of my sway.”*

The thing we are so eager to get, it may be, would do irreparable hurt to our truest life.

The Ministry of Comfort

The joy we so desire to keep, and which we think indispensable to our happiness, perhaps has done its full work for us and in us, and would better now be taken away. God knows what is best for us, and his will is not only perfect wisdom, but also perfect love. To resist it is to do harm to our own life; to reject it and insist upon having our own way would be to choose evil, not good, for ourself.

It does not seem to us that sorrow can be the bearer of blessing to us. Yet there is no doubt that every grief or pain which comes brings a blessing wrapped in its dark folds. There is a marginal reading of a sentence of one of the psalms which tells us that our burden is a gift—God's gift to us. Every burden that is laid upon us, however it may have become ours, carries, folded up in it, a gift of God. God's gifts are always good. To refuse to accept the burden would be to reject a gift of love from our Father and to thrust away a blessing sent for the enrichment of our life.

Comfort in God's Will

Diamonds are sometimes found in the heart of rough stones. It is said that the first discovery of diamonds in South Africa was in some pebbles which were tossed about on the ground by passing feet. A scientific man came upon a group of boys using some of these stones for marbles and his keen eye detected the gem that was wrapped up in the rough encrusting. So it is that the stern and severe experiences which we call sorrows conceal within their forbidding exterior diamonds of God's love and grace. We do not know how we are robbing ourselves when we refuse to accept the trials which come to us in God's providence. Acquiescence in the divine will is taking into our life the good which our Father is offering to us.

There are those who are called to long years of suffering or of sorrow. It is a comfort for such to think of their pain or grief as a friend sent to accompany them on the way. Mrs. Gilchrist wrote of Mary Lamb, "She had a life-long sorrow and learned to find its companionship not bitter." When the

The Ministry of Comfort

sufferer learns to think thus of the pain or the sorrow that stays and does not depart, the bitterness is turned to sweetness and the life finds blessing, inspiration, uplift, purifying in the sacred companionship.

*“ When first I looked upon the face of Pain
I shrank repelled, as one shrinks from a foe
Who stands with dagger poised, as for a blow.
I was in search of Pleasure and of Gain :
I turned aside to let him pass : in vain :
He looked straight in my eyes and would not go.
‘ Shake hands,’ he said, ‘ our paths are one,
and so—
We must be comrades on the way, ’tis plain.’*

*“ I felt the firm clasp of his hand on mine :
Through all my veins it sent a strengthening
glow,
I straightway linked my arm in his, and lo !
He led me forth to joys almost divine ;
With God’s great truths enriched me in the
end :
And now I hold him as my dearest friend.”*

Or it may be that the will of God would take from us something very dear which

Comfort in God's Will

we would keep. We should always remember that God's love is the same whether he is putting new gifts into our hands or taking away those we have learned to cherish. The good things which mean so much to us are his, not ours. They have only been lent to us for a time, and for a specific purpose. When their mission is finished God recalls them, and we may be sure there is blessing in the recalling.

A beautiful story is told of a devout Jewish home in which were twin boys who were greatly beloved. In the absence of the father both boys suddenly died. When the father returned, not knowing of the sorrow in his home, the mother met him at the door and said, "I have had a strange visitor since you went away."

"Who was it?" asked the father, not suspecting her meaning.

"Five years ago," his wife answered, "a friend lent me two precious jewels. Yesterday he came and asked me to return them to him. What shall I do?"

The Ministry of Comfort

"Are they his?" asked the father, not dreaming of her meaning.

"Yes, they belong to him and were only lent to me."

"If they are his, he must have them again, if he desires."

Leading her husband to the boys' room, the wife drew down the sheet, uncovering the lovely forms, white as marble. "These are my jewels," said the mother. "Five years ago God lent them to me and yesterday he came and asked them again. What shall we do?"

With a great sob, the father said, bowing his head, "The will of the Lord be done."

That is the way to find God's comfort. He has a right to take from us what he will, for all our joys and treasures belong to him and are only lent to us for a time. It was in love that he gave them to us; it is in love that he takes them away. When we cease our struggle, and in faith and confidence submit our will to his, peace flows into our heart and we are comforted.

Comfort in God's Will

Thus it is that the secret of divine comfort is found in complete, quiet, and joyful yielding to the will of God. It does not make the pain of the sorrow less; it does not give back the loved one who has been called away, but it brings the heart into full accord with God, and thus gives sweet peace. "Not my will, but thine," ends all strife and struggle, and the soul rests in undisturbed calm on the bosom of God. We do not try to understand, we ask no more questions; we simply trust and leave all in our Father's hands, and are strangely, sweetly comforted.

*"We see not, know not; all our way
Is night; with thee alone is day.
From out the torrent's troubled drift,
Above the storm our prayer we lift,
Thy will be done!"*

*"We take with solemn thankfulness
Our burden up, nor ask it less;
And count it joy that even we
May suffer, serve, or wait for thee.
Thy will be done!"*

Jesus as a Comforter

[97]

*And all through life I see a Cross,
Where sons of God yield up their breath;
There is no gain except by loss,
There is no life except by death,
There is no vision save by faith,
Nor glory but by bearing shame,
Nor justice but by taking blame.
And that Eternal Passion saith,
Be emptied of glory and right and name.*
W. SMITH.

CHAPTER EIGHTH

Jesus as a Comforter



It is interesting to study Jesus as a comforter. The comfort he gave to his friends was strong and true. We have an illustration of this in the Bethany home. The sorrow was very great. Lazarus was dead, and Jesus came, not as other friends came, merely to mourn with the sisters, but to comfort their hearts in their overwhelming grief.

First, he lifted the veil and gave them a glimpse of what lies beyond death. "Thy brother shall rise again." "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die." Thus he opened a great window into the other world. This is all plainer to us than it could be at that time to Martha

The Ministry of Comfort

and Mary ; for a little while after Jesus had spoken these words, he himself passed through death, coming again from the grave in immortal life. To those who sorrow over the departure of a Christian friend, it is a wonderful comfort to know the true teaching of the New Testament on the subject of dying. Death is not the end ; it is a door which leads into fullness of life.

Many in bereavement, though believing the doctrine of the future resurrection, fail to get present comfort from it. Jesus assured Martha that her brother should rise again. " Yes, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day," she said. The hope was too distant to give her much comfort. Her sense of present loss outweighed every other thought and feeling. She craved back again the companionship she had lost. Who that has stood by the grave of a precious friend has not experienced the same feeling of inadequateness in the consolation that comes from even the strongest belief in

Jesus as a Comforter

a far-off rising again of those who are in their graves?

The Master's reply to Martha's hungry heart-cry is very rich in its comfort. "I am the resurrection." This is one of the wonderful present tenses of Christian hope. To Martha's thought the comfort of resurrection was a dim, far-away consolation. "I am the resurrection," said Jesus. The resurrection was something present, not remote. His words embraced the whole blessed truth of immortal life. "Whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die." There is no death for those who are in Christ. The body dies, but the person lives on. The resurrection may be in the future, but there is no break whatever in the life of the believer in Christ. He is not here, our eyes see him not, our ears hear not his voice, we cannot touch him with our hands; but he still lives, thinks, feels, remembers and loves. No power in his being has been quenched by dying, no beauty dimmed, no faculty destroyed.

The Ministry of Comfort

*“ He hath solved the sacred mystery,
He hath crossed the great divide :
Within the sacred city, far
Beyond the soundless tide,
He the Master's face beholdeth
Whom unseen we all adore.
He praiseth him rejoicing
On that bright celestial shore.*

*“ Praises be to God the Father,
We all may live for aye,
Though, folded like a garment,
We lay our body by.
Eternal life we enter,
By that full and swelling tide,
Within the Golden City
Where the gates stand open wide.”*

This is a part of the comfort which Jesus gave to his friends in their bereavement. He assured them that for the believer there is no death. There remains, for those who stay behind, the pain of separation and of loneliness, but for those who have passed over we need have no fear. How does Jesus comfort the friends who are

Jesus as a Comforter

left? As we read over the story of the sorrow of this Bethany home, we find the answer to our question. You say, "He brought back their dead, thus comforting them by the literal undoing of the work of death and grief. If only he would do this now, in every case where love cries to him, that would be comfort indeed." But we must remember that the return of Lazarus to his home was only a temporary restoration. He came back to his old life of mortality, temptation, sickness, pain and death. He came back, too, only for a season. It was not a resurrection to immortal life; it was only a restoration to mortal life. He must pass again through the mystery of dying, and the second time his sisters must experience the agony of separation and loneliness. We can scarcely call this comfort—it was merely a postponement for a little while of the final separation.

But Jesus gave the sisters true comfort besides this. His own presence with them brought them comfort. They knew that he

The Ministry of Comfort

loved them. Many times before, when he had entered their home, he had brought benedictions. They had a feeling of security and peace in his presence. Even their great grief lost something of its poignancy when the light of his face fell upon them. Every strong, tender and true human love has comforting power. We can pass more easily through a sore trial if a trusted friend is beside us. The believer can endure any sorrow if Jesus is with him.

The trouble with us too often is that we do not realize the presence of our Master though he is close beside us, and miss altogether the comfort of his love. Mary stood with breaking heart by the empty grave, crying out for her Lord, who even then was close behind her, but unrecognized, "she, supposing him to be the gardener." A moment later, however, the speaking of her name in the old familiar tone of voice revealed him to her, and instantly her sorrow was turned into joy. So we stand oftentimes in the deep shadows of grief, longing for com-

Jesus as a Comforter

fort, yearning for love, while Christ is close beside us, closer than any human friend can be. If only we will dry our tears and look up into his face, believing, our soul shall be flooded with his wonderful love and our sorrow shall be swallowed up in fullness of joy. There is never the least doubt about the presence of Christ in our times of trouble ; it is only because we remain unaware of that presence that we are not comforted.

Another element of comfort for these sorrowing sisters was in the sympathy of Jesus. There was a wonderful gentleness in his manner as he received first one and then the other. Mary's grief was deeper than Martha's, and when Jesus saw her weeping he groaned in the spirit and was troubled. Then, in the shortest verse in the Bible, we have a window into the very heart of the Master, and we find there the most wonderful sympathy.

"Jesus wept." It is a great comfort in time of sorrow to have even human sympathy, to

The Ministry of Comfort

know that somebody cares, that some one feels with us. It would have added something—very much indeed—of comfort for the sisters, if John, or Peter, or James, had wept with them beside their brother's grave. But the tears of the Master meant incalculably more. They told of the holiest sympathy this world ever saw—the Son of God weeping with two sisters in a great human sorrow.

This shortest verse in the Bible was not written merely as a fragment of the narrative—it contains a revealing of the heart of Jesus for all time. Wherever a believer in Christ is sorrowing, One stands by, unseen, who shares the grief. There is immeasurable comfort in the revealing that the Son of God suffers with us in our suffering, is afflicted in all our affliction, is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. We can endure our trouble more quietly when we know this.

There is yet another feature in the manner of Christ's comforting his friends which is suggestive. Too often human sympathy is

Jesus as a Comforter

nothing but a sentiment. Our friends weep with us and then pass by on the other side. They tell us they are sorry for us, yet they do nothing to help us. But the sympathy of Jesus at Bethany was very practical. Not only did he reveal his affection for his friends in coming all the way from Peræa, to be with them in their trouble; not only did he show his love by speaking to them words of divine comfort, which have made a shining track through the world ever since; not only did he weep with them in their grief; but he also wrought the greatest of all his miracles to restore to them their heart's joy.

No doubt thousands of other friends of Jesus in bereavement have wished that he would comfort them in like manner, by giving back their beloved. Ofttimes he does what is in effect the same—in answer to the prayer of faith he spares the lives of those who are dear and who seem about to be taken away. When we pray for the recovery of our friends who are sick, our prayer, if we

The Ministry of Comfort

pray acceptably, always ends with, "Not my will, but thine, be done." Even the most passionate longing of our affection we subdue in the quiet confidence of faith. If it is not best for our loved ones, if it would not be a real blessing, if it is not God's way, then, "Thy will be done." If we pray thus we must believe that the issue, whatever it may be, is God's best for us. If our friends are taken away there is unspeakable comfort in the confidence that this was God's will for them. If they recover, it is Christ who has given them back to us, as he gave back Lazarus to Martha and Mary.

The problem of sorrow in a Christian life is a very serious one. It is important that we have a clear understanding upon the subject, in order that when it falls to our lot to suffer, we may receive blessing, and not hurt, from our experience. Every sorrow that comes into our life brings us something good from God. But we may reject the good, and if we do, we not only miss blessing, but receive harm instead. There is in Jesus

Jesus as a Comforter

Christ an infinite resource of consolation, and we have only to open our heart to receive it. Then we shall pass through sorrow sustained by divine help and love, and shall come from it enriched in character and blessed in all our life. Our griefs set lessons for us to learn, and we should diligently seek to get into our life whatever it is that our Master would teach us. In every pain is folded the seed of a blessing—we should make sure that the seed shall have an opportunity to grow, and that we may gather its fruit. In every tear a rainbow hides, but only when the sunshine falls upon the crystal drop is the splendor revealed.

*“ The dark brown mould’s upturned
By the sharp-pointed plough—
And I’ve a lesson learned.*

*“ My life is but a field,
Stretched out beneath God’s sky,
Some harvest rich to yield.*

*“ Where grows the golden grain ?
Where faith ? Where sympathy ?
In a furrow cut by pain.”*

God Himself the Best Comfort

[111]

*My God, my God, let me for once look on thee
As though naught else existed, we alone !
And as creation crumbles, my soul's spark
Expands till I can say, even from myself—
I need thee and I feel thee and I love thee.*

BROWNING.

CHAPTER NINTH

God Himself the Best Comfort



A**F**TER all, the most heart-satisfying comfort in time of trouble is found in God himself and not in anything God says or does. The Christian revelation concerning death brings comfort, when we learn to think of it as really only a process in which the life passes out of limitation, imperfection, and unattainment, emerging into rich beauty and wondrous enlargement. The truth of immortality also gives comfort, as we think of our friends entering upon an existence in blessedness which shall never have an end. There is comfort, too, in the assurance that God makes no mistakes in any of his dealings with us, and that sometime we shall see beauty and good where now we see only what seems marring and hurt. We get a measure of comfort, also, in

The Ministry of Comfort

the divine assurance that "all things work together for good to them that love God," that sorrow has a mission, that within every trial God sends a blessing.

But the comfort which means most to the heart that is bruised or broken is that which comes in the personal revealings of God and in the experiences of communion with him. One of the common failures of Christian faith is in being satisfied with God's gifts and not then going on to find God himself. God is better than his best gifts. Always it is true that "the gift without the giver is bare." Especially is this true of God and his gifts.

*" O Lord, while show'ring on my path
Thy benedictions full and free,
Whate'er thou givest, fail not thou
To give of thine own self to me.
For dear as all thy blessings are,
Thyself is more than all besides.
This ' Gift of gifts ' alone I crave,
Bestow it, Lord, whate'er betides.
Come then what may,
By night or day,*

God Himself the Best Comfort

Through sunshine or through storm,

Safe in thy care,

What need I fear ?

Naught, naught can do me harm."

We have illustrations of this in human friendships. One comes into our life who does many things for us: His words encourage, cheer, and strengthen us. His kindness adds to our pleasure. His helpfulness in many ways makes our burdens lighter. But we have never yet entered into close relations with him. There has been no occasion in our life, no time of need, to draw him near to us in those revealings in which the heart gives its best. We know him only through what he has done for us in a general way. But at length there comes an experience in which, in place of mere ministries of common kindness and helpfulness, the man gives us part of himself. We often hear it said of some friend: "I knew him for years, and he did a great deal for me ; but I never learned what nobleness there was in his nature, what treasure of

The Ministry of Comfort

good there was in his friendship, until the time of my great need a few months since, when he came into my life with all his marvellous power of personal helpfulness." No longer was it merely the things the man did that gave help,—it was now the man himself who poured out the wealth of his own life, and this was better than the best of all his gifts, and of all his services.

It is the same with God. There are many people who receive countless blessings from him and who rest on his promises, who yet do not get to know God himself in a personal way. There are many who for a time trusted Christ and found great comfort in the assurances of his love, but who at length, in some season of trial, entered into close relations of personal friendship with him. In this revealing they found treasures of love, of sympathy, and of comfort, far surpassing the best they had ever experienced before. In seeking, therefore, for help in sorrow, we should never be content with the gifts of God alone, or with the comforts

God Himself the Best Comfort

which come in his words of promise ; we should pass through all these to God himself and seek satisfaction in the infinite blessedness of his love.

It is thus that the Scriptures represent God. He is ever, with lavish hand, dispensing his mercies and benefits, but he would not have us content with these. "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." But he desires to manifest himself to his children as he does not to the world. The great Bible saints found their satisfaction and their help, not in God's gifts, but in God himself. Thus the reason for David's sublime assurance, "I shall not want," was not because he had great stores of God's gifts laid up, but because "the Lord is my shepherd." His confidence was not in the wealth which God had given him, which would cover all his wants for the future, but in God himself. In another psalm the writer's intense longing is not for any mere tokens of divine goodness, any mere bene-

The Ministry of Comfort

fits or favors, but for God himself. "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God." His thirst was unappeasable in any way but in fellowship with God. Nothing that God could have given him of the richest of his gifts, of the sweetest blessings of his hand, would have satisfied him. It was for God himself, the living God, that he thirsted. The human soul was made for God, and God alone can meet its need.

The only heart-filling comfort, therefore, in time of sorrow is that which is in God himself. It is thus, too, that our Father desires to bless us; he asks for our fullest trust, and he would reveal himself to us in tenderest personal ways. After Horace Bushnell's death there were found, dimly pencilled on a sheet of paper, laid in his Bible, these words: "My mother's loving instinct was from God, and God was in her love to me first—which love was deeper than hers and more protracted. Long years ago she vanished, but God stays by me still, embracing me in my gray hairs as tenderly

God Himself the Best Comfort

and carefully as she did in my infancy, and giving to me as my joy and the principal glory of my life, that he lets me know him, and helps me, with real confidence, to call him my Father."

That is very beautiful. Mother-love is God coming to us in an incarnation which even infancy soon learns to understand. What the mother is to her baby, God is to his child unto the end. The Scriptures strive continually to make the truth of the divine nearness real to us. We are taught to call God our Father, but there is something about the mother's relation to her child which is even closer and tenderer than a father's. So when God is seeking most earnestly to make his people understand the tenderness of his love and yearning for them, he says, "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you."

*"No word of all the Scripture
Thrills a sweeter chord than this,
Stirs a richer retrospection
Of the soul's experienced bliss,*

[119]

The Ministry of Comfort

*Than this promise, where the Spirit strengthens
weak and timid faith*

*With assurance of his comfort, 'As a mother
comforteth.' "*

Jesus went straight to his Father with all his troubles. He was not content with any logic of comfort, or any promise of divine good in the final outworking of events. He believed all this, but in his trial he wanted the blessing of his Father's presence, the warmth of the Father's embrace. Continually we find him fleeing away from the throng, from hatred and persecution, to commune with God. In the hour of his extremest sorrow, while he sought also human sympathy, it was to his Father that he turned for real comfort. "Being in an agony he prayed." Our Master's example should be our guide in every experience of grief or trial. Persuasions, arguments, and promises, however true, precious, and divine they may be, will never bring perfect quiet to a heart in its anguish. We may listen to all that earth's most skilful comforters can tell us

God Himself the Best Comfort

even of the consolations of the word of God, but our lonely spirit will be lonely still. There may be an assent to all that is said to us, and our mind may acquiesce, finding a measure of rest; yet still in the depths of our being we remain un comforted. Something is wanting. But if we creep into God's bosom, and nestle there like a tired child in the mother's arms, and let God's love enfold and embrace us, and flow into our heart, however deep the sorrow may be, we shall be comforted, satisfied. And even if every source of human joy has been cut off, and we are left utterly bereft, we can still find in God that which will suffice. Mrs. Browning has put this faith in strong way :

If I could find

*No love in all the world for comforting,
Nor any path but hollowly did ring,
Where "dust to dust" the love from life disjointed;
And if, before those sepulchres unmoving
I stood alone (as some forsaken lamb
Goes bleating up the moors in weary dearth),
Crying, "Where are ye, O my loved and loving?"—*

[121] •

The Ministry of Comfort

*I know a Voice would sound, " Daughter, I am.
Can I suffice for heaven, and not for earth ? "*

There is a blessing in true human sympathy. God sends our friends to us to bring us little measures of his own love,—little cupfuls of his grace. But he himself is the only true comforter. His love alone is great enough to fill our heart, and his hand alone has skill to bind up our wounds.

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

[123]

*Thou knowest that through our tears
Of hasty, selfish weeping
Comes surer sin, and for our petty fears
Of loss thou hast in keeping
A greater gain than all of which we dreamed ;
Thou knowest that in grasping
The bright possessions which so precious seemed
We lose them ; but if, clasping
Thy faithful hand, we tread with steadfast feet
The path of thy appointing,
There waits for us a treasury of sweet
Delight, royal anointing
With oil of gladness and of strength.*

HELEN HUNT JACKSON.

CHAPTER TENTH

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow



SORROW makes deep scars; it writes its record ineffaceably on the heart which suffers. We really never get over our great griefs; we are never altogether the same after we have passed through them as we were before.

*“ There follows a mist and a weeping rain,
And life is never the same again.”*

In one sense, sorrow never can be forgotten. The cares of a long, busy life may supervene, but the memory of the first deep sorrows in early youth lives on in perpetual freshness, as the little flowers live on beneath the cold snowdrifts, through all the long winter. The old woman of ninety remembers her grief and sense of loss seventy years ago, when God took her first baby out

The Ministry of Comfort

of her bosom. We never can actually forget our sorrows, nor is it meant that we should do so.

There is a way of remembering grief that is not wrong, that is not a mark of insubmission, and that brings rich blessing to the heart and life ; there is a humanizing and fertilizing influence in sorrow which has been rightly accepted and cheerfully borne. "The memory of things precious keepeth warm the heart that once did hold them." Recollections of losses, if sweetened by faith, hope, and love, are benedictions to the lives they overshadow. Indeed, they are poor who have never suffered, and have none of sorrow's marks upon them ; they are poorer far who, having suffered, have forgotten their sufferings and bear in their life no beautifying traces of the experiences of pain through which they have passed.

*" We turn unblessed from faces fresh with
beauty,
Unsoftened yet by fears,*

[126]

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

*To those whose lives are chased by pain and
duty*

And know the touch of tears.

*" The heart whose chords the gentle hand of sad-
ness*

Has touched in minor strain,

*Is filled with gracious joys, and knows a glad-
ness*

All others seek in vain.

" How poor a life where pathos tells no story,

Whose pathways reach no shrine,

*Which, free from suffering, misses, too, the
glory*

Of sympathies divine! "

Yet there is a way of remembering sorrow which brings no blessing, no enrichment—which does not soften the heart nor add beauty to the life. There is an insubmissive remembering which brings no joy, which keeps the heart bitter, which shuts out the sunshine, which broods over losses and trials. Only evil can result from such memory of grief. In a sense, we ought not to

The Ministry of Comfort

remember our sorrow. We certainly ought not to stop in the midst of our duties and turn aside and sit down by the graves of our losses, staying there while the tides of busy life sweep on. We should leave our griefs behind us while we go on reverently, faithfully, and quietly in our appointed way of duty.

There are many people, however, who have not learned this lesson ; they live perpetually in the shadows of the trials and losses of their bygone days. Nothing could be more unwholesome or more untrue to the spirit of Christian faith than such a course. What would be said or thought of the man who should build a house for himself out of black stones, paint all the walls black, hang black curtains over the dark-stained windows, put black carpets on every floor, festoon the chambers with funereal crape, have only sad pictures on the walls and sad books on the shelves, and should have no lovely plants growing and no sweet flowers blooming anywhere about his home ? Would

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

we not look upon such a person with pity, as one into whose soul the outer darkness had crept, eclipsing the beauty of life ?

Yet that is just the way some people do live. They build for their soul houses just like that ; they have a memory like a sieve, which lets all the bright and joyous things flow away while it retains all the sad and bitter things ; they forget the pleasant incidents and experiences, the happy hours, the days that came laden with gladness as ships come from distant shores with cargoes of spices ; but there has been no painful event in all their life whose memory is not kept ever vivid. They will talk for hours of their griefs and bereavements in the past, dwelling with a strange, morbid pleasure on each sad incident. They keep the old wounds ever unhealed in their heart ; they keep continually in sight pictures and reminiscences of all their lost joys, but none of the joys that are not lost ; they forget all their ten thousand blessings in the abiding and absorbing recollections of the two or

The Ministry of Comfort

three sorrows that have come amid the multitudinous and unremembered joys.

Tennyson makes Rizpah say, "The night has crept into my heart, and begun to darken my eyes." So it is with these people who live perpetually in the shadows and glooms of their own sorrows. The darkness has crept into their soul, and all the joyous brightness has passed out of their life, until their very vision has become so blurred that they can no more even discern the glad and lovely colors in God's universe.

Few perversions of life could be sadder than this dwelling ever in the glooms and shadows of past griefs. It is the will of God that we should turn our eyes away from our sorrows, that we should let the dead past bury its dead, while we go on with reverent earnestness to the new duties and the new joys that await us. By standing and weeping over the grave where it is buried we cannot get back what we have lost. When David's child was dead, he dried his tears and went at once to God's house and wor-

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

shipped, saying, "Now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." Instead of weeping over the grave where his dead was not, he turned his eyes forward toward the glory in which his child was waiting for him, and began with new ardor to press toward that home. He turned all the pressure of his grief into the channels of holy living.

That is the way every believer in Christ should deal with his sorrows. Weeping inconsolably beside a grave can never give back love's vanished treasure. Nor can any blessing come out of such sadness. It does not make the heart any softer; it develops no feature of Christlikeness in the life: it only embitters our present joys and stunts the growth of all beautiful things. The graces of the heart are like flower-plants; they grow well only in the sunshine.

There was a mother who lost by death a lovely daughter. For a long time the mother had been a consistent Christian, but when

The Ministry of Comfort

her child died she refused to be comforted. Her pastor and other Christian friends sought by sympathy to draw her thoughts away from her grief, yet all their effort was vain. She would look at nothing but her sorrow ; she spent a portion of nearly every day beside the grave where her dead was buried ; she would listen to no words of consolation ; she would not lift an eye toward the heaven into which her child had gone ; she went back no more to the sanctuary, where in the days of her joy she had loved to worship ; she shut out of her heart every conception of God's love and kindness and thought of him only as the powerful Being who had taken her sweet child away from her bosom. Thus dwelling in the darkness of inconsolable grief, the joy of her religion failed her. Hope's bright visions no longer cheered her, and her heart grew cold and sick with despair. She refused to quit her sorrow and to go on to new joys and toward the glory in which for Christian faith all earth's lost things wait.

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

There was another mother who lost a child—one of the rarest and sweetest children God ever sent to this earth. Never was a heart more completely crushed than was the heart of this bereft mother, yet she did not, like the other woman, sit down in the gloom and dwell there; she did not shut out the sunshine and thrust away the blessing of divine comfort. She recognized her Father's hand in the grief that had fallen so heavily upon her, and bowed in sweet acquiescence to God's will; she opened her heart to the glorious truth of the immortal life, and was comforted by the simple faith that her child was with Christ. She remembered, too, that she had duties to the living, and turned away from the grave where her little one slept in such security, requiring no more any service of earthly affection, to minister to those who still lived and needed her care and love. The result was that her life grew richer and more beautiful beneath its baptism of sore grief. She came from the deep shadow a lovelier Christian, and her

The Ministry of Comfort

home and the whole community shared the blessing which she had found in her sorrow.

It is easy to see which of these two ways of enduring sorrow is the true one. We should forget what we have suffered. The joy set before us should shine upon our grief as the sun shines through clouds, glorifying them. We should cherish sacredly and tenderly the memory of our Christian dead, but should train ourself to think of them as not in the grave, but in the home of the blessed with Christ, safely folded, waiting for us. Thus the bright and blessed hopes of immortality should fill us with tranquillity and healthy gladness as we move over the waves of trial.

“ He taketh that we may for ever keep :

All that makes life most beautiful and deep,

Our dearest hopes, by sorrow glorified,

Beneath his everlasting wings abide ;

For oh, it is our one true need to find

*Earth's vanished bliss in heavenly glory
shrined.”*

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

We should remember that the blessings which have gone away are not all that God has for us. This summer's flowers will all fade by and by, when winter's cold breath smites them—we shall not be able to find one of them in the fields or gardens during the long, cold, dreary months to come—yet we shall know all the while that God has other flowers preparing, just as fragrant and as lovely as those which have perished. Spring will come again, and under its warm breath the earth will be covered once more with floral beauty as rich as that which faded in the autumn. So the joys that have gone from our home and our heart are not the only joys; God has others in store just as rich as those we have lost, and in due time he will give us these to fill our emptied hands.

One of the most serious dangers of inconsolable sorrow is that it may lead us to neglect our duty to the living in our mourning for the dead. This we should never do. God does not desire us to give up our work be-

The Ministry of Comfort

cause our heart is broken. We may not even pause long with our sorrows ; we may not sit down beside the graves of our dead and linger there, cherishing our grief. "Let the dead bury their own dead," said the Master, to one who wished to bury his father, and then follow him ; "but go thou and publish abroad the kingdom of God." Not even the tender offices of love might detain him who was called to the higher service. The lesson is for all, and for all time. Duty ever presses, and we have scarcely laid our dead away out of our sight before its earnest calls that will not be denied are sounding in our ears, bidding us hasten to new tasks.

A distinguished general related this pathetic incident of his own experience in time of war. The general's son was a lieutenant of battery. An assault was in progress. The father was leading his division in a charge ; as he pressed on in the field, suddenly his eye was caught by the sight of a dead battery-officer lying just before him. One glance showed him it was his own son. His

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

fatherly impulse was to stop beside the loved form and give vent to his grief, but the duty of the moment demanded that he should press on in the charge; so, quickly snatching one hot kiss from the dead lips, he hastened away, leading his command in the assault.

Ordinarily the pressure is not so intense, and we can pause longer to weep and do honor to the memory of our dead. Yet in all sorrow the principle is the same. God does not desire us to waste our life in tears. We are to put our grief into new energy of service. Sorrow should make us more reverent, more earnest, more helpful to others. God's work should never be allowed to suffer while we stop to weep. The fires must still be kept burning on the altar, and the worship must go on. The work in the household, in the school, in the store, in the field, must be taken up again—the sooner, the better.

Ofttimes, indeed, the death of one in the circle is a divine voice calling the living to new

The Ministry of Comfort

duty. Thus, when a father dies, the mother is ordained to double responsibility. If there is a son of thoughtful age, his duty is not bitter grieving, but prompt taking up of the work that has fallen from the father's dead hands. When our friends are taken from us, our bereavement is a call, not to sad weeping, but to new duty.

" It bids us do the work that they laid down—

Take up the song where they broke off the strain ;

So journey till we reach the heavenly town

Where are laid up our treasures and our crown,

And our lost loved ones will be found again."

Sometimes it is care only that is laid down when death comes, as when a mother puts her baby away into the grave ; no work drops out of the little hands for the mother to take up. But may we not then say that, since God has emptied her hands of the care and duty which had filled them, he has some other work for them to do? He has set them free from their own tasks, that

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

with their trained skill and their enriched sympathies they may serve others.

In a sick-room there was a little rose-bush in a pot in a window. There was only one rose on the bush, and its face was turned full toward the light. This fact was noticed and spoken of, when one said that the rose would look no other way but toward the light. Experiments had been made with it; it had been turned away from the window, its face toward the shadow of the interior, but in a little time it would resume its old position. With wonderful persistence it refused to face the darkness, and insisted on ever looking toward the light.

The flower has its lesson for us. We should never allow ourself to face toward life's glooms; we should never sit down in the shadows of any sorrow and let the night darken over us into the gloom of despair; we should turn our face away toward the light and quicken every energy for braver duty and truer, holier service. Grief should always make us better and give us new skill

The Ministry of Comfort

and power ; it should make our heart softer, our spirit kindlier, our touch more gentle ; it should teach us its holy lessons, and we should learn them, and then go on, with sorrow's sacred ordination upon us, to new love and better service.

It is thus, too, that lonely hearts find their sweetest, richest comfort. Sitting down to brood over our sorrows, the darkness deepens about us and our little strength changes to weakness ; but if we turn away from the gloom and take up the tasks of comforting and helping others, the light will come again and we shall grow strong.

*“ When all our hopes are gone,
'Tis well our hands must still keep toiling on
For others' sake ;
For strength to bear is found in duty done,
And he is blest indeed who learns to make
The joy of others cure his own heartache.”*

Effectual Prayer

[141]

*We kneel how weak, we rise how full of power.
Why therefore should we do ourselves this wrong,
Or others—that we are not always strong,
That we are ever overborne with care,
That we should ever weak or heartless be,
Anxious or troubled, when with us is prayer,
And joy and strength and courage are with thee ?*
TRENCH.

CHAPTER ELEVENTH

Effectual Prayer



EFFECTUAL prayer is prayer that avails. A Scripture word tells us that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." In the Revised Version there is a suggestive change in the rendering, making it read, "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." So prayer works. There are those who tell us that the effect of prayer is only subjective. You are in some trouble and plead with God to take away that which is so hard to bear. The trouble is not removed, but through your supplication you are brought into the spirit of acquiescence and no longer plead for relief. Your prayer has changed nothing in your circumstances—it has only brought your mind into accord with your condition.

The Ministry of Comfort

No doubt there are many prayers whose answer seems to come in this way. David pleaded for his sick child that it might live. The child died. But when David knew it was dead, he rose from his place of penitent pleading, washed away his tears and went to God's house and worshipped. Then, returning to his home, he astonished the members of his household by the way he bore himself. His prayer had not kept his child in life, but it had brought into the king's heart such divine comfort, that his sorrow was turned into joy.

St. Paul earnestly and importunately besought the Lord to take away his "thorn in the flesh." The painful affliction was not removed, and yet there is evidence that the prayer availed in its working. There came to the apostle a word of assurance—"My grace is sufficient for thee : for my power is made perfect in weakness." Immediately afterward we hear the triumphant rejoicing, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the strength of Christ

Effectual Prayer

may rest upon me." It is evident that while the prayer was not answered in the removing of the trouble, it was answered in the coming into the apostle's heart of such an accession of divine strength that he was able now to keep his thorn and rejoice, not merely in spite of it, but even on account of it. The answer which came was indeed a greater manifestation of the power of prayer than if the trial had been wholly taken away.

In our Lord's experience in Gethsemane we have another example of a like working of prayer. The cup for whose taking away the Holy Sufferer pleaded with strong crying and tears was not withdrawn, and yet the anguish of his heart grew less and less intense until we hear the word of victory, "The cup which the Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" The supplication availed in its working, not in saving him from the bitter experiences on which he was entering, but in the giving of help which enabled him to pass through all the terrible

The Ministry of Comfort

fifteen hours that followed, without murmuring.

In all these cases there was more than a subjective influence, bringing the suppliant into a spirit of acquiescence to that which was inevitable: there was an actual divine working in the heart, imparting grace for the hour. If you have a friend carrying a heavy load, there are two ways in which you may help him—you may take part of his burden and carry it for him, or you may put into his heart cheer and courage, making him stronger, so that he can bear his burden gladly himself. The latter way of helping is quite as effective as the former, and oftentimes it is a great deal wiser. We have a very inadequate conception of prayer if we think of our Father as always, or even usually, at every cry of ours, hastening to lift away the burden we think too heavy, or to give us the pleasure or gratification we ask him to give. In very many instances such answering of prayer would be unkindness, not love. Then God answers, not by giving

Effectual Prayer

us what we cry for, but by imparting to us strength to do without it and to rejoice in his will. But the prayer as really avails in its working as if the thing we sought had been granted.

*“ Father, I do not ask
That thou wilt choose some other task
And make it mine. I pray
But this : Let every day
Be moulded still
By thine own hand ; my will
Be only thine, however deep
I have to bend thy hand to keep.
Let me not simply do, but be content,
Sure that the little crosses each are sent ;
And no mistake can ever be
With thine own hand to choose for me.”*

Then there are many prayers which bring the answer in the very form that is sought. Elijah prayed fervently that it might not rain ; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. He prayed again ; and the heaven gave rain and the earth brought forth her fruit. The Bible is full of such il-

The Ministry of Comfort

lustrations. Then every devout Christian has many examples in his own personal experience. We may say, therefore, that all true prayer is effectual, avails in its working. There are supposed prayers which get no answer—prayers, those who make them call them, perhaps wondering why nothing comes of them. The Master tells us that there are those who pray in order that men may think them devout. Their petitions ascend not upward. St. James says there are those who ask and receive not because they ask amiss, that they may spend it in their pleasures. But every true prayer is effectual, avails in its working.

What, then, is effectual prayer? It is easy to gather from the teachings of holy Scripture the answer to this question. Jesus Christ is our great Teacher, and he spoke many words about prayer. He himself was a man of prayer and knew perfectly how to pray so as to receive an answer. Perhaps most of us altogether underestimate the value of what we call the Lord's Prayer, as definite

Effectual Prayer

instruction concerning the manner in which we should pray. It was given by the Master to his disciples, in answer to their request that he would teach them to pray. We may study it, therefore, as the divine ideal of acceptable and effectual prayer.

To begin with, we must enter at the right gate, the children's gate. We must approach God, saying, "Our Father." This means that we must come to God in prayer as his children. One writes :

*" My little girl to-night with childish glee,
Although her months had numbered not two-
score,
Escaped her nurse, and at my study door,
With tiny fingers rapping, spoke to me.
Though faint her words, I heard them trem-
blingly
Fall from her lips as if the darkness bore
Its weight upon her : ' Father's child ! ' no
more
I waited for, but straightway willingly
I brought the sweet intruder into light
With happy laughter."*

The Ministry of Comfort

It is thus that we should come always to God in prayer. Whenever we do, we need not doubt that as quickly as the words, "Abba, Father," are spoken, the door will open to us.

Much instruction is found in the order of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. We are apt to think first of our own frets and worries, our own wants and desires, when we come to God, and to begin at once to pour these into his ear. But it is not thus that we are taught by our Master to do. Half of the Lord's Prayer is finished before there is a word about the earthly needs of him who is praying. We are to pray first for the hallowing of our Father's name. It is a great deal more important that we in our own life shall be interpreters of God, than that our burden shall be lifted away, our business prospered, our sorrows comforted. Next we are to pray for the coming of our Father's kingdom. This desire should be dearer to our heart than anything that concerns merely our own comfort, pleasure, or ad-

Effectual Prayer

vancement. Then we are to ask that God's will may be done in earth as it is in heaven. Of course it is the will of God as it concerns our own personal life that we have to do with immediately. We are to seek that our will may be lost in his, that the law of heaven shall become the law within the realm of our heart. This, too, must come before any mention of need of ours.

It is not a mere accident that the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are arranged as they are. The order certainly teaches us that the first things in prayer are not to be the affairs of our own personal life, but the great matters which concern the name, the kingdom, and the will of God.

" It is not prayer—

This clamor of our eager wants

That fills the air

With wearying, selfish plaints.

" It is true prayer

To seek the Giver more than gift ;

God's life to share,

And love—for this our cry to lift."

[151]

The Ministry of Comfort

It is very comforting, however, as we go on, to find that there is a place in the Master's model of prayer for the commonest wants of daily life ; that we may ask our Father even for the bread which our body needs. Only we should never forget to keep self and all personal wants and troubles in their true place, far secondary to our longing and asking for the things of God. Only that prayer is effectual in the largest measure which puts the honor of God and the interests of God and his cause above all else in its desire. Self creeps into our praying so easily and so insidiously that we need always to be on our guard lest we dishonor God. If we do, our prayer cannot avail.

Another condition of effectual prayer suggested in our Lord's model form is the spirit of forgiveness. "Forgive us as we forgive." Then so important did Jesus regard this petition that he returned to it again, saying: "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses

Effectual Prayer

neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." It is very clear that forgiveness is one of the essentials in the prayer which God will hear and answer. Supplications breathed out of a bitter, resentful heart do not find their way to heaven.

Indeed, the whole of the Lord's Prayer is a strong protest against selfishness. We are not to go to God with our own wants only. All the petitions require us to unite others with ourself. We must come to God as "Our Father," and when we ask for daily bread we must think of all who are hungry; and when we plead for the forgiveness of our sins we must ask forgiveness for others as well. Selfishness at the throne of grace vitiates the most eloquent pleading. Love is a condition of effectual prayer.

There are other elements in the prayer which avails in its working. Our Lord teaches us that we must be importunate. "Men ought always to pray and not to faint." Ofttimes the reason no answer comes to our supplication is because we lack earnestness.

The Ministry of Comfort

It is the pleading that will not give up until it gets the blessing which prevails with God. Then faith is essential. Prayer without faith has no power. Faith as a grain of mustard-seed, said the Master, will remove mountains ; that is, will overcome the greatest difficulties and obstacles. To pray in faith is to pray as seeing him who is invisible, entering into closest fellowship with him. Such believing attaches us to Christ so that his life flows through us. Nothing is impossible to him that believeth.

To the lowliest and feeblest of God's children is given the privilege of prevailing prayer. We may lay hold upon God's strength. We may make intercession for others and call down upon them the most gracious blessing. We may unlock storehouses of divine goodness and gather treasures at will. All things in earth and heaven are within the reach of him who prays.

*“ Whate'er is good to wish, ask that of heaven,
Though it be what thou canst not hope to
see ;*

Effectual Prayer

*Pray to be perfect, though material leaven
Forbid the spirit so on earth to be :
But if for any wish thou dar'st not pray,
Then pray to God to cast that wish away."*

The Effacement of Self

[157]

*“ We mar our work for God by noise and bustle ;
Can we not do our part, and not be heard ?
Why should we care that men should see us
With our tools, and praise the skill with which we use
them ? ”*

CHAPTER TWELFTH

The Effacement of Self



ONE of the most difficult lessons to learn is self-effacement. Self always dies hard. It seems to us that we have a right to put our name on every piece of work we do, and to get full honor for it. We like people to know of the good and virtuous things we do, of the kindnesses we show, of our benevolences, our self-sacrifices, our heroism and services.

Yet we all know that this is not the attitude toward ourself and our own work which our Lord approves. Jesus expressly bids his followers to take heed that they do not their righteousness before men to be seen of them. The last phrase is the emphatic one—"to be seen of men." We must often do our righteousness before men; indeed, we are commanded to let our light shine before

The Ministry of Comfort

men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father. It is not doing worthy things before men that is condemned, but doing them in order to be seen of men. We are not to live for the eye of men and for human praise, but for the eye of God and for his approval.

Jesus proceeded in the same connection to say that when we do alms we should not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing, that our alms may be in secret. Then God alone can recompense us—and he will. Regarding prayer, too, the same counsel is given. There were those who made a show of their private devotions, performing them in some conspicuous place, in order that they might be seen of men, that men might regard them very devout. "They have their reward," said Jesus. They get what they seek—they are seen of men, but they are not heard of God. Jesus exhorts that, avoiding this display of devoutness to attract men's attention, his disciples should enter into their inner chamber when they pray,

The Effacement of Self

and should shut their door and pray to the Father, who seeth in secret. We are not to infer from this that no prayer ever should be made in public—public prayer is an important duty; the teaching is that all acts of devotion should be for the eye of God alone. We should never do anything in order to get human notice and commendation.

We may apply this teaching to all life. We are to live only to please God. Jesus said of himself—and his mode of life was a pattern for us—"I do always those things that please my Father." He never wrought for human eye, but always for the divine approval. It mattered not to him, therefore, whether any but God knew what he was doing. The prophet said of him, "He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street," and his life fulfilled this foretelling. If we can learn this lesson of living and working for God's eye only, it will give us a wonderful sense of freedom, will exalt our ideals of life and duty, and

The Ministry of Comfort

will inspire us always to the best that we can do.

There is another phase of the same lesson. Not only should we do all our work for the divine approval, but we should not be careful to get our own name on what we do. If it is done solely for the honor of Christ, why should we be solicitous to have everybody know our part in it? Should it not be honor enough to have Christ accept our work and use it?

John the Baptist, in his life and ministry, illustrated the grace of self-effacement as few other men have done. When he first began to preach, great throngs flocked about him. When Jesus came and began to preach, the crowds melted away from John and went after the new preacher. It was not easy for John to see this and not be disturbed by it. But it caused him no bitter pang. He rejoiced in seeing Jesus thus honored, though at the cost of his own fame. "He must increase, but I must decrease," was his answer, when his disciples grew en-

The Effacement of Self

vious of the Galilæan Rabbi. He understood that the highest and noblest use to which his life could be put was to add to the honor of his Master. He was glad to be unnoted, to have his own name extinguished, that the glory of Christ might shine the more brightly.

The same renunciation of self should characterize all who follow Christ. They should seek only to get recognition for him, willing themselves to be unrecognized and unhonored. Yet not always are the Master's friends content to be nothing that the praise may be given to Christ. Too often do they insist upon having their own name written in bold letters on their work. It would be the mark of a higher degree in spiritual attainment if we were willing to be anonymous in every service for Christ. Even in the things men do which are necessarily conspicuous, in which it is impossible to hide the hand that works, there should always be in the heart the paramount desire to please and honor Christ. If in what they

The Ministry of Comfort

do, however beautiful and worthy it may be in itself, the wish is "to be seen of men," the beauty is blotted, and the worthiness vitiated. Only what we do for the honor of Christ is really gold and silver and precious stones in the building; all the rest is but wood, hay, and stubble, which cannot abide.

Another practical application of this lesson is to the way we do the common deeds of love in our every-day life. We should seek to obliterate self altogether and every thought of what is to come to us from the thing we do. The faintest trace of a mercenary spirit in any service we may be rendering to another, leaves a blot upon the deed and spoils its beauty. The true reward of kindness or self-denial is that which comes from the act itself, the joy of helping another, of relieving distress, of making the heart a little braver and stronger for the toil or struggle which we cannot make easier. Mrs. Browning puts it well in the familiar lines :

The Effacement of Self

*The sweetest lives are those to duty wed,
Whose deeds, both great and small,
Are close-knit strands of an unbroken thread
Where love ennobles all.*

*The world may sound no trumpets, ring no bells,
The Book of Life the shining record tells.*

*Thy love shall chant its own beatitudes
After its own life-working. A child's kiss
Set on thy singing lips shall make thee glad ;
A poor man served by thee shall make thee rich ;
A sick man helped by thee shall make thee strong ;
Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense
Of service which thou renderest.*

Among the many beautiful stories of Queen Victoria this was told just after she died. While visiting the wounded soldiers who had been brought back from South Africa, she was greatly distressed by the appearance of one poor man who had been terribly injured. "Is there nothing," said the Queen, "that I can do for you?" The soldier replied, "Nothing, your Majesty, unless you would thank my nurse for her kindness to me." The Queen turned to the nurse and

The Ministry of Comfort

said, with tears in her eyes, "I do thank you with all my heart for your kindness to this poor wounded son of mine." There was something exquisitely beautiful in the soldier's utter self-forgetfulness, which led him to think not of anything from his Queen for himself, but of pleasure and honor to her who was serving him so faithfully.

Are we willing to go about ministering blessing to others and then forget what we have done? Are we willing to be as the dew which loses itself as it sinks away into the bosom of the rose only to be remembered in the added sweetness of the flower? Are we willing to do deeds of love, and then keep absolutely quiet about what we have done? Is there not among us too much of the spirit which our Lord so severely condemned — sounding a trumpet before us when we are going out to do some deed of charity, some act of kindness? We all are quite ready to note the blemish in others when they talk about their own piety and devoutness, or about their good deeds and

The Effacement of Self

their acts of self-denial and helpfulness. We say the desire to have people know how holy he is and how useful, dims the lustre of a man's graces. Moses wist not that his face shone, and the truest and divinest godliness is always unaware of its shining. We say this when we are speaking of others' self-praise, but are we different from them? Do we do our deed of love and straightway hide the knowledge of it away in our heart? Henry Drummond puts the lesson well in these short sentences: "Put a seal upon your lips and forget what you have done. After you have been kind, after love has stolen forth into the world and done its beautiful work, go back into the shade again and say nothing about it. Love hides even from itself." We could not do better than write out these words and place them where we must see them every day, and then make them the rule of our life, until we have indeed learned to seal our lips and be silent about ourself and what we have done; to steal forth quietly on errands of

The Ministry of Comfort

love, do our errands, then hurry back into the quiet whence we set out, and to hide even from ourself the things we have done to help others, never thinking of them again. Talking about these gentle and sacred ministries is like handling lovely flowers—it spoils their beauty.

Tell no one of the kindness you have been doing. Do not keep a diary, writing therein a minute record of your charities, your words and deeds of love. Let them be forgotten on the earth, even by yourself. There is a place where they all will be written down. That is record enough.

One Day

[169]

*My heart gives thanks for yonder hill,
That makes this valley safe and still ;
That shuts from sight my onward way
And sets a limit to my day ;
That keeps my thoughts, so tired and weak,
From seeking what they should not seek.
On that fair bound across the west
My eyes find pasturage and rest,
And of its dewy stillness drink,
As do the stars upon its brink ;
It shields me from the days to come,
And makes the present hour my home.*

LOUISA BUSHNELL.

CHAPTER THIRTEENTH

One Day



TIME is given to us in days. It was so at the beginning. We need not puzzle or perplex ourselves trying to understand just what the day was in which God wrought in creating the universe. We may leave this matter to the scientific men and the theologians who are quite willing to give us their thoughts or guesses on the subject. But it is interesting to know that each day had its particular apportionment in the stupendous work. At the end of the creative periods we read, "There was evening and there was morning, one day." So it has been ever since. Time is measured to us not by years, but by days. Each day has its own particular section of duty, something that belongs, that is to be done, in between sunrise and sunset, that cannot be

The Ministry of Comfort

done at all if not done in its own hours. "There was evening and there was morning, one day, a second day, a third day."

This breaking up of time into little daily portions means a great deal more than we are wont to think. For one thing, it illustrates the gentleness and goodness of God. It would have made life intolerably burdensome if a year instead of a day had been the unit in the division of time. It would have been hard to carry a heavy load, or to endure a great sorrow, or to keep on at a hard duty, for such a long stretch of time. How dreary our common task-work would be if there were no breaks in it, if we had to hold our hands to the plough or our foot on the treadle for a whole year! We never could go on with our struggles, our toils, our suffering, if night did not mercifully settle down at such brief intervals with its darkness, bidding us rest and renew our strength.

We do not understand what a blessing there is for us in the shortness of our days. If they were even twice as long as they are,

One Day

life would be intolerable. Many a time when the sun goes down we feel that we could scarcely have gone another step. We should have fainted in failure and defeat if the summons to rest had not come just when it did.

Night with its darkness seems to be a blot on the whiteness of day. It seems to fall across our path as an interruption to our activity, compelling us to lay down our work when we are in the very midst of it, leaving it only half-done. It seems to be a waster of precious time, eating up half the hours. How much more we could accomplish, we sometimes say, if the sun did not go down, if we could go on without pause!

Night throws its heavy veil over the lovely things of this world, hiding them from our view. Yet its deep shadow is no stain on the splendor of the day. It is no thief of time, no waster of golden hours, no obscurer of beauty. It reveals as much loveliness as it hides, for no sooner is the sun set, leaving earth's splendor of landscape, garden, and

The Ministry of Comfort

forest swallowed up in gloom, than there bursts upon our vision the other splendor of the sky filled with glorious stars. A noble sonnet by Blanco White describes the experience of our first parent as he watched the sinking of the sun to his setting at the close of the first day.

*Did he not tremble for this lovely frame—
This glorious canopy of light and blue ?
Yet, 'neath a curtain of translucent dew,
Bathed in the rays of the great setting flame,
Hesperus, with the host of heaven, came,
And lo ! creation widened in man's view.
Who could have thought such darkness lay con-
cealed
Within thy beams, O sun ! or who could find,
Whilst fly and leaf and insect stood revealed,
That to such countless orbs thou mad'st us blind !*

When the privilege of work is interrupted by the coming of the night, God has another blessing ready for us—the blessing of sleep. One may figure out with a fair show of mathematical certainty that it is a waste of

One Day

time to spend one-third of each twenty-four hours in the unconsciousness and idleness of sleep. But these hours which seem to be lost, in which we appear to be doing nothing, bring us new gifts from God. An old version renders the Psalm verse thus, "He giveth his beloved in sleep." We lie down with our vitality exhausted in the toils, tasks, and struggles of the day. We could not have gone another hour. Then, while we sleep, God comes to us in the silence and refills the emptied fountains. It is really a new creation that takes place in us while we sleep, a nightly miracle of renewal and restoration. We die, as it were, and are made to live again.

So night, which seems to us a waste of precious hours, is a time of God's working in us. He draws the veil of darkness that none may see him when he visits us in loving ministry. He folds us in the unconsciousness of sleep that we ourselves may not know when he comes or how he gives to us the marvellous blessings. When the morning

The Ministry of Comfort

returns and we awake strong and filled with new life, we learn that God has visited us though we knew it not.

Thus we get hints of the graciousness of the divine thoughtfulness in giving us time in periods of little days which we can easily get through with, and not in great years in which we would faint and fall by the way.

It makes it possible for us to go on through all the long years and not be overwrought, for we never have given to us at any one time more than what we can do between the morning and the evening. George Klinge has put this in striking form :

*God broke our years to hours and days,
That hour by hour, and day by day,
Just going on a little way,
We might be able all along to keep quite strong.
Should all the weight of life
Be laid across our shoulders, and the future rife
With woe and struggle, meet us face to face
At just one place,
We could not go ;
Our feet would stop ; and so*

One Day

*God lays a little on us every day ;
And never, I believe, on all the way
Will burdens bear so deep,
Or pathways lie so threatening and so steep,
But we can go, if by God's power
We only bear the burden of the hour.*

Not only are the days short, so that we can go on to eventide with our work or our burden, but they are separated as by an impassable wall, so that there may be no overflowing of one day's care or responsibility into the field of another. Night drops down its dark curtain between the days, so that we cannot see to-day anything that is in to-morrow. Our Lord taught us that we sin if we let ourselves try to carry the load of any but this one little day. "Be not anxious for the morrow," he said; "for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." If we allow ourselves to borrow anxiety from to-morrow we shall find that we have a greater load than we can carry. There is just enough for our full measure of strength in the duty and the

The Ministry of Comfort

responsibility of the one day. If then we add to this the burden also of to-morrow, our strength will fail. We do great wrong to ourselves, therefore, when we go out of to-day to get burdens which do not belong to us.

*“ I thank thee, Lord, that thou dost lay
These near horizons on my way.
If I could all my journey see,
There were no charm of mystery,
No veiled grief, no changes sweet,
No restful sense of tasks complete.
I thank thee for the hills, the night,
For every barrier to my sight ;
For every turn that blinds my eyes
To coming pain or glad surprise ;
For every bound thou settest nigh,
To make me look more near, more high ;
For mysteries too great to know ;
For everything thou dost not show.
Upon thy limits rests my heart ;
Its safe Horizon, Lord, thou art ! ”*

The only true way to live, therefore, is one day at a time. This means that we should give all our strength to the work of the

One Day

present day, that we should finish each day's tasks by nightfall, leaving nothing undone at setting of the sun that we ought to have done that day. Then, when a new morning dawns, we should accept its duties, the bit of God's will it unrolls for us, and do everything well that is given us to do. We may be assured, too, that there is something for each moment, and that if we waste any portion of our day we shall not make it complete. We should bring all the energy and all the skill of mind, heart, and hand to our duty as we take it up, and do nothing carelessly or negligently. Then we can lay our day back into God's hand at nightfall, with confidence, saying, "Father, I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do to-day."

Robert Falconer's creed gathers into its four articles a very clear summary of our Lord's teaching concerning the whole duty of man : " First, That a man's business is to do the will of God. Second, That God takes upon himself the care of the man. Third,

The Ministry of Comfort

Therefore, that a man must never be afraid of anything. Fourth, And so be left free to love God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself."

So we should never be anxious about either yesterday or to-morrow. Yesterday is gone, and we can never get it back to change anything in it. It is idle, therefore, to waste a moment of time or a particle of strength fretting over it. To-morrow is not yet ours, and we should not touch its life until it becomes our to-day. God means us to put our undivided energy into the doing of the present day's work. If we do this, we shall have quite enough to keep our heart and our hands full from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same.

In this way, too, doing faithfully the work of this day, we shall best prepare for to-morrow. One day's duty slighted or neglected prepares confusion or overburdening for the next. The days are all woven together in God's plan, each one following the one before, and fitting into the one coming

One Day

after it. Each takes up the work which the day before brought to its feet, and carries it forward to deliver it to the one which waits. A marred or empty day anywhere spoils the web, losing its thread.

*“ Not merely what we are,
But what we were and what we are to be,
Make up our life—the far days each a star,
The near days nebulae.*

.
*“ But each day is a link
Of days that pass, and never pass away ;
For memory and hope—to live, to think.”*

If we learn well this lesson of living just one day at a time, without anxiety for either yesterday or to-morrow, we shall have found one of the greatest secrets of Christian peace. That is the way God teaches us to live. That is the lesson both of the Bible and of nature. If we learn it it will cure us of all anxiety, it will save us from all feverish haste, it will enable us to live sweetly in any experience.

The Ministry of Comfort

- “ One day at a time! That’s all it can be :
No faster than that is the hardest fate ;
And days have their limits, however we
Begin them too early and stretch them late.*
- “ One day at a time! A burden too great
To be borne for two can be borne for one ;
Who knows what will enter to-morrow’s gate?
While yet we are speaking all may be done.*
- “ One day at a time—but a single day,
Whatever it’s load, whatever its length ;
And there’s a bit of precious Scripture to say
That according to each shall be our strength.”*

The Culture of the Spirit

[183]

*For myself alone I doubt ;
All is well, I know without ;
I alone the beauty mar,
I alone the music jar.
Yet, with hands by evil stained,
And an ear by discord pained,
I am groping for the keys
Of the heavenly harmonies.*

WHITTIER.

CHAPTER FOURTEENTH

The Culture of the Spirit



IN the true life, beauty is as important as strength. Strength at its best is always beautiful, but sometimes loveliness is sacrificed to vigor. In these days we hear much about the strenuous life, but the phrase has in it a suggestion of abundant vitality, of an unwearied energy, that may lack the enrichment and refinement which are the ripe fruit of true self-culture. At least, the emphasis is put upon the strenuousness, as if that were the dominant quality of the life.

On every hand, and enforced by the holiest sanctions, we are urged to make the most of our life and our opportunities. Again and again we hear in the Bible the ringing exhortation, "Be strong." More than one of our Lord's parables teaches our responsibility

The Ministry of Comfort

for the development of every power of our being to its fullest possibilities, and the using of every particle of energy in our nature in worthy service. One who does not do one's best falls under a ban. St. Paul, himself a magnificent type of the utmost strenuousness in living, calls for the most vigorous Christian life in the followers of the Master. He exhorts a young man to stir up the gift that is in him, probably seeing plainly that his friend was not doing his best, making the most of his life. He uses the figure of the runner in the race, bending every energy to reach the goal and win the prize, to incite every Christian to the most eager stretching toward the highest possibilities in spiritual attainment. He employs the illustration of the soldier as the type of true manhood, and bids his friends quit themselves like men, and to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. If we would realize the scriptural thought of the worthiest life, we must call out all the latent power that is in us and develop it to its highest degree of vitality.

The Culture of the Spirit

The lesson is strongly emphasized in the spirit of the days in which we are living. Every man is now called to do his best. No patience is exercised toward one who takes life easily. The man who works leisurely is left behind in the race. Literature is full of homilies on "success" and how to attain it. The men who are held up as examples to youth are those who began with nothing and by their own energy have risen to wealth or power. Strenuousness is everywhere glorified.

But not so universally nor so urgently is the duty of self-culture taught. Yet the lesson is equally important. There are many people who are giants in strength, but are lacking in the qualities of refinement which belong to the truest character. Strength is sometimes rude. Too often it is ungentle and thoughtless. It is aggressive and relentless, but stops not to look what fair flowers it is trampling under its feet.

It is well that we pause, therefore, in the pressure under which we are striving, to

The Ministry of Comfort

give thought to self-culture. The beginning of it lies in self-mastery. There are many men who have prodigious strength, and yet never have achieved self-control. We are truly strong, not merely when we have great forces of energy, but when we can command these forces at will. "He that ruleth his own spirit is greater than he that taketh a city." There is much of bad temper even among Christian people. Many are quick to speak, flying into a passion at the slightest provocation. They are sensitive even to the point of touchiness. They have capacity for strenuous life, but they are weak, driven of every wind and tossed, because their bark is without a helm. Under momentary impulses they do rash and foolish things which grieve their friends and do irreparable harm to their own life.

Few faults mar the beauty and the influence of a life more than the habit of ill-temper. One writes: "Losing the temper takes all the sweet, pure feeling out of life. You may get up in the morning with a clean heart,

The Culture of the Spirit

full of song, and start out as happy as a bird; and the moment you are crossed and you give way to your temper, the clean feeling vanishes and a load as heavy as lead is rolled upon your heart, and you go through the rest of the day feeling like a culprit, unless you promptly confess your fault and seek forgiveness of God and man."

We all admire a self-controlled person, one who is not irritated by irritating experiences, who is not disturbed in his equanimity by confusing or annoying circumstances, who is not vexed nor fretted by life's trials. This power of self-control is a higher mark of royalty than crown or sceptre. Self-culture includes self-mastery. It holds the reins of the life and restrains every rude impulse, every wayward desire. It sits on the throne, and every feeling, every passion, every energy, every emotion, is ruled by it.

The thought of culture always implies also refinement, grace of spirit, beauty of soul. That is, it is gentle as well as strong. It is more than knowledge, for one may know all

The Ministry of Comfort

the world's literature and yet lack this culture. In the ordinary sense, it is the final result of true education and study. One may be very learned, and yet lack the refinement of spirit which the thought of culture suggests. Self-culture is defined as what a man does upon himself: mending his defects, correcting his mistakes, chastening his faults, tempering his passions.

Always, love must be the ruling element in Christian culture. Fine manners may be the result of the study of the rules of etiquette, but no manners are really beautiful which are not the fruit of love in the heart. Gentleness belongs to culture, and gentleness is love in exercise. The word "gentleman" as a designation of one who has reached the finest things in manliness is very suggestive. No man, however masterly his strength, however wide his knowledge, however high his rank, however splendid his achievements, is manly in the fullest sense if he be not gentle—a gentleman.

In a summary of the things which make up

[' 190]

The Culture of the Spirit

a worthy Christian character, St. Paul puts first whatsoever things are true, honorable, just, and pure, and then, whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. The sterner qualities alone do not make the character complete while loveliness is lacking. The word "grace" which is used to describe the divine favor and is applied to all spiritual work wrought in a life, means primarily that which is pleasing and agreeable, beauty of form, manner, or movement. As applied to the disposition, it means sweetness, amiability, courtesy. To grow in grace is not only to become more devout, obedient, and holy, but also to grow more loving—more gentle, kindly, thoughtful, patient, unselfish.

It is evident, therefore, that we should pay heed to the culture of our spirit, as well as to the development of our energies. Success which takes account only of one's worldly life and its affairs, and does not also consider one's attainments in character, in heart qualities, in the spiritual elements of one's

The Ministry of Comfort

being, will not stand the test of life's most serious ordeals. It is possible to be growing in the elements which make for power among men and increasing in activities which do good in a community, and yet not to be advancing in grace and beauty of life. Heart culture is essential. It is not in what we have or what we do, but in what we are, that the true measure of our character must be taken. We are growing only when our mind is becoming more open to the truth, when our heart is becoming more gentle, when the peace of God is possessing us more and more fully, and when we are giving our life more and more unreservedly and sweetly to the service of others in Christ's name.

It need not be said that all spiritual work in us is wrought by the divine Spirit. Yet we are in danger of missing the real meaning of this truth by putting God far from us instead of understanding that he is with us continually, closer than closest human friend. We never can by any mere self-disci-

The Culture of the Spirit

pline achieve in ourself the beauty we yearn for, nor attain the gentleness, the peace, the grace, which belong to true spiritual culture; but God is ready to work in us and with us if we will admit him to our life, and then our striving to grow into loveliness will not be in vain.

No influence works upon life so deeply, so thoroughly, with such power for the cleansing and enriching of the nature, as personal friendship with Christ. If we live with him in close daily companionship, walking with him, talking with him, dwelling in the very atmosphere of his presence, continually, our rudeness will be imperceptibly transformed into spiritual refinement and our earthliness into heavenliness. One tells of buying a common clay jar for a few cents, and then filling it with some rare and costly perfume. At length the jar became saturated in all its substance with the rich fragrance. So it is with the commonest life, when it is filled with Christ. The sweetness of his love and the holiness of his spirit permeate it, until

The Ministry of Comfort

disposition, thought, feeling, and affection become like Christ indeed, and the life is the partaker of the divine nature.

The Secret of Servicing

[195]

*“ Rouse to some work of high and holy love,
And thou an angel's happiness shalt know,
Shalt bless the earth ; while in the world above;
The good begun by thee shall onward flow
In many a branching stream, and wider grow ;
The seed that in these few and fleeting hours
Thy hands unsparing and unwearied sow,
Shall deck thy grave with amaranthine flowers,
And yield thee fruits divine in heaven's imperial bowers.”*

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH

The Secret of Serving



BEFORE we can do people good we must love them. There is no other secret of real helpfulness. The weakness of many schemes for the relief of distress and the amelioration of misery is that they are only systems, working in mechanical lines, but without a heart of love to inspire them. A paid agent may dispense charity very justly and generously, and what he gives may serve its purpose well enough—fuel for the fire in winter, bread for hunger, and clothes to cover the shivering poor. But how much would be added to the value of these gifts if love dispensed them, if a real heart-beat of human sympathy throbbed and thrilled in each bit of helpfulness. There are deeper wants than those of the body. There is a higher help than that

The Ministry of Comfort

which satisfies only physical needs. When with the gift of bread, love comes to the door, when it is a brother's hand that brings the welcome loaf, two hungers are fed, the hunger of the body and the hunger of the heart.

But not in charity only is it the element of love that imparts the best blessing, multiplying many times the value of the material gifts disbursed. In all lines of life it is love that is the true secret of power. We know the difference in the serving that is merely professional, however skilful it may be, and the serving that love inspires. It is interesting to remember that the one question which the Master asked his disciple, whom he was about to restore to his lost place as an apostle, was, "Lovest thou me?" Not until Peter had answered this question affirmatively could the care of souls be put into his hands. The essential qualification, therefore, for being a pastor, a teacher, or a spiritual helper of other lives, is love. It is, first of all, love for Christ. One who does not love

The Secret of Serving

him more than all other things and all other beings is not truly his disciple, and certainly is not fitted for shepherd work among Christ's sheep and lambs. But if there be true love for Christ there will also be love for our brothers. No one is fit to do Christ's work for men who does not love men.

Love is the essential thing in preparing one for being a helper of others. It is not enough for the preacher to declare to all men that God loves them—the preacher must love them too if he would make them believe in the divine love for them. The true evangel is the love of God interpreted in a human life. No other will win men's confidence and faith. We must show the tenderness of God in our tenderness. We must reveal the compassion of God in our compassion. God so loved that he gave—we must so love as to give.

The only efficient preaching of the cross is when the cross is in the preacher's life. The man must love men, and must love them enough to give himself for them, otherwise

The Ministry of Comfort

his preaching will have but little power. It was this that gave Jesus Christ such influence over men and drew the people to him in such throngs. He told them of the love of God, but they also saw that love, and realized its compassion in his own life. He loved, too. He wrought miracles, and did many gracious things ; but that which made all his ministry so welcome and so full of helpfulness was that he loved the people he helped or comforted. That is the meaning of the Incarnation—it was God interpreted in a human life, and, since God is love, it was love that was thus revealed and interpreted. Just in the measure, therefore, that we love others, are we ready to help them in any true way. Nothing but love will do men good. Power has its ways of helping. Law may protect. Money will buy bread and build homes. But for the helpfulness which means the most in human lives, nothing but love prepares us. Even the most lavish and the most opportune gifts, if love be not in them, lack that which chiefly gives them

The Secret of Serving

their value. It is not the man whose service of others costs the most in money value who is the greatest benefactor, but the man who gives the most of human compassion, the most of himself, with his gifts.

“The man most man, with tenderest human hands,

Works best for man,—as God in Nazareth.”

People sneered at St. Theresa when once she set out with only three half-pence to found a hospital. What would three half-pence do toward such a work? But they forgot that St. Theresa had first given herself. He who puts his heart, his life, into his service, has given that which will multiply his gifts a thousand times.

It is worth our while to think of love's true attitude to others. The spirit of serving is different altogether from the spirit in which men usually think of others. The world's attitude is that of self-interest. Men want to be served, not to serve. They look at other men, not with the desire to be helpful to them, to

The Ministry of Comfort

do them good, to give them pleasure, but rather with the wish to be served in some way by them, to have their own personal interests advanced through their association with them. Even friendship too often has this selfish basis—the gain there will be in it. But the love which Christ came to teach us looks at others in an altogether different way. Instead of asking how they can be made profitable to us, it teaches us to ask in what way we may be helpful to them. Jesus put it in a sentence when he said of himself, “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.” A study of his life in this regard will make his meaning plain. He never demanded attention. Conscious of his divine glory, he never exacted reverence. He used all his authority and power, not to humble men beneath him, nor to compel them to help him, but in serving them and doing them good. The picture of Jesus with the basin and the towel is one of the truest representations of his whole life. He lived to serve.

The Secret of Serving

On one occasion Jesus taught his disciples the lesson with special clearness, setting in contrast the world's way and his own: "Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister; and whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all." Thus he taught that the noblest, the divinest, life is that which seeks to serve. He is greatest who ministers.

This does not mean that the servant in a house is greater than his master, or his work more pleasing to God—the master may serve more truly than the servant. It is not by the position, but by the spirit, that the rank is determined. The law of love requires us to look upon everyone with a desire for his good and with a readiness to give him help, to do him service. As St. Paul puts it, we are debtor to every man, owing to each a debt of love and service. If this mind that

The Ministry of Comfort

- was in Christ Jesus be in us, it will inspire in our heart kindly thought of everyone. We will think not so much of having friends as of being a friend, of receiving, as of giving, of being helped, as of helping. We will not press our service officiously on anyone—this is an error always to be avoided. We will not overhelp—nothing could be more unwise or unkind. Nor will this spirit make us obsequious or patronizing in our relations to others. On the other hand, nothing is more manly than the love which our Lord enjoined upon his followers as the very badge of discipleship, and whose portrait St. Paul painted so inimitably. It is when we have this spirit of service that we are prepared to be truly helpful to others. Then we will look upon everyone we meet as our brother. Even the most debased will appear to us as still having in him possibilities of something noble and beautiful.

“ *The hungry beggar boy . . .*

Contains, himself, both flowers and firmaments,

[204]

The Secret of Serving

*And surging seas and aspectable stars,
And all that we would push him out of sight
In order to see nearer. Let us pray
God's grace to keep God's image in repute."*

When we have faith to see glints and gleams of God's image in every man, whatever his present character or worth, we shall find abundant inspiration for service. It was this that drew Jesus to his wondrous ministry among the lost—he saw the possible glory in them and knew they could be saved to eternal blessedness. The divinest work in the world is that which finds the stars in the darkened life, and helps the life to find itself. But in both low and high there is need always for love's serving. We are debtors to everyone—to every man we owe love's debt; and if we are truly following our Master we must love all, and be ready ever to serve all in love's best way.

An interesting story is told of a good woman who opened a home for children for whom no other one seemed to care. Among those received into her home was a boy of three

The Ministry of Comfort

years, whose condition was pitiable indeed. His skin was blotched and his disposition was fretful and unhappy. Try as she would the woman could not love him. Something in him repelled her. She was outwardly kind to him, but it was always an effort to show him any tenderness.

One day she sat on the veranda of her house with this boy on her knee. She dropped asleep and dreamed that she saw herself in the child's place, the Master bending over her. She heard him say, "If I can bear with you, who are so full of fault and sin, can you not, for my sake, love this poor, innocent child, who is suffering, not for his own sin, but through the sin of his parents?"

The woman awoke with a sudden start and looked into the face of the boy. Penitent because of her past unkind feeling, and with a new compassion for him in her heart, she bent down and kissed him as tenderly as ever she had kissed babe of her own. The boy gave her a smile so sweet that she had never seen one like it before. From that

The Secret of Serving

moment a change came over him. The new affection in the woman's heart transformed his peevish, fretful disposition into gentleness. She loved him now, and her serving was glad-hearted and Christ-like, no more perfunctory.

There is no other secret of the best and truest serving. We must love those we would help. Service without love counts for nothing. We can love even the unloveliest when we learn to see in them the possibilities of divine beauty. But only the love of Christ in us will prepare us for such serving.

The Habit of Happiness

[209]

*If I have faltered more or less
In my great task of happiness ;
If I have moved among my race
And shown no glorious morning face ;
If beams from happy human eyes
Have moved me not ; if morning skies,
Books, and my food, and summer rain
Knocked on my sullen heart in vain—
Lord, thy most pointed pleasure take,
And stab my spirit broad awake.*

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

CHAPTER SIXTEENTH

The Habit of Happiness



OUR habits make us. Like wheels running on the road, they wear the tracks or ruts in which our life moves. Our character is the result of our habits.

We do the same thing over and over a thousand times, and by and by it is part of ourself.

*“ Sow a thought and reap an act ;
Sow an act and reap a habit ;
Sow a habit and reap a character.”*

For example, one is impatient to-day in some matter. To-morrow there is another trial and the impatience is repeated. Thus, on and on, from day to day, with the same result. It begins to be easier to give way to the temptation than to resist it. Again and again the stress is felt and yielded to,

The Ministry of Comfort

and at length we begin to say of the person that he has grown very impatient. That is, he has given way so often to his feelings that impatience has become a habit. If he had resisted the first temptation, restraining himself and keeping himself quiet and sweet in the trial, and then the second, the third, the fourth, the tenth time, had done the same, and had continued to be patient thereafter, whatever the pressure of suffering or irritation, we would have said that he was a patient man. That is, he would have had formed in him at last the fixed habit of patience. As we say again, it would have become "second nature" with him to hold his imperious feelings in check, however he might have been tried. Patience would then have become part of his character.

In like manner all the qualities which make up the disposition are the result of habit. The habit of truthfulness, never deviating in the smallest way from what is absolutely true, yields at length truth in the

The Habit of Happiness

character. The habit of honesty, insisted upon in all dealings and transactions, fashions the feature of honesty in the life and fixes it there with rock-like firmness.

It is proper, therefore, and no misuse of words, to speak of the habit of happiness. No doubt there is a difference in the original dispositions of people in the quality of cheerfulness or gloom that naturally belongs to them. Some persons are born with a sunny spirit, others with an inclination to sadness. The difference shows itself even in infancy and early childhood. No doubt, too, there is a difference in the influences which affect dispositions in the first months and years of life. Some mothers make an atmosphere of joy for their children to grow up in, while others fill their home with complaining, fretfulness, and discontent. Young lives cannot but take something of the tone of the home atmosphere into the disposition with which they pass out of childhood.

Yet, in spite of all that heredity and early

The Ministry of Comfort

education and influence do, each one is responsible for the making of his own character. The most deep-seated tendency to sadness can be overcome and replaced by happy cheerfulness. The gospel of Christ comes to us and tells us that we must be born again, born anew, born from above, born of God, our very nature recreated. Then divine grace assures us that it is not impossible even for the most unholy life to be transformed into holiness. The being that is saturated with sin can be made whiter than snow. The wolf can be changed into lamb-like gentleness. The fiercest disposition can be trained to meekness. There is no nature, therefore, however unhappy it may be because of its original quality or its early training, which cannot, through God's help, learn the lesson of happiness.

The way to do this is to begin at once to restrain the tendency to gloomy feeling and to master it. We should check the first shadow of inclination to discouragement.

The Habit of Happiness

We should choke back the word of discontent or complaining that is trembling on our tongue, and speak instead a word of cheer. We should set ourself the task of keeping sweet and sunny.

It will make this easier for us if we think of our task as being only for one day at a time. It should not be impossible for us even if we have things disheartening or painful to endure to keep happy one day. Anybody should be able to sing songs of gladness through the hours of a single short day. At the time of evening prayer we should confess our failures, and the next morning begin the keeping of another day, bright and joyous, unstained by gloom, resolved to make our life more victorious than the day before.

At first the effort may seem utterly to fail, but if the lesson is kept clearly before our eyes, and we are persistent in our determination to master it, it will not be long until the result will begin to show itself. It takes courage and perseverance, but the

The Ministry of Comfort

task is not an impossible one. It is like learning to play on the piano, or like training the voice for singing. It takes years and years to become proficient in either of these arts. It may take a lifetime to learn the lesson of joy, but it can be learned. Men with the most pronounced and obdurate gloominess of disposition have, through the years, become men of abounding cheerfulness. We have but to continue in the practice of the lesson until repetition has grown into a fixed habit, and habit has carved out happiness as a permanent feature of our character, part of our own life.

The wretched discontent which makes some people so miserable themselves and such destroyers of happiness in others is only the natural result of the habit of discontent yielded to and indulged through years. Anyone who is conscious of such an unlovely, un-Christlike disposition, should be so ashamed of it that he will set about at once conquering it and transforming his

The Habit of Happiness

gloomy spirit into one of happiness and joyousness.

Let no one think of happiness as nothing more than a desirable quality, a mere ornamental grace, which is winsome, but is not an essential element in a Christian life, something which one may have or may not have, as it chances. Happiness is a duty, quite as much a duty as truthfulness, honesty, or good temper. There are many Scripture words which exhort us to rejoice. Jesus was a rejoicing man. Although a "man of sorrows," the deep undertone of his life, never once failing, was gladness. Joy is set down as one of the fruits of the Spirit, a fruit which should be found on every branch of the great Vine. St. Paul exhorted his friends to rejoice in the Lord. There are almost countless incitements to gladness. We are to live a songful life. There are in the Scriptures many more calls to praise than to prayer.

But how are we to get this habit of happiness into our life? The answer is very

The Ministry of Comfort

simple—just as we get any other habit wrought into our life. There are some people to whom the lesson does not seem hard, for they are naturally cheerful. There are others who seem to be predisposed to unhappiness and who find it difficult to train themselves into joyful mood. But there is no Christian who cannot learn the lesson. The very purpose of divine grace is to make us over again, to give us a new heart. A man who has formed the habit of untruthfulness and then becomes a Christian may not say that he never can learn now to be truthful—that untruthfulness is fixed too obdurately in his being. No evil can be so stained into the soul's texture that grace cannot wash it white. The love of Christ in one makes him a new man, and whatsoever the old is, it must give way. So, though we have allowed ourselves to drift into a habit of gloom and sadness, there is no reason why we should not get our heart attuned to a different key and learn to sing new songs. This is our duty,

The Habit of Happiness

and whatever is our duty we can do by the help of Christ.

The secret of Christian joy is the peace of Christ in the heart. Then one is not dependent on circumstances or conditions. St. Paul said he had learned in whatsoever state he was, therein to be content. That is, he had formed the habit of happiness and had mastered the lesson so well, that in no state or condition, whatever its discomforts were, was he discontented. We know well that his circumstances were not always congenial or easy. But he sang songs in his prison with just as cheerful a heart and voice as when he was enjoying the hospitality of some loving friend. His mood was always one of cheer, not only when things went well, but when things went adversely. He was just as songful on his hard days as on his comfortable days.

*“ It is easy enough to be pleasant
When life flows by like a song ;
But the man worth while is the one who will
smile*

The Ministry of Comfort

*When everything goes wrong.
For the test of the heart is trouble,
And it always comes with years ;
And the smile that is worth the praises of earth
Is the smile that shines through tears."*

Then St. Paul gives us the secret of his abiding gladness in the word he uses—"content." It means self-sufficed. He was self-sufficed—that is, he carried in his own heart the springs of his own happiness. When he found himself in any place he was not dependent on the resources of the place for his comfort. The circumstances might be most uncongenial. There might be hardship, suffering, want; but in himself he had the peace of Christ and this sustained him so that he was content.

There is no other unfailing secret of happiness. Too many people are dependent upon external conditions—the house they live in, the people they are with, their food, their companions, the weather, their state of health, the comforts or discomforts of their circumstances. But if we carry within us

The Habit of Happiness

such resources that things without us cannot make us unhappy, however uncongenial they may be, then we have learned St. Paul's secret of contentment, which is the Christian's true secret of a happy life. George Herbert puts this well in his "Happy Life":

*How happy is he born and taught
That serveth not another's will ;
Whose armor is his honest thought,
And simple truth his utmost skill !*

*Whose passions not his masters are,
Whose soul is still prepared for death,
Not tied unto the world with care
Or public fame or private breath ;*

*Who envies none that chance doth raise,
Or vice ; who never understood
How deepest wounds are given by praise,
Nor rules of state, but rules of good ;*

*Who hath his life from rumors freed ;
Whose conscience is his strong retreat ;
Whose state can neither flatterers feed
Nor ruin make accusers great.*

The Ministry of Comfort

*This man is freed from servile bands,
Or hope to rise, or fear to fall ;
Lord of himself, though not of lands,
And having nothing, yet hath all.*

Thinking Soberly

[223]

*One small life in God's great plan,
How futile it seems as the ages roll,
Do what it may or strive how it can
To alter the sweep of the infinite whole !
A single stitch in an endless web,
A drop in the ocean's flow and ebb !
But the pattern is rent where the stitch is lost,
Or marred where the tangled threads have crossed ;
And each life that fails of its true intent
Mars the perfect plan that the Master meant.*

SUSAN COOLIDGE.

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH

Thinking Soberly



THE smallest life is of infinite importance. It sends streams of influence and of destiny into eternity. If it fails of its mission it leaves a blank in God's universe. Therefore we should think reverently of our life. Yet we should also think humbly of it, for in God's sight the greatest are very small. It is well that we seek to have true thoughts of ourself and of our place and importance in the world. One may have too exalted an opinion of one's self—there is a self-conceit that exaggerates one's value to society, one's work, and one's influence among men. Then there is also such a thing as having too low an opinion of one's self and of one's abilities, by reason of which one shrinks from serious duty and fails to meet life's full responsibility.

The Ministry of Comfort

In one of his letters St. Paul exhorts the followers of Christ not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think, but so to think as to think soberly, according as God has dealt to each man a measure of faith. Then follows an illustration of the exhortation, drawn from the body and its members. There are many members in the body, and these members do not all have the same office or function. Not all followers of Christ have the same gifts or are fitted to perform the same duty. Some have the gift of prophesying, others of ministering, others of exhortation.

The counsel is that no man think more highly of himself than he ought to think, but so to think as to think soberly. Thinking soberly is recognizing the truth, first of all, that whatever our particular gift may be, it is what God has given us. Our gifts differ, but it is according to the grace bestowed upon us. This takes away all ground for glorying in our individual ability or power.

Thinking Soberly

If our gift is greater than our neighbor's, we may not boast of it nor be vain because of it. God saw fit to endow him with certain abilities, in order that he might discharge the duties that are allotted to him in his appointed place. We have a different place to fill, with different duties, requiring different abilities, and through the grace of God we have received gifts fitting us for our particular duties. Therefore we should not think too highly of ourself, but rather should think humbly and gratefully, giving God the praise and honor for whatever gifts we have received.

He does not think soberly who leaves God out of his thoughts. It is said of William Hunt, the artist, that he never allowed the spiritual in his work to be obscured by the material or earthly quality. With him thoughts, ideas, duties must always come before things. Once one of Mr. Hunt's pupils was engaged in sketching a landscape bathed in the glory of the setting sun. In the foreground stood a large barn. Mr.

The Ministry of Comfort

Hunt watched the young man quietly for a while, and then said to him most impressively, "If you spend so much time painting the shingles on that barn, you'll never have time to paint that sunset. You will have to choose between the two."

There are many people who put shingles before sunsets in their life and work. They see the dusty road on which they are walking, but see not the glorious sky that arches above them. They toil for earth's perishing things, and see not heaven's imperishable glory that might be made theirs. They spend all their life in striving to get honor, wealth, or power, and miss God. They paint the shingles into their picture, bringing out every minutest detail, but when that is done the glory of the sunset has vanished, and they have only a picture of some shingles. Thinking soberly is getting God and eternal things first of all into our life. If we fail of this, nothing else that we may do will be of any avail. Without God, a life full of services great and small is only a row of

Thinking Soberly

ciphers, with no numeral before them to give them value.

Thinking soberly recognizes the truth that others also have abilities which God has bestowed upon them. We are not the only one to whom God has given brains and a heart. And how do we know that our gift is really greater or more honorable than our neighbor's? One man may have eloquence, and be able to move and thrill hearts. Another is a quiet man, whose voice is not heard in the street or in any assembly. But he has the gift of intercession. He lives near to God, and speaks to God for men. While the preacher preaches, this man prays. May the man of the eloquent tongue glory over his brother who cannot speak with impressiveness to men, but who has the ear of God and power in heaven, instead? Who knows but that by the ministry of intercession more things are wrought in people's hearts and lives than by the eloquence that wins so much praise among men?

The Ministry of Comfort

In one of Miss Procter's poems is a legend of a monk who preached with great power, pouring forth eloquent words from a glowing heart,—

*And the flame spread—in every soul that heard,
Sorrow and love and good resolve awoke.*

A poor lay brother, ignorant and old, in humility thanked God that he had heard such words. The monk prayed that the glory might be God's alone, saying that while his hands had sown the seed, it was the divine blessing that had made his words bring light and love to those who heard them. So he thanked God that his strength had wrought so mightily that sinful hearts had been melted by his pleading—

*So prayed the monk ; when suddenly he heard
An angel speaking thus : “ Know, oh my son,
Thy words had all been vain, but hearts were
stirred,
And saints were edified, and sinners won,
By his, the poor lay brother's, humble aid,
Who sat upon the pulpit stairs and prayed.”*

Thinking Soberly

May it not often be so that the gifts which men praise and regard as most honorable are not those whose power reaches highest into heaven and deepest into men's hearts, but the gifts which attract no attention, of which no man boasts? Let not the eloquent preacher think more highly of himself or of his gift than he ought to think, but so to think as to think soberly. It may be that but for the lowly brother who sits on the pulpit stairs and prays, the great preacher's words would have no power over men to bring them to God.

Thinking soberly does not forget that the greatest gifts are great only in the measure in which they are used. The abilities which God bestows upon us are not merely for the adornment of our life—they are given to us in order that they may be used. No one gift in itself is really greater than another. The humblest member of the body that fulfils its function thereby becomes honorable. But this gives it no reason to think highly of itself, or to depreciate other members

The Ministry of Comfort

and their functions. The lowliest Christian who does well the lowliest work given him to do, making the most of his gifts or his abilities in the serving of men and for the honor of God, is realizing God's thought for his life, and is pleasing God just as well as he who with his large ability does a work far greater in itself.

Instead, therefore, of thinking highly of himself because of the attractiveness of his gift or power, each man should accept it as something committed to him by God to be used. There is no room for contention as to which is greater, or for claiming that our particular form of doing good is superior to our neighbor's. Instead of this, each one should consecrate his own particular ability to God, and then use it. "Whether . . . ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality." That is the way thinking soberly about our own life should inspire us to use our gift. In-

Thinking Soberly

stead of boasting of our fine abilities and thinking of ourself more highly than we ought to think, we should use our particular ability to its very utmost and in its own line. Many a person, with most meagre natural gifts, makes his life radiant by its service of love, while the man with the brilliant natural powers does nothing, his gifts, unused, dying in his brain and heart. It is a true word which Milton wrote :

“I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and seeks her adversary, but slinks out of the race where the immortal garland is to be run for not without dust and heat.”

Thus there are many reasons against thinking of ourself more highly than we ought to think, and for thinking soberly. Noble gifts, instead of making us vain and self-conceited, should inspire in us a sense of responsibility. We are to use our abilities, whether large or small, and then we must account for them at the last—not for the abilities as

The Ministry of Comfort

they were when first given to us, mere germs and possibilities, but for their development into their full power of usefulness, and then for their use in ways of blessing, unto the uttermost. If we understand this, we cannot but think soberly about our life.

Stumbling at the Disagreeable

[235]

*“ There is no noble height thou canst not climb ;
All triumphs may be thine in time's futurity,
If whatsoe'er thy fault, thou dost not faint or halt,
But lean upon the staff of God's security.*

*“ Earth has no claim the soul cannot contest.
Know thyself part of the supernal source,
And naught can stand before thy spirit's force,
The soul's divine inheritance is best.”*

CHAPTER EIGHTEENTH

Stumbling at the Disagreeable



ANY people fail in life because they lack courage to do or to endure disagreeable things. They demand a career with only congenial experiences. They insist on getting the roses without the thorns. They want to reach fine results without the toil it costs other men to reach them. They wish to stand upon the mountain-peaks, but they are unwilling to climb the steep, rugged paths that lead up to them. They desire success in life, but they are not ready to work for it. They dream beautiful dreams, but they have not the skill or the energy to forge their dreams into realities. They would like to leave the disagreeable out of every phase of their existence. They are impatient of a disagreeable environment. They dislike disagreeable people and have not the good-

The Ministry of Comfort

nature necessary to get along with them. They complain bitterly when they must suffer any inconvenience, when the weather is uncomfortable, when circumstances are unfavorable, when they are sick. They cannot bear disappointment, and they chafe and fret when things do not turn out as they expected.

But there really is nothing manly or noble in such an attitude toward life. It may be said, first of all, that it is impossible to find a path in this world which has not in it something disagreeable. There always are thorns as well as roses, and usually they grow on the same stalk. There are some dark, unpleasant days in the brightest and most cheerful summer. It is not likely that every one of a hundred neighbors or companions in work is altogether congenial—almost certainly there will be one disagreeable person among them. Then it is not by any means certain that even one's most congenial and best-natured friend will be perfectly agreeable every hour of the three hundred

Stumbling at the Disagreeable

and sixty-five days in the year. The sweetest people are apt to have their disagreeable moods now and then. The most sunny-hearted friend will likely have a day of cloud now and then.

It may be said, further, that not only is the disagreeable inevitable in life, but it is also the school in which much that is best may be learned. Nothing really noble and worthy is ever attained easily. One may get money by inheritance from an ancestor, but one cannot get education, culture, refinement, or character as an inheritance. These possessions can become ours only through our own struggle, toil, and self-discipline.

Some people dream of genius as a gift which makes work unnecessary. They imagine that with this wondrous power they can do the finest things without learning to do them. They fancy, for example, that genius can sit down at a piano the first time it sees the instrument, and play exquisitely the noblest music; or put a vision of beauty on the canvas without having touched brushes be-

The Ministry of Comfort

fore ; or write a story, a poem, or an essay which will thrill all hearts, without ever having been a student and without literary training ; or go into business and build up a great fortune without having had any preliminary business experience.

But such thoughts of life are only idle dreams. The truest definition of genius is that it is merely "an infinite capacity for taking pains." Those who expect results without processes can only be bitterly disappointed in the end. Nothing beautiful or worthy in any department of life was ever achieved or attained without toil. "Wherever a great thought is born, there also has been Gethsemane." The lovely works of human creation which people linger before with admiring wonder have all cost a great price. Somebody's heart's blood has gone into every great picture, into every stanza of sweet song, into every paragraph which inspires men. It has been noted that the Anglo-Saxon root of the word bless is the word for blood. We can bless another in

Stumbling at the Disagreeable

deep and true ways only by giving of our life-blood. Anything that will do real good can be wrought only in tears and suffering. When Raphael was asked how he produced his immortal pictures he replied, "I dream dreams and see visions, and then I paint my dreams and my visions."

And not only are these painful processes necessary in order to produce results that are worth while, but it is in them that we grow into whatever is beautiful and noble. Work is the only means of growth. Instead of being a curse, as some would have us believe, work is a means of measureless good. Not to work is to keep always an undeveloped hand, or heart, or brain. The things which work may achieve are not half so important as that which work does in us.

*"Disappointment is not utter failure,
The striving is a measure of success ;
Each wise attempt but makes us stronger grow,
Till, oft-repeated, stumbling-blocks seem less
And finally prove the stepping-stones to gain
The end in view, and our fond hopes attain !"*

The Ministry of Comfort

A genial writer has given us a new beatitude —“Blessed be drudgery!” and in a delightful essay proves that we owe to what we speak of ordinarily as drudgery, the best things in our life and character. A child dislikes to be called in the morning and to have to be off to school at the same hour every day, and chafes at rules, bells, lessons, and tasks; but it is in this very drudgery of home and school that the child is being trained for noble and beautiful life. The child that misses such discipline, growing up as its own sweet will inclines, may seem to be fortunate and may be envied, but it is missing that without which all its future career will be less beautiful and less strong. “Blessed be drudgery!” It is in the tiresome routine of hours, tasks, and rules that we learn to live worthily and that we get into our life itself those qualities which belong to true manhood. Those who have been brought up from childhood to be prompt, systematic, to pay any debt on the day, always to keep every promise and ap-

Stumbling at the Disagreeable

pointment, never to be late, will carry the same good habits into their mature life, in whatever occupation or calling it may be spent, and when these qualities will mean so much in success.

Thus, irksome things play an important part in the making of life. We can shirk them if we will, but if we do so we throw away our opportunity, for there is no other way to success. Young people should settle it once for all that they will shrink from no task, no toil, no self-discipline that faces them, knowing that beyond the thing which is unpleasant and hard lies some treasure that can be reached and possessed in no way but by accepting the drudgery. Nor can we get some other one to do our drudgery for us, for then the other person, not we, would get the reward which belongs to the task-work and which cannot be got apart from it. We must do our own digging. The rich man's son might easily find some other one who would be willing to study for him for a money consideration, but no money could

The Ministry of Comfort

buy the gains of study and put them in among his own life-treasures. We can acquire knowledge, culture, breadth of mind, only through our own work.

It is a misfortune to a young man to be born rich, not to have to ask, "What shall I do for a living?" unless he has in him the manly courage to enter life as if he were a poor man and to learn to work as if he must indeed earn his bread by the sweat of his own brow. There is no other way to grow into manly character. There is no other way to make life worth while.

We are very foolish, therefore, certainly very short-sighted, to quarrel with the disagreeable in our lot, of whatever sort it is. The disagreeable is inevitable. We cannot find all things just to our own mind, in even the most perfect human lot in this world. Nor could we afford to miss the things that are less pleasant, that are even painful. We shrink from life's hard battles, but it is only through struggle and victory that we can reach the fair heights of honor and win the

Stumbling at the Disagreeable

prizes of noble character. We dread sorrow, but it is through sorrow's bitterness that we find life's deepest, truest joy. We hold our life back from sacrifice, but it is only through losing our life that we can ever really save it. If we have faith and courage to welcome struggle, cost, pain, and sacrifice, we shall find our feet ever on the path to the best things in attainment and achievement in this world and the highest glory at the last.

*“ Then welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand, but go !
Be our joys three parts pain !
Strive and hold cheap the strain ;
Learn, nor account the pang ; dare, never
grudge the throe ! ”*

The Duty of Thanksgiving

[247]

*“ Lord, in thy sky of blue,
No stain of cloud appears ;
Gone all my faithless fears,
Only thy love seems true.
Help me to thank thee, then, I pray,
Walk in the light and cheerfully obey !”*

CHAPTER NINETEENTH

The Duty of Thanksgiving



THANKSGIVING is one of our highest and holiest duties. There are in the Scriptures more commands and calls to praise than to prayer. Yet few duties are more frequently neglected than this. There are many people who are always coming to God with requests, but who do not come to him with thanksgiving after their requests have been granted. Ten lepers once cried to Jesus, as he was passing at a distance, beseeching him for cleansing. He graciously heard them and granted their plea. When they had been healed, one of the ten returned to thank the Healer, but the other nine came not again with any word in recognition of the great favor they had received. So it is continually—many are blessed and helped, but only one here and there shows gratitude.

The Ministry of Comfort

Our Lord felt keenly the ingratitude of the lepers who returned not. "Where are the nine?" was his pained question. God pours out his gifts and blessings every day upon his children; and whenever no voice of thanksgiving is heard in return, he misses it. If one bird in the forest is silent in the glad spring days, he misses its song. If one human heart fails to utter its praise amid life's countless blessings, he is disappointed.

Some people seem to think that if they set apart certain definite days for praise, it is enough. For example, they will be grateful for a whole day once in the year, doing nothing but sing, touching every chord of praise in their being, thinking that this is the way God wants them to show their gratitude. But the annual Thanksgiving Day is not intended to gather into itself the thanksgiving for a whole year; rather it is intended to give the keynote for all the year's life. Life's true concert pitch is praise. If we find that we are below the

The Duty of Thanksgiving

right pitch, we should take advantage of particular thanksgiving seasons to get keyed up. That is the way people do with their pianos—they have them tuned now and then, when the strings get slack and the music begins to grow discordant—and it is quite as important to keep our life in tune as our piano.

The ideal life is one of gladness. Discontent and fretfulness are discords in the song. We have no right to live gloomily or sadly. Go where we may, we hear the music of joy, unless our ears have become tone-deaf. The world is full of beauty and full of music. Yet it is strange how many people seem neither to see the loveliness nor hear the music.

There is a legend of an aged priest whom one met painfully toiling up some steep mountain slope. He was asked why he, at such advanced age, was enduring the fatigue of the rugged ascent. He explained that he had spent his life in the cloister, thinking it almost sinful to look upon or

The Ministry of Comfort

admire the beauties of nature. In a sore illness he had come to the very gates of death. There an angel met him and said to him, "That is a beautiful world you have come from." The monk reflected that while he had lived many years in this world, he had seen but little of it and knew almost nothing of its loveliness. Recovering from his illness, he resolved to devote his remaining days to travel, that he might look upon as many as possible of the beautiful things of this world, which thus far he had failed to see.

It were well if many of us would train ourselves to see the glory and the goodness of God as revealed in nature. It will be sad to leave this world after staying in it three-score or fourscore years without having seen any of the ten thousand beauties with which God has adorned it. "Consider the lilies," said Jesus. Every sweet flower has a message of joy to him who can read the writing. One who loves flowers and birds and trees and mountains and rivers and

The Duty of Thanksgiving

seas, and has learned to hear the voices which everywhere whisper their secrets to him who understands, never can be lonely and never can be sad. Emerson had ears to hear this mystic music, and wrote

*Let me go where'er I will,
I hear a sky-born music still ;
It is not only in the rose,
It is not only in the bird,
But in the darkest, meanest things,
There always, always, something sings.*

The power to hear what nature's voices have to say is in the heart, not merely in the ear. We must have the beauty in our soul before we can see beauty anywhere. Hence there are many who are really blind to the loveliness which God has strewn everywhere, with most lavish hand, in his works. So we must have the music in our heart before we can hear the music which sings everywhere for him who has ears to hear. If we have thanksgiving within us, we will have no trouble in finding gladness wherever we go. .

The Ministry of Comfort

It is a sad and cheerless heart that makes the world dreary to certain people ; if only they would let joy enter to dwell within, a new world would be created for them. There is a legend of a wonderful bell which rings in heaven, and whose sweet tones only those can hear whose hearts are pure and gentle.

*“ It is said somewhere, at twilight
A great bell softly swings,
And a man may listen and hearken
To the wondrous music that rings.*

*“ If he puts from his heart's inner chamber
All the passion, pain, and strife,
Heartache and weary longing
That throb in the pulses of life ;*

*“ If he thrusts from his soul all hatred,
All thoughts of wicked things,
He can hear in the holy twilight
How the bell of the angels rings.”*

If we allow our heart to cherish unlovingness, bitterness, evil thoughts and feelings, we cannot hear the music of love which breathes everywhere, pouring out from the

The Duty of Thanksgiving

heart of God. But if we keep our heart gentle, patient, lowly, and kind, on our ears will fall, wherever we go, sweet strains of divine music, out of heaven.

A great man used to say that the habit of cheerfulness was worth ten thousand pounds a year. This is true not only in a financial way—it is true of one's own enjoyment of life and also of the worth of one's life to others. A glad heart gets immeasurably more out of life than one that is gloomy. Every day brings its benedictions. If it is raining, rain is a blessing. If trouble comes, God draws nearer than before, for "as your days, so shall your strength be." Then in the trouble benedictions are folded up. If there is sorrow, comfort is revealed in the sorrow, a bright light in the cloud. If the day brings difficulties, hardships, heavy burdens, sharp struggles, life's best things come in just this kind of experience, and not in the easy ways. The thanksgiving heart finds treasure and good everywhere. Then, a glad life makes a career of gladness

The Ministry of Comfort

wherever it goes. It leaves an unbroken lane of sunbeams behind it. Everybody is better as well as happier for meeting, even casually, one whose life is full of brightness and cheer.

*“ Just being happy
Is a fine thing to do ;
Looking on the bright side
Rather than the blue ;
Sad or sunny musing
Is largely in the choosing
And just being happy
Is brave work and true.*

*“ Just being happy
Helps other souls along ;
Their burdens may be heavy ;
And they are not strong ;
And your own sky will lighten
If other skies you brighten
By just being happy
With a heart full of song ! ”*

We can do nothing better either for ourself or for the world in which we live than to learn the lesson of praise, of thanksgiving.

The Duty of Thanksgiving

We should begin at once to take singing-lessons, learning to sing only joyous songs. Of course there are troubles in every life, but there are a thousand good things to one that is sad. Sometimes we have disappointments, but even these are really God's appointments, as some day we shall find out. People will sometimes be unkind to us, but we should go on loving just as before, our heart full of unconquerable kindness. No matter what comes we should sing and be thankful, and should always keep sweet. One writes :

*“ Suppose a world of troubles do
Annoy you day by day ;
Suppose that friends considered true
Your trust in them betray ;
And rocks may bruise and thorns may tear
Your worn and weary feet,
And every day you meet a snare—
Keep sweet.*

*“ Suppose you have not each desire
That forms within your mind ;*

The Ministry of Comfort

*And earth denies you half your hire,
And heaven seems quite unkind;
And you have not the best to wear,
Nor yet the best to eat—
You seem to have the meanest fare—
Keep sweet.*

*“ A sour heart will make things worse
And harder still to bear,
A merry heart destroys the curse
And makes the heavens fair.
So I advise, whate'er your case—
Whatever you may meet,
Dwell on the good—forget the base—
Keep sweet.”*

Manners

[259]

*" To nobly think the highest thought that I can reach,
To feel the mighty thrill of kindling aspiration,
To hate with ardent soul all base, ignoble schemes,
To match a steadfast will against the tempter's arts,
To do my daily duty in heroic mood,
To take my cross and follow Christ uncomplainingly,
To love my fellow-men as truly as myself,
To feed the hungry mouth, to clothe the naked back,
To visit them that sit in dismal prison-cells,
To love my God with all my heart and soul and
strength—
Such holy work as this is heaven begun on earth."*

CHAPTER TWENTIETH

Manners



MANNERS are very important. Some people will tell you that if a person is genuine in character, it makes small difference what kind of manners he has. But this is not true. A man may have the goodness of a saint, but if he is rude, awkward, lacking refinement, a large measure of the value of his goodness is lost. Manners are the language in which the life interprets itself; oftentimes much of the sweetness and beauty of the heart's gentle thoughts and feelings is lost in the faulty translation.

Everywhere in life manners count for a great deal. In business, civility is almost as important as capital. A man who is rude, discourteous, and brusque, lacking the graces of cordiality and kindness, may have fine

The Ministry of Comfort

goods in his store, but people will not come to buy of him. On the other hand, a man with affable manners, who treats his customers with politeness, who is patient, thoughtful, ready always to oblige, desirous to please, will attract patrons to his place and will build up a business. No merchant will retain in his employ a salesperson who treats customers rudely.

The same is true in the professions and in all occupations and callings. The surly, discourteous physician will not get patients. If you begin to deal with a tradesman who appears to be impertinent, cross-tempered, and disobliging, you will not continue to go to him. The principal of a private school was very popular with his boys and did splendid work, for some years. Meanwhile the school prospered. Then something happened which soured the principal and embittered his spirit. His manners changed, becoming stern, severe, harsh. He would give way to fits of violent temper in which he lost self-control and used language in the

Manners

presence of his pupils that no gentleman should ever use. One year of this was enough to break up the school.

We all know the impressions that the manners of people make upon us when we first meet them. A beautiful behavior goes a long way in winning our favor and confidence, and ill-manners offset many excellences of character and much true worth.

In a passage in the Old Testament there is an intimation that the manners of the people of Israel very sorely tried the Lord in the days of the wilderness wanderings. It is said that for about the space of forty years he suffered their manners in the wilderness—not only bore with them, but suffered from them. There is no doubt that their manners were very bad. They were always murmuring and complaining. They did not praise the God who had done so much for them. They were ungrateful and rebellious. It is given as a mark of the divine patience that the Lord suffered or endured their manners all those years. It is implied, also, that

The Ministry of Comfort

he was sorely grieved by all that was so un-beautiful and so unworthy in their manners. There is a class of ill-manners which is much too common, and which many persons seem not to think of as in any way ungracious—the habit of fretting and complaining about one's condition or circumstances. There are some people whose greatest pleasure appears to be found in talking about their discomforts and miseries, their ill-health, their trials. They seem never to think there is anything discourteous or unrefined in thus inflicting upon their neighbors the tale of their real or imagined, at least exaggerated, woes. Yet the truest Christian spirit always avoids the intruding of self in any way, especially the unhappy or suffering self, into the life of others. "By the grace of God I never fret," said Wesley. "I am discontented with nothing. And to have persons at my ear fretting and murmuring at everything is like tearing the flesh off my bones."

Manners

An old writer says,

*“ Fret not : 'tis wasteful, for it lets thy work :
And selfish, for it doth thy neighbor irk :
And faithless : did not God thy lot prepare ?
But chiefly needless, being healed by prayer.”*

The Bible is the best book of manners ever written. All its teachings are toward the truest and best culture. It condemns whatever is rude in act, coarse and unlovely in disposition, ungentle in word or thought. Jesus Christ was the most perfect gentleman who ever lived, and all his teachings are toward whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, pleasing to others, well spoken of. Saint Paul, also, is an excellent teacher of good manners. If we would learn to live out the teachings of the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, for example, we should need no other instruction on how to behave. No rules of conduct ever formulated in books of etiquette are so complete or cover all possible cases so fully as these few words in that immortal chapter :

The Ministry of Comfort

“If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.”

This subject is very important. We cannot pay too careful heed to our manners. Religion is love, and love, if it be true and large-hearted, inspires perfect manners. There are certain conventional rules regulating one's conduct in good society, which everyone should know and follow. There is a place for etiquette, and no one has a right to ignore the formalities which prevail among refined people. But the essential element in all good manners is the heart. The love which Saint Paul so earnestly commends inspires gentleness, kindness, thoughtful-

Manners

ness, unselfishness, humility, good temper, self-control, patience, endurance of wrong, and all the graces. A daily study of this one chapter, the thirteenth of First Corinthians, with hearty and earnest effort to get its teachings into the heart and then to live them out in all life's relations, would ultimately change the most faulty manners into the beauty and gracefulness which belong to all true Christian life.

Some persons are greatly hindered in the cultivation of politeness by their shyness. A great deal of rudeness is unintended ; indeed, it is altogether unconscious. All that is needed to cure it is thoughtfulness. But we have no right to be thoughtless. Want of thought is only a little less blameworthy than want of heart. A man says, when he learns that some word or act of his gave great pain, "I didn't know that my friend was so sensitive at that point." If he had been more thoughtful he would have known, or at least he would not have spoken the word or done the thing which hurt so. We

The Ministry of Comfort

never know what burden our neighbor is carrying, how tender his heart is. If we knew, we would be more careful.

In seeking to have our manners thoroughly Christian we need to bring every phase and every expression of our life under the sway of the love of Christ. It is easy enough to be gentle to some men, for they are so kindly in their spirit, so patient, so thoughtful, so generous, that they never in any way try us. But there are others to whom it is hard to be gentle, for they are continually doing or saying things which would naturally irritate us and excite us to unloving and unlovely treatment of them. But our manners should be unaffected by anything in others. It was thus with our Master. His moods were not dependent on the influences which played upon him. Rudeness to him in others did not make him rude to them. Wrong and injustice did not dry up the fountain of love in his heart. He was as gracious and sweet in spirit and manner to the discourteous and the unkind as if they had

Manners

shown him the most refined courtesy. If we have the mind that was in Christ Jesus, we, too, will be unaffected by the atmosphere about us. Love beareth all things, endureth all things, never faileth.

Cardinal Newman has sketched the character of a gentleman, in the Christian sense, in words that it is worth while to quote :

“It is almost the definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never gives pain. . . . He carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast—all clashing of opinion or collision of feeling, all restraint or suspicion or gloom or resentment—his great object being to make everyone at ease and at home. He has his eyes on all his company. He is tender toward the bashful, gentle toward the distant, and merciful toward the absurd; he can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unreasonable allusions or topics that may irritate; he is seldom promi-

The Ministry of Comfort

nent in conversation and never wearisome.

“He makes light of favors while he does them, and seems to be receiving when he is conferring. He never speaks of himself except when required to do so, never defends himself by mere retort. He has no ears for slander or gossip, is scrupulous in imputing motives to those who interfere with him, and interprets everything for the best. He is never mean or little in his disputes, never takes an unfair advantage, never mistakes personalities or sharp sayings for arguments, or insinuates evil which he dare not say out. . . . He has too much sense to be affronted at insult. He is too busy to remember injuries and too wise to bear malice. . . . If he engages in controversy of any kind, his disciplined intellect preserves him from the blundering discourtesy of better though less educated minds, who, as with blunt weapons, tear and hack instead of cutting clean.

“He may be right or wrong in his opinion,

[270]

Manners

but he is too clear-headed to be unjust. He is as simple as he is forcible, and as brief as he is decisive. Nowhere shall we find greater candor, consideration, and indulgence. He throws himself into the minds of his opponents, he accounts for their mistakes. He knows the weakness of human nature as well as its strength, its province, and its limits."

The best school of manners is the school of Christ. The best culture is heart culture. To be a Christian in the fullest sense is to be a gentleman or a lady of the highest type. The world's standards are worldly; the Beatitudes give the heavenly standard, which is infinitely better.

*" Let the old life be covered by the new,
The old, old part, so full of sad mistakes ;
Let it be wholly hidden from our view
By deeds as white and silent as snowflakes,
Ere the earth life melt in the eternal spring.
Let the white mantle of repentance fling
Soft drapery about it, fold on fold,
Even as the new snow covers up the old."*

Things Which Discourage Kind- ness

[273]

*If I had the time to find a place
And sit me down full face to face
With my better self, that cannot show
In my daily life that rushes so :
It might be then I would see my soul
Was stumbling still toward the shining goal,
I might be nerved by the thought sublime
If I had the time !*

RICHARD BURTON.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIRST

Things Which Discourage Kindness



It is well always to be optimistic about people. Jesus was. He never gave anybody up as hopeless. Evil returned by those who received his kindness never checked nor lessened the flow of kindness in him. The fountain of love in him was not dried up by the bitterest enmities and persecutions. The person who wronged him was the very one he sought the earliest opportunity to befriend. When a man had proved unworthy, taking advantage of his compassion and unselfishness, and returning only ingratitude and injury, the next one who came with his needs did not find the heart of the Master closed, or the flow of affection checked, but met as tender love as if that great heart had never received.

The Ministry of Comfort

a hurt. In all our Lord's dealings with others we find this abiding love, with exhaustless patience, sympathy, hope, and help.

The Master would have all his followers like him in this. He has taught us that we are to love as he loved. "As I have loved you," the new commandment runs. We are to show to others the same forgiveness that we ask from God for ourselves. We are to love our enemies as Jesus loved his enemies. When others use us despitefully, we are to pray for them, instead of resenting their unkindness and cherishing bitterness toward them in our heart.

This is one point at which we need to keep most careful watch over our own life. We are naturally disposed to resent wrongs done to us and to be affected in our own disposition by the treatment we receive from others. When we have denied ourselves and made sacrifices to help another, and he shows no appreciation, no gratitude, the danger is that the warmth of our love shall be chilled, and the flow of our kindness checked.

Discouragements for Kindness

The old teaching was that one should forgive another three times. Peter thought he was taking a great stride forward when he suggested that a Christian should forgive seven times. But Jesus set the standard far beyond Peter's, saying, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." That is, forgiveness is to be exhaustless. We are never to weary of exercising it. However often one may repeat his offence against us, we are still to be ready to forgive and forgive. The same is true of patience, of compassion, of kindness, of all goodness. The love in our heart is to be unfailing, like a spring of water which flows unintermittingly.

Yet there are many things to discourage kindness, to make the kindly disposed restrain their gentle impulses and withhold their hand from ministry. Ingratitude is too common. Too often those we help, even at much cost to ourselves, prove unworthy. Nothing comes of our efforts to do them good. They promise to do better, but soon are back again in the old paths. They take

The Ministry of Comfort

our favors and enjoy our gifts, and pay us with neglect or injustice. Too frequently those for whom we have done the most make the smallest return. It is easy in such experiences to conclude that it is not worth while to continue to show favors or to deny ourselves to do others good, since nothing comes of it—nothing but disappointment.

In the matter of helping with money, there is special discouragement. There are persons who are ready always to assist others in time of need. But perhaps no other form of kindness proves quite so unsatisfactory as this. In the fewest cases do gifts of money bring back a return of gratitude. The acceptance of such help seems to have a sinister influence upon the feelings. Not many retain afterward as close friends those to whom they have given financial assistance. Many good men who begin dispensing money with a free hand, truly interested in others' troubles and eager to assist them, meet with such discouragement in the effect of their gifts upon those who receive them,

Discouragements for Kindness

that the fountains of their charity are at last dried up. Not only are they led to decline to give further help to those who have proved so ungrateful, but, as a consequence, they harden themselves against all such appeals for help in the future. As a result, when really worthy objects of benevolence are presented to them, there is no answer of sympathy.

These are suggestions of the things which discourage kindness and check the flow of benevolence. In ancient times in the East a common practice among tribes at war was to fill up each other's wells. Every well thus rendered useless was a public blessing destroyed. Like crime against humanity is it when a well of kindness in a heart is stopped. The world's need and sorrow are the losers. The thirsty come to drink where before their want had been satisfied, and are disappointed.

But the most serious consequence is in the harm which is done to the persons themselves whose love and compassion are thus

The Ministry of Comfort

restrained. One of the great problems of Christian living is to keep the heart gentle and sweet amid all the world's trying experiences. Nothing worse could happen to anyone than that he should become cold toward human suffering, or bitter toward human infirmity and failure.

Jesus gave us in his own blessed life the example of one who lived all his years amid ingratitude and enmity, and yet never lost the sweetness out of his spirit. He poured out love, and men rejected it. He scattered kindnesses to-day which to-morrow were forgotten. He helped people in sorest need and distress, and they turned about and joined his maligners. He came to save his nation, and they nailed him on a cross. Yet amid all this rejection of his love, this rewarding of good with evil, of love with hate, the heart of Jesus never lost a trace of its gentleness and compassion. He was just as ready to help a needy one on the last day of his life as he was the day he set out to begin his public ministry. He wrought a

Discouragements for Kindness

miracle of healing on an enemy the night of his betrayal, and when being fastened on his cross prayed for the men who were driving the nails through his hands.

A legend tells of a youth who had so blotted the divine grace out of his soul that one day he flung on high a dagger meant for God's heart. And the answer of heaven was, a hand upon that dagger's hilt, then five drops of blood from Christ's wounds to cleanse the guilt. Love is always the divine answer to human sin. The answer to the crucifying of the Son of God was redemption. So love, more love, should be our answer to all injury, to all wrong, to all injustice and cruelty, to all ingratitude. No evil returned for our good should ever be permitted to discourage us in the doing of good.

Whatever failure there may seem to be in our ministry of kindness, through the shutting of lives against it, our heart should never lose any of its compassion and yearning. One writes of finding a fresh-water

The Ministry of Comfort

spring close beside the sea. Twice every twenty-four hours the tides rolled over it, burying it deep under their brackish floods. But when the bitter waters rolled out again, the spring was found fresh as before, with no taint of the salt sea in its sweet stream. So should it be with the heart of love. When the tides of unkindness, injustice, or cruelty have swept over it, it should emerge unembittered, patient, long-suffering, meek, rich still, in its generous thought and feeling, and ready for any new service for which there may be opportunity to-morrow.

That is one of the great lessons Jesus would teach us. The secret of such a life is to have and ever to keep in us the heart of a little child. Instead of allowing our spirit to grow bitter when our kindness has been abused, when our love has been repaid with hate, we should take the first opportunity to repeat the kindness and the love, thus overcoming evil with good. The Master said, "Love your enemies, and pray for them that spitefully use you, and persecute

Discouragements for Kindness

you." That is, if you have an enemy, one in whose breast is bitterness toward you, he is the very man you are to love. If anyone has used you badly to-day, he is the very person you are to pray for to-night when you bow before God.

Someone may say that this is impossible, that no love can endure rejection and unrequiting day after day and lose none of its warmth; that no kindness can meet unkindness, continually, and yet keep all its warmth and generosity undiminished. But St. Paul tells that love suffereth long and is kind, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil, beareth all things, endureth all things, never faileth. Christian love is not an earth-born affection—it is born out of heaven, out of God's own heart. Hence it is immortal, its life is inextinguishable, and it cannot perish. Alfred Austin writes:

*Yet love can last, yet love can last,
The future be as was the past,
And faith and fondness never know
The chill of dwindling afterglow,*

The Ministry of Comfort

*If, to familiar hearth there cling
The virgin freshness of the spring,
And April's music still be heard
In wooing voice and winning word.*

*If when autumnal shadows streak
The furrowed brow, the wrinkled cheek,
Devotion deepening to the close,
Like fruit that ripens tenderer grows;
If, though the leaves of youth and hope
Lie thick on life's declining slope,
The fond heart, faithful to the last,
Lingers in love-drifts of the past;
If, with the gravely shortening days
Faith trims the lamp, faith feeds the blaze,
And reverence, robed in wintry white,
Sheds fragrance like a summer night,
Then love can last !*

Putting Away Childish Things

[285]

*When I look back upon my life nigh spent,
Nigh spent, although the stream as yet flows on,
I more of follies than of sins repent,
Less for offence than Love's shortcomings moan.*

*With self, O Father, leave me not alone—
Leave not with the beguiler the beguiled;
Besmirched and ragged, Lord, take back thine own:
A fool I bring thee to be made a child.*

GEORGE MACDONALD.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SECOND

Putting Away Childish Things



HERE is a wide difference between childlikeness and childishness. Childlikeness is commended as very beautiful in life and disposition. The Master exhorted his disciples to become as little children, and said that until they would do so, they could not enter into the kingdom of heaven. The finest things in character are childlike things—humility, simplicity, trustfulness, the absence of scheming and ambition—guilelessness.

But childishness is something altogether different. It is something to get as far as possible away from, and not something to cultivate. It is one of the things we are to put off and leave behind as we grow into the strength and beauty of mature manhood. Instead of being a noble quality, the mark

The Ministry of Comfort

of rank and greatness in spiritual life, it is the sign of weakness, of unmanliness, of puerility.

Childishness in a child may be endured. One is expected to be a baby before he becomes a man. Indeed, it is abnormal to miss being a child, to be mature as if full-grown when one is still an infant in years. "How old is your friend?" asked one man of another. "Let me see," was the reply, "he was fifty when he was born, and that was thirty-three years ago. He is eighty-three now." There are such people. They are never young. They have no childhood. They miss the gladness of the care-free days and start away on amid the feelings and ways of maturity.

But such a life is not beautiful. Precocity is deformity, monstrosity. The truest childhood is the one that is most childlike. We are forbearing with childishness in a child. We do not grow impatient with it. "He is only a child," we say in apology for actions and words and ways which are not beautiful.

Putting Away Childish Things

But when these childish things appear in one who has come to manhood in years, we find no excuse for them. They are blemishes, marks of immaturity. We ought to leave them behind us when we pass up into the larger, maturer life of manhood. We have good authority for saying that when we are children, we speak as children, we feel as children, we act as children; but when we become men we put away childish things.

Yet there are too many people who keep their childish ways after they are grown up. For example, pouting is not uncommon in quite young children. Something disappoints them, and they turn away in sullen mood, thrusting out their lips and refusing to speak to anyone or take part in what their companions are doing. It is no wonder that the other children in a party jeer at such puerile behavior in one of their number, ridiculing him with taunting epithets. The lesson of good-naturedly bearing slights, hurts, or defeats usually has to be learned by experience, and the lesson is a long one.

The Ministry of Comfort

It need not be wondered at, therefore, if young children are sometimes slow in mastering their sensitiveness in this regard. We may have great patience with them. Immaturity is always faulty. An unripe apple is not usually sweet. Unripeness, however, is not blameworthy. It is but a phase in the progress toward ripeness.

But every now and then—and not so rarely, either—we find full-grown people who have not got beyond the pouting phase. They are very genial and happy in their relations with others while nothing occurs to impinge upon their self-esteem. But the moment anyone seems to slight them or to fail in proper respect for them, when one appears to treat them unkindly, or when some scheme or proposal of theirs is set aside, instantly out go the lips in a childish pout, down come the brows in a bad-tempered frown, and the offended person goes off in a fit of babyish sulks.

This spectacle is not uncommon among young people in their relations with each

Putting Away Childish Things

other. There are some who demand absolute and exclusive monopoly in their friendships. They are ardent in their devotion to the person on whom they fasten their affection, but that person must become wholly theirs, scarcely treating any other one respectfully, certainly showing no cordiality to anyone. If the object of their attachment fails to be absorbedly loyal, the doting friend pouts and sulks and whimpers, "You don't care for me any more!" Such conduct may be tolerated in children, but in young people who are past the years of childhood it is the token of a sickly and most unwholesome sentimentality.

A beautiful friendship is one that is generous and trustful, not exacting and unreasonable in its demands, that is willing and glad to see others esteemed and honored, and sharing in affection and regard. Yet too many people are selfish in their friendships, not only demanding the first place, but insisting that no other one shall be admitted to any second or third place, even that no one

The Ministry of Comfort

else shall be treated with common courtesy. Such persons are not fit to have friends. Even the most childish child rarely shows such a spirit. Envy and jealousy are most unlovely, and are unworthy of anyone, especially of anyone who bears the Christian name, and are certainly to be set down among the childish things which should be put away by all on becoming men and women.

There are other manifestations of feeling and disposition which should be left behind by all who grow up into maturity of life. St. Paul names many qualities which have no rightful place in a Christian life and which should be put away—anger, wrath, malice, railing, shameful speaking. There are many good people, good in the great features of life and character, who are very hard to live with. They are thoughtless, ungentle, uncontrolled in speech. They lack the graces of kindness and helpfulness. While they are honest, true, strong, upright, they are wanting in the refinements of life which in

Putting Away Childish Things

the last analysis are essential to real loveliness of character, and which make a person winsome, agreeable, companionable, and pleasant to get along with in intimate relations.

Very much of the unhappiness of human lives is caused, not by cruel wrongs which crush the heart, but by infinitesimal unkindnesses and irritations which fret and vex the spirit continually. A thoughtful woman says very truly : "Taking life through and through, the larger part of the sadness and heartache it has known has not come through its great sorrows, but through little needless hurts and unkindnesses ; not so much through the orderings of providence as through the disorderings of humanity. Look back and you can readily count up the great griefs and bereavements that have rent your heart and changed your life. You know what weary months they darkened. There was a certain sacredness and dignity, like the dignity of lonely mountain-tops, in their very greatness ; and looking back, if not at

The Ministry of Comfort

the time, you can often understand their purpose. But, oh! the days that are spoiled by smaller hurts! Spoiled because somebody has a foolish spite, a wicked mood, an unreasonable prejudice, that must be gratified and have its way, no matter whose rights, plans, or hearts are hurt by it. There are so many hard places along the road for most of us, made hard needlessly by human selfishness, that the longing to be kind with a tender, thoughtful, Christlike kindness grows stronger in me each day I live."

It is not expected of a child that he be always thoughtful—the lesson usually has to be learned, and the learning of it takes years and long experience. But when one has come to maturity, it is certainly time that at least one has begun to grow kind and considerate.

Not infrequently is a childish spirit manifested in societies and associations, where members are chosen to official places or appointed on committees, or shown other honors. There are likely always to be some

Putting Away Childish Things

among the number who keep in the best kind of mood while they are filling any position of honor or authority, but who cannot come down gracefully from the official rostrum when their term is ended. The descent from this elevated position to the level of common membership is too much for their measure of magnanimity. They act as if they felt that they should be continued in office indefinitely; and when some other one is chosen in turn to wear the honor which by the grace of their peers they have worn for a term, they take it as a personal matter and feel aggrieved. Sometimes they display their hurt feelings publicly; sometimes they say nothing, but go about afterward with a martyr-like air, as if they were patiently enduring a wrong or an injury. In either case, they probably do not take an active part thereafter in the work of the organization, pouting sometimes the remainder of their days.

These are only illustrations of a most unhappy spirit that is much too common in

The Ministry of Comfort

the world. We all know how such conduct mars the beauty of manliness. Nothing is a better test of character and disposition than the way one meets defeat or bears injury. "Blessed are the meek" is a great deal more human beatitude than we are wont to think. Commendation is sweet, but we show a pitiable weakness if we keep sweet only when people are saying complimentary things to us or of us, and then get discouraged and out of sorts when the adulation fails to come. There is a good teaching which counsels us to prefer others in honor, and when a young man has had a term as an officer or a committee chairman in his society, he ought to be delighted to yield the place to another, and should go back into the ranks with the best of cheerfulness to work more earnestly and beautifully than ever in the unofficial place.

Let us put away childish things forever. Let the young people begin to do so very early. If you find the slightest disposition in yourself to pout or sulk or be envious or

Putting Away Childish Things

jealous, or to play the baby in any way, you have a splendid chance to do a Christlike thing. Will you do it?

*“ I like the man who faces what he must,
With step triumphant and a heart of cheer ;
Who fights the daily battle without fear ;
Sees his hopes fail, yet keeps unfaltering trust
That God is God ; that somehow, true and just
His plans work out for mortals ; not a tear
Is shed when fortune, which the world holds
dear,
Falls from his grasp ; better, with love, a crust
Than living in dishonor ; envies not,
Nor loses faith in man ; but does his best,
Nor ever murmurs at his humbler lot,
But, with a smile and words of hope, gives zest
To every toiler ; he alone is great,
Who by a life heroic conquers fate.”*

