

IX.

## THE GENTLENESS OF FAITH

“Let your moderation be known unto all men.”—PHIL. iv. 5.

“I beseech you by the gentleness of Christ.”—2 COR. x. 1.

As these two verses stand in our Bibles, the connection between them is not obvious. But if you turn to the New Version, you will see that the Revisers render the verse in Philippians, “Let your *forbearance* be known unto all men,” and they put in the margin, “or, *gentleness*.” The Greek word is the same as in the passage quoted from the Corinthians.<sup>1</sup> It is the word which in the passage (I Tim. iii. 3) about the qualities of a good bishop is rendered “patient;” in the Epistle of James it is an epithet of the wisdom that is from above, “pure, peaceable, *gentle*.” Now, many as the words are which we are driven to use in order to seize the particular shade of meaning in different passages, it must not be supposed that the Greek word itself is of fluctuating sense.

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the contrary, its meaning is definite, though not easy to express in a few words. It means that instinct by which a man perceives the fair course to pursue, and pursues it. It is the quality of seeing exactly how a case stands, of making the proper allowances, of saying just the right word, of doing just the right thing, that will meet the necessities of a special case. Life is regulated by rules and customs, but in our intercourse with each other we need to know when one rule is to apply and when another, when a rule may or should be relaxed, and when it should be jealously and rigorously adhered to. Or, again, in matters of law, where some fresh case has arisen not contemplated by the framers of the law, and where to press the letter of the law would be doing an act of injustice in the very name of justice, a judgment is required which shall be, as we say, equitable rather than strictly legal. Or, again, in matters of trade there might be considerations which would make a man not extort the uttermost farthing, but abate something of his lawful claims; or when an offence was clear there might be circumstances which palliated, and so allowances might be made. These are a few instances of the way in which in human affairs judgments have to be made in the circumstances of cases as they arise, and not drawn blindly from general principles; and to do this rightly, to see in each case the fair course to

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pursue, is no easy task; it requires the habit of patient examination, detachment from self-interest, and the genius of quick sympathy. Nevertheless, difficult as it is, more a gift of nature, it might seem, than a virtue to be cultivated, it is this quality to which S. Paul exhorts the Philippians; it is this power in Jesus Christ by which he beseeches the Corinthians. There is a word in English which at one period of its history would have summed up this character exactly—*forbearing* rather than *assertive*, *equitable* rather than *over just*, *patient*, *considerate*, *gentle*—the word “*gentleman*;” but this was at a time when a poet could speak without scruple of our Lord Himself as “the first true Gentleman that ever breathed.”<sup>2</sup> At present we

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have no single word to express it, but we hint at it in such words as these—*forbearance*, *moderation*, *patience*, *gentleness*, *reasonable fairness*.

“Let your gentleness be known unto all men;” “I beseech you by the gentleness of Christ.” The root of this gentleness is a knowledge of human nature; and not a mere formal knowledge such as might be derived from books, or a mere general knowledge such as everybody gains who lives a certain length of time in the world, but a knowledge that goes deeper; that is not above knowing individuals, and knows them not as they appear, but as they really are, in all the wonderful likeness and diversity of their strength and weakness; that understands the word unspoken; that can see even in defeat the potency of success, and can give even a fleeting impulse its due, and so, if it may be, strengthen it into life. We have all of us, I trust, known people who have gone along with us some way, or at some point crossed our lives, who have left upon us an ineffaceable mark—people who have, as we say, understood us; who in some crisis of our life have given the right advice; who in some sharp grief have said the right word of con-

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solation; who when we were in despair have given us faith and hope, and bidden us be of good cheer; who took us by the hand when the thick fog was dull and heavy about us, and waited with us till the sun shone out once more; who did for us some deed in the light of which we are thereafter transfigured; it may be, forgave us some sin. And why they were so different from other people we could never tell; but they understood us, that is certain; when others praised or scolded, they “read our wound, our weakness clear,” and brought healing to it; they said the right word and did the right deed, that is all we know, but that made all the difference to us.

“Tact” seems a poor word and a commonplace quality enough in our ordinary use of it, but think for a moment what it really means: it means the faculty of touching rightly. To touch rightly, to touch to fine issues the complicated mechanism of a human being—could anything be more worthy our most eager and most patient enthusiasm; could anything human be more divine? On the other hand, to touch wrongly—could anything be more hazardous, more fraught with fatal, irremediable consequences? Yet think of the number of people even in our own little circles against whom we are constantly jostling, of whom we know so little and for whom we care less; whom, for aught we know, we wound habitually from mere excess

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of thoughtlessness. Think of the advice we pour out in all circumstances with such heedless glibness; of the foolish consolations with which we are so ready. Think of the cruel judgments we give each other about each other, judgments that have cost us no effort of thought, that have taken account of nothing but the most superficial characteristics—judgments that are nothing but the merest chance prejudice, and perhaps not our own at all, but some waif of gossip that has drifted in our direction, and which we busy ourselves to hand on, sometimes in malice, sometimes from abundance of leisure, and then leave to do its work. And, in a wider circle, how do we treat our dependents? Do we not sometimes forget that they are living spirits like ourselves; that beneath a necessary covering of reserve they hide as sharp griefs, as vivid happinesses, as our own; that life for them is no less real a thing than it is for us, only with less range and dignity of interest? Are we careful that they shall enjoy the means of gracious living? Do we note this defect and that, and put the proper remedies in their way, or are we simply distant and self-absorbed? And do we ever look out over a wider circle still, to those lives which pass away in rearing the fabric of our happiness; who sow and we reap, and who now and again send a cry to our ears, asking for the reason of it all? Do we earnestly try to understand their

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case? Do we set to work to think about it? Do we at least go and say to them, "Sirs, we are brethren"? Do our hands touch them with balm, and soothe and try to heal them, or do we merely pass by on the other side?

If such be our gentleness, think of the gentleness of Christ. Wherein lies the difference? In His knowledge: He knew what was in man. In His sympathy: He was touched with a feeling for our infirmities. He was not as we can so easily become—callous, dead of heart, blunt of hand, wrapt all round in a shell of selfishness, seeking our own, pressing forward through all obstacles to our private interests, inclined to treat all with whom we come in contact as so much occasion of profit to ourselves or else valueless. He looked at men, felt for them, understood them; and so He could give to each his own heart's desire—a word of forgiveness, a word of healing.

Take that scene in the temple reported by S. John, when the scribes and Pharisees brought before Him a woman taken in adultery. The sinner stood there covered with shame and sorrow; the accusers, to whom her shame was little and her sorrow less, were thinking only of their scheme to catch Him in His words; but our Lord, feeling her shame as if it were His own, stooped down to hide His face, and feeling their sins, said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a

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stone at her," so that they went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, and He was left alone to execute the sentence; and feeling her contrition, said, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." Or take the story of the multitude who had followed Him all day, listening to His teaching, and whom His disciples were for sending away; but He said, "I have compassion on the multitude." Or the story of the man whom the disciples forbade because he cast out devils in the Lord's name, although he did not follow with them; and Jesus said, "He that is not against us is on our part." Or the mothers whom the disciples rebuked for bringing their children; but He said, "Suffer... and forbid them not." Or remember the woman who was a sinner "in the city," who brought an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard, very precious, and brake the box and poured it on His head. He, though He cared more than they for the poor, and knew as well as they the value of the ointment, did not ask why the waste of substance was made, because He knew the love that poured itself forth in the offering.

In all these stories—and there are many others—what is it that distinguishes the conduct of our Lord from that of the Pharisees, and from that even of the disciples; that makes Him forbearing and gentle when they are ready to call down fire from heaven; that makes Him bless little children

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when they are struggling who shall be greatest, and makes Him forgive when they would condemn? Is it not just this—that He knew what was in man; that He judged of each separate case as it came before Him by all its circumstances; that He *understood* by His perfect sympathy? He was God, and God is Love.

This gentleness of Christ, as it depended upon perfect insight, could sometimes burn like fire. Now, this, to people whose gentleness is merely a selfish wish to be easy and undisturbed, a mere constitutional good-humour and good-nature, presents a difficulty. They have no conception—as how can they have?—of what is meant by the *wrath of the Lamb*. They regard it

as something to be explained away and apologized for. And yet, in fact, it was the very same power in our Lord, the very same penetration and intuition which said to one, “Thy sins be forgiven thee,” and to another, “Woe!” It was not that the sin of the murderer or adulterer was not utterly hateful and loathsome to Him that He forgave; it was because to the adulterer and murderer they had become loathsome too. But when the sin was glozed over with hypocrisy, repentance was impossible, and so forgiveness was impossible.

By this gentleness of Christ, then, St. Paul beseeches you, and He bids you let your gentleness be known to *all* men; not only to those who love  
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you—to your friends, to those who do good to you—but to your enemies also, to them which hate you and curse you, and use you spitefully; not only to the tender and winning, but to the uninteresting people—those who blunder and make your nerves tingle; not only to the quick and enthusiastic, but to the plodding dullard; not only to those who will appreciate your effort of self-renouncement, your agony of patient attention, but to those who would take without a thought, without a word of thanks, even the cup of water won by life’s blood from the well; and so doing, you shall be the children of the Highest, for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Oh that we could believe as well as say that the gentleness of Christ is the gentleness of God, who is Love; and that the fruit of His Spirit is indeed loving-kindness, and patience, and long-suffering, and forbearance, and gentleness! But oh that we would believe, too, that such fruit as this is not the sudden growth of a single shower or burst of sun, nor the chance growth of a plant wind-sown; it is not wild grapes we are to bear, but the fruit of the true vine, growing surely, steadily, quietly, under careful nurture, until it may become, to some fainting heart, a cup of blessing! Who can heal the sickness of the body unless he know, not only the disease, but the body? Who can forgive sins unless he can understand the spirit? Let us have

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zeal, but not zeal only, but quick insight and patient knowledge as well; let us have pity, but pity that has power as well as will; and sympathy that shall be sympathy indeed—a fellowship in suffering. And so we shall come to understand something of what the apostle means by the gentleness of Christ, and become in our measure gentle with His gentleness.

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<sup>1</sup> ἐπιείκεια.

<sup>2</sup> Decker. A “gentleman” is strictly a man “of family,” and “gentle” behaviour meant originally such conduct as might be expected from a gentleman, as contrasted with a “villain” or “churl.” Thus Chaucer says of his knight—

“Though that he were worthy [brave], he was wise,  
And of his port as meek as is a maid.  
He never yet no *villainy* ne said  
In all his life unto no manner wight.  
He was a very perfet gentle knight.”

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In Chaucer's day the ideal was somewhat superficial and fantastic, but so far as it went it was zealously cultivated, and, to judge from the "Canterbury Tales," it was in fact the ideal only of those of "gentle" birth. Two centuries later, Spenser, in the "Faery Queen," undertook to draw the portrait of a gentleman, and his ideal, while it was as aristocratic as Chaucer's, was much fuller and deeper, and was genuinely realized in the gentlemen of his day, of whom Sidney was the flower. But education, and with it the "gentle" ideal, had begun to spread to lower strata; and the man whom his contemporaries called the "gentle" Shakespeare sprang from the trading class; though in later life, as if to save the word its original sense, he applied for a grant of coat-armour. In these last days of universal education and publicity, manners tend to become more and more uniform through all classes, and consequently it is of more importance than ever that the ideal of the highest class should be a noble one. What do we mean now by a "gentleman"?