

III.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH

“Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them.”—S. MATT. vi. 1 (R.V.).

So the words run in the Greek, and in our Revised Version, and perhaps at first they sound strangely to us. When is it that we “do our righteousness”? Does not the psalmist testify, “There is none righteous, no, not one”? and do not we acknowledge ourselves in the Daily Office to be “miserable sinners”? It may be replied, perhaps, that David wrote many centuries before Christ, and therefore his judgment must not be treated as a perpetual prophecy; and further, that the phrase “miserable sinners” comes from a form of confession which no one need use who does not wish to confess. But the rejoinder would come, Can any man stand up and profess righteousness before God, “in whose sight the very heavens are not clean”?¹ And then it may strike us that Christ came to earth for this very purpose, to enable us so

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to stand. He came to reconcile us to God, and this atonement He would accomplish by drawing us in faith to Himself. Some He drew while He walked in Galilee; but He looked forward to His death and resurrection as the means of drawing many more—nay, the whole world. “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.”² Now, to be drawn by faith to Christ is to be freed from the power of sin. Sin and faith are antithetical terms.³ This does not mean that a man who has any faith at all in Christ can never sin, but it means that as a man grows in faith to Christ he ceases from sin. Perfect faith will mean perfect sinlessness. At present we see the face of Christ “through a glass, darkly,” and we know that sometimes we turn away from the glass altogether, so that we have to confess sins both of ignorance and wilfulness; but we know also that there are times when our trust in Christ and our obedience to His commandments carry us to actions which our conscience approves. On no subject is cant more deplorable than on this; and yet is it altogether an unknown experience to combine the sentiments of the Pharisee in the parable with the expressions of the Publican? Christ’s language about man’s sinfulness is altogether free from vagueness and hyperbole; when He blames He blames for definite faults which we

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can appreciate, and He is so far from declaring that man can do no good thing, that He assumes always that man, in his proper state of dependence upon God, has the power to do righteousness. “Whosoever shall do the will of My Father which is in heaven, he is My brother, and sister, and mother.”⁴ “Already ye are clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. *Abide* in Me.”⁵ And so here: “Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect. Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them.”

But the question remains, How, considering our actual shortcomings, can any of us be spoken of by Christ as righteous here and now? This is the question in answer to which S. Paul wrote two of his greatest Epistles. His answer was that according to Christ, a man is accounted righteous, not from a consideration of his works, but from a consideration of his faith in God; “we are justified by faith.” Human righteousness is not a verdict upon the summing up of a life, but it is reckoned to a man at any moment from a certain disposition of his spirit to the Spirit of God; a disposition of trust, love, reverence; the disposition of a dutiful son to a good father.

“Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness;” and so now, righteousness, in the only

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sense in which it is possible for men, means believing and trusting God. You see the truth of this in the various stories of forgiveness recorded in the Gospels, the constant formula of which is, “Thy faith hath saved thee;” and in an extreme instance you see it very clearly in the story of the penitent thief. He was pardoned and pronounced righteous—“To-day shalt thou be *with Me* in Paradise;” and yet he had done no works of righteousness; he had done nothing that could stand as a witness before God; nay, he acknowledged the justice of his sentence: “We indeed receive the due reward of our deeds.” But as he hung upon his cross he believed in God; he testified at the very least that the way of goodness was better than the way of sin, though they seemed at that moment to have led to the same shameful end; and that act of recognition, that bowing of his spirit before the Spirit of God, that prayer that God would look upon him and remember him though he had gone astray, was counted to him for righteousness; it was righteousness in the true sense in which righteousness is possible to man.

What Christ, then, means by righteousness is a right disposition of the human spirit towards God—a right *will*; the heart that wills nothing but what God wills; that says, “Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” Of course, such a will as this, if it has opportunity, must endeavour to

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perform actions that are good, as S. James is careful to point out, “Show me thy faith by thy works;” and in ordinary life we who cannot look within are often, or almost always, bound to judge a man by his actions, which are the fruit of his will. But God does not judge so. He can look upon the heart, upon the motives; and where we see failure and blunder, He may see right endeavour; and where we see success, He may see double motives, vanity, failure: so that the last are first, and the first last. And therefore our Christian creed is, that a man is accounted righteous by his faith in God, or, which is the same thing, by his love of God; that however he may fail and be feeble and stumble, he is yet accepted by God provided his will is right.

Does this Christian doctrine seem to you to make righteousness easy? Indeed, Christ by His gospel does make righteousness *possible*, and for that we may thank God. Even the foolishlest and weakest of us may love God, and wish to serve Him, and determine never to sin wilfully; but does Christ make righteousness easy? Does He not, indeed, also make it hard? For think, how many showy deeds of ours might have passed muster, if they could only be looked at by themselves, apart from our motives, but must now be counted “filthy rags,” in the face of this requirement of God’s, the *good will*. “Go ye and learn what that

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meaneth, I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” Not good deeds, not good words for themselves, but a good will inspiring them, that is what God demands of us. “My son, give Me thy *heart*.” Sacrifices which cost us nothing, or which were really bargains, so much given for so much praise anticipated; honesty which was not a keeping of the commandment, but only good policy; temperance that was only selfishness; chastity that was only fear of public opinion;—how they all dwindle and shrink in the face of this requirement of God’s, the pure heart, the right will! “Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of men: otherwise ye have no reward with your Father which is in heaven;” for righteousness done to

be seen of men would be no longer righteousness, since righteousness does not lie in deeds, but in motives.

There are two substitutes for faith which are regarded sometimes as the title for justification, against which a caution must be entered. The first is "good intentions." It is not difficult for a man to persuade himself that his good intentions will justify him. "Man," he says, "is weak through the flesh; he must come short. But God looks upon the heart; He knows I do not love evil for evil's sake; when I fall it is because circumstances are too strong for me. I mean to do right; my heart is right; O God, my heart is ready." But

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good intentions, so far from being in themselves acceptable to God, are well called the "pavement of hell."⁶ They differ from faith, as trust in one's self differs from trust in God. To see the difference in a striking instance, you need but recall S. Peter's great confession of love and worship for Christ which earned the great blessing, with his well-intentioned but faithless remonstrance which earned the great rebuke."⁷ Another common substitute for faith is "right ideas." There are those of a stronger nature than the others who know what conduct is right, and are shrewd judges of their neighbours, but seem to think it of little importance what kind of actions they themselves exhibit. Perhaps, if opportunity should ever arise for noble action on a grand scale, they would make the effort to show their virtue; but as such opportunities are slow in coming, the actions which they commonly perform are poor and mean, or worse. No, we are not justified by good intentions, nor by right ideas, but by faith in Christ, through which alone there comes to a man the grace which strengthens his will, if it be there that his weakness lies, or to overcome his pride and selfishness. And in faith we include the admiration and love of Christ, and the worship of Christ as King. If

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the heart is lifted up, if our prayers and praises mount upward, as to-night, to the throne of God, the answer in grace is certain, and more than we can ask or think; and then the week's duty that lies before us will be made cheerful and easy, and temptation will be foiled. Out of faith works will spring inevitably. For God does not despise our works; He Himself is a Worker, and He would have us work according to the commandment, "Six days shalt thou labour." And He judges our work, and praises or blames, and takes delight in our success. "I know thy works," He saith to all the Churches. Only, because these must fall short of His standard, He has promised not to judge *us* by them; *us* He has promised to judge, not by the works we do, but by the faith out of which they spring; and for the sake of that faith He will shut His eyes to the shortcoming of our works, though the works themselves must also be judged by fire in their own season, and all must perish which are of "wood, hay, stubble."⁸ But, indeed, our faith and love to Christ will abide when the night comes and no man can work; a time of which the shadow falls upon us, when we lie on a sick-bed and can do nothing; and long for work, and wish to offer ourselves to God in our works and can do nothing, not even pray; and all we have done shows worse than we could have dreamed it would, and yet we

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cannot add to it, or repair it, but must leave it in all its imperfection, in all its decay, to the mercies of God. At that day we shall find the comfort of the thought that God has promised to look upon the heart in judging us rather than the hand.

Such, then, being the great Christian doctrine of righteousness, that it lies in “faith,” in a right spirit, a good will, our Lord in the verses that follow applies this teaching in the three directions in which man’s will can work, viz. in its reference to God, to his fellows, and to himself, choosing as examples the three typical actions of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.

If all that God requires of us here is that we should seriously, and with all our heart and energies, *wish* and *long* that His will should be done on earth by us and all men, then prayer cannot be anything but an expression of this wish to God; we must pray that God’s will may be made clear to us and to all, and that our will may be bent according to it, and strengthened to perform it. So understanding prayer, we shall not be inclined to make public prayers for show, to be seen or heard of men; nor shall we be inclined to use repetitions that are merely idle.⁹

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Here, surely, if at all, here at the root of all, we shall be sincere and genuine and simple, making our requests known to God, that He may make His will known to us; speaking to Him as a child would speak to the father he loved and honoured. “Our Father, which art in heaven. Thy kingdom come. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses. Deliver us from the evil—this evil.”

And then for *almsgiving*, i.e. for practical benevolence of all kinds, in which we seek to benefit our neighbour. Here, too, the good will is everything. That is what the very word “benevolence” means—a good will to any one, just as the word

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“alms” means *pity*. And when we remember that, we see how much more than simply doling out relief is included in this Christian duty; it implies a good will to every one; a desire for the welfare of every one, in body, soul, and spirit; a determination to do all in our power for their welfare in the way it may best be achieved—by money, by counsel, by sympathy, by reproof, by instruction, by common joy, by placing within their reach the means of good living which we have ourselves found serviceable.

And, lastly, our will has its work to do upon ourselves; and so our Lord goes on to speak of fasting. Just as before prayer was taken as the typical instance of those acts by which we consciously place ourselves in the presence of God, and almsgiving was chosen as a typical action to include all benevolence, so here fasting implies all self-discipline, all endeavour of the will after its own perfection. For even when we know by God’s revelation what we ought to do, and set this commandment before us as our duty, how hard we find it to adopt! How clogged and fettered our will is by a multitude of desires for other things—lusts of the flesh, lusts of the eyes *i.e.* desires for comfort or praise, which turn away the will from its purpose! Who has not vowed to God, and broken his vow, simply from the lusts of other things creeping in? And yet our will

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could be strengthened and left free for its work, if we would but be serious with ourselves, and cut away some of these distracting passions. We need self-discipline, it may be even in its simplest form of fasting. How can we expect the body to be a fit instrument for the spirit’s use if we pamper it in all its demands, and cannot deny it one request? Let us all ask ourselves, Is my eating and drinking such as to promote God’s glory, by promoting my work; or am I conscious that my work would be better if I were more moderate in diet? And let us who are richer ask ourselves, Would my hand be less shortened for good works if it were less choice in

its luxuries? And again, let us all ask ourselves, How do I stand in regard to England's besetting sin of drunkenness? A man will tell you he avoids excess, and yet he may daily be growing more firmly fettered in the bonds of his evil desire; we see, if he does not, the hand growing unsteady, the eyes shifty, the whole character weak. Here, surely, is an opportunity for fasting. You can abstain if you wish? Then wish, and test yourself. You can check the headstrong horses that are hurrying you on the road to ruin? Then check them, in God's name, before it is obviously too late. Your will is free? Ah, give it at least a chance of freedom by cutting through some of its fetters.

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The way in which the season of Lent will present itself to each of us will depend upon the degree of our self-knowledge. To the man who is content to think of himself as no worse than his neighbours, whose notion of righteousness is the standard of conduct in his own little circle, Lent will seem a meaningless ordinance—a survival, perhaps, from some old monkish past, when men, it is supposed, had nothing better to do than afflict themselves. To the man, on the other hand, who is so far instructed in Christianity that he has firmly grasped the doctrine of righteousness by faith in God, the doctrine that nothing avails in the sight of God but a *good will*, a *right spirit*, Lent will present itself as an opportunity which he might never have had the wisdom or the courage to make for himself, but made for him by the courage and wisdom of his forefathers—a house of penance which he never builded—and he will take the gift and use it with thankfulness. And how will he use it? Like the earth waiting for the spring, he will soften and open his heart to the showers of God's truth, that he may be ready for His sunshine. No selfish soul can accept God's gifts. How then stands his will to Godward, how towards man? Does he sincerely and earnestly wish God's will to be done in earth everywhere and always, or only on the occasions when his own will is not in conflict with it? Is

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right the one standard by which he tests his actions? And does he sincerely and earnestly wish and work for the good of his neighbours? Is he always on the watch to help them, never to hinder? And does he find his will answer at once to the helm? Is to wish and to order the same act to him? Or, when the reason is convinced, does the will hesitate and falter and fail? Righteousness is indeed of faith—a matter of will, not of works; but it is also of *grace*. It is the gift of God. Who shall teach our will what is right, if not the grace of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ? Who shall inspire us with love for our neighbour, if not the love of God? What shall strengthen our feeble hands, and confirm our feeble knees, but the fellowship with our spirits of the Holy Ghost? Let Easter find us understanding more clearly the things of God, seeking with more earnestness the things above, both for ourselves and our neighbours, able at last to say "No" to some sin that now so easily besets us.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

¹ Job xv. 15.

² S. John xii. 32.

³ Rom. xiv. 23.

⁴ S. Matt. xii. 50.

⁵ S. John xv. 3.

⁶ An excellent illustration of this self-justification by good intentions will be found in Mr. R. L. Stevenson's story of "Markheim."

⁷ S. Matt. xvi. 13-23.

⁸ I Cor. iii. 12.

⁹ Of course, repetitions may not be idle. Our Lord has taught us both by example and parable to pray again and again for what we want, "saying the same words" (S. Matt. xxvi. 39, 42, 44; S. Luke xviii. 1). Nor can repetitions be called idle which serve to impress upon us the things for which we ought to pray, and to bring back our wandering attention. The experience of the pious Dean Donne has been at times the experience of most of us. "I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in and invite God and His angels within, and when they are there I neglect God and His angels, for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door; I talk on in the same posture of praying, and if God and His angels should ask me when I thought last of God in that prayer I cannot tell. Sometimes I find that I had forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it I cannot tell. A memory of yesterday's pleasures, a fear of to-morrow's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an anything, a nothing, a fancy, a chimæra in my brain, troubles me in my prayer" (ed. 1640, p. 820). It may be profitable as well as interesting to those who find themselves distracted, to learn from a distinguished physician that it is the attitude commonly assumed in praying which is a chief cause of the distraction. "In this position the flow of blood through the arterial system onwards to the brain, as well as its return backwards through the veins, seems to be particularly easy. . . . When one is led to assume it unconsciously, it seems to give rise to a rapid and sometimes almost uncontrollable flow of ideas" (Dr. Lauder-Brunton, in *Lancet*, July 2, 1892).