

SIMPLICITY.
(A Bible Study.)

BY THE EDITOR.

IN the course of our Scale How Bible Readings in St. Luke's Gospel, we came upon a discourse of our Lord's, so full of illuminating and connected teaching upon the subject of Simplicity that it seems well to draw the attention of parents to the Divine teaching on a quality which is the first condition of all successful work with children. The simple person can do anything with a little child, the unsimple loses the key and cannot force an entrance into a child's heart. When governess or nurse, aunt or uncle, even mother or father, fails to get hold of children, it is usually because he or she is a person of unsimple character. Our Lord, in his amazing discourse, full, as is all his teaching, of the philosophy of life, unfolds to us the nature of simplicity, and investigates the two causes which hinder men from living simple lives. We are unsimple, we educators, because we are insincere, or, because we are anxious.

"The *lamp* of the body is the eye" we are told; not "the *light* of the body is the eye," as the Authorised Version has it. Were this the case we should probably be right in saying that a "man can but walk according to his lights," however dim and illusive these be. But the eye is the lamp, the horn lantern, through which that light is to shine whereby the traveller sees his way, or which, when set upon a stand or candlestick—our settled circumstances or condition of life—shows light to those that are in the house. This lamp of the body is our power of spiritual reception and perception, that universal gift of spiritual discernment proceeding from "the Light that lighteth every man." We all know that we possess this gift, we say, "we will look into the matter," that such an one has power to "see into things." When the eye is single, the whole house of many chambers—heart and mind and soul—is full of light. We see our way and walk cheerfully onwards when the horn lantern is "single," but if the lantern be of double horn, or if it be cob-webbed, neglected, long disused, the light is dimmed to the point of extinction by the opacity of the

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lantern. We fail to see by that Light which lighteth every man and are at the mercy of every wandering Will o' the wisp of baneful and fitful light. We say of some people, that they are perfectly transparent, a good and beautiful thing. We say, everything is clear as day about them. We call them sincere, that is, clear (as honey free from wax). We all value these people, "open as the day." They are shining as a clear, clean lamp, letting forth light. Do we ask ourselves—Have we this single eye? The answer is to be found, not in anxious enquiries into our motives and feelings, but in out-shining of the light in simple, humble, pleasant doing of that duty which comes next. By turning the light upon ourselves we produce dark lanterns. The most profound sense of our own unworthiness, abject humiliation, these are but forms of that self-consciousness which is a turning of the light upon ourselves, and so presenting a dark lantern to the world. We may know when the light shines out, because then we see other people. Before, men are to us but "as trees walking." It is not only upon our brother that the search-light is cast, for the pure in heart, the single of eye, shall see God. The world hungers for the beatific Vision. It would fain satisfy itself with fame, prosperity, human love; but when all these are in possession the desire of men is still towards the vision of God, that final bliss, to be

discerned only as we have light, that Light shining in darkness and lighting every man which is born into the world, that Light of the world Who is our life.¹

Now we have the discourse interrupted. A Pharisee asks our Lord to dine with him. He knew what was in the Pharisees, but we never read of his refusing any invitation. The graciousness of the Divine guest is met in a spirit of carping criticism. He eats with unwashed hands. We wonder at the sudden and terrific burst of the wrath of the Lamb which follows upon the supercilious glances and inward comments of the Pharisees. Why was Christ, who was tender to criminals and patient with sinners, austere and terrible in his denunciation of the Pharisees? We understand better when we perceive that He is but continuing his discourse on the single and the double lantern, the simple and the unsimple soul. It would be a key to the [p 48]

better understanding of many of Christ's discourses if we perceived that He works out a single train of thought exhaustively in the face of many interruptions, frequently using these very interruptions to demonstrate his meaning. Our Lord would show what the simple soul is by this present example of the unsimple. These men were the religious formalists of their day. Doubtless they believed that they were the upholders of religion, the witnesses for the honour of Jehovah. Now the whole point of the invective lies in the fact that they believed these things, believed in the sincerity of their own lives and, yet, they are branded as hypocrites. Conviction was impossible to them, so double were their thoughts. So they began to press upon him vehemently and to provoke Him to speak of many things, laying wait for Him, to catch something out of his mouth. Upon this day was driven in another of the nails upon which Christ hung upon the Cross.²

And now the "many thousands of the multitude trode one upon another to hear Him, and He began to say unto his disciples first of all, Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." This would be startling. We can imagine that a feeling of complacency might have stolen into the hearts of the disciples. Anyway they were not hypocrites, whatever were their faults, that was not one. But they have not escaped. Christ bids *them* beware, be aware of this leaven of hypocrisy; they had heard Him speak before of leaven, they knew very well that "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," that leaven permeates the whole loaf through and through and cannot, by any human process, be separated from the bread; and they whom Christ calls in this very connection "my friends" are warned to be aware of the possibility of this leaven of hypocrisy in themselves. The very complacency with which they had possibly listened to the exposure of the Pharisees may have called down on them this more gentle rebuke. But how could they who had given up all and followed Christ yet be hypocrites? Alas, the danger of this damnable state, this eternal death of hypocrisy, lies in its insidiousness. Our rude modern notion of hypocrisy makes it the sin most easily to be avoided, most contemptible in the eyes of those who call themselves the [p 49]

"friends" of Christ. The hypocrite, in our view, is the man who makes believe in the eyes of others to be that what he is not; but our Lord flashes a searching light upon his friends and upon his enemies and shews in a way never to be forgotten that the leaven to beware of is the posing before the eyes of our own consciousness, making believe to ourselves to be that which we are not. The all-penetrating leaven is that which we call insincerity; insincerity as to what we are, what we think, what we purpose, which is, alas, "the natural fault and corruption of the

nature of every man," unless as he is illuminated by the Light of the world.

This warning is supported by three arguments. First, our inmost thoughts are and shall be known in this world as well as in the next. It is vain to make ourselves believe that we are other or better than we are, because neither God nor man is deceived, we alone are the victims of our own delusion. Next, why should we compromise and commit ourselves and make believe to be other than we are for the sake of any risk to our worldly well-being when the loss of life itself is not the great and final thing we think it is. Do not thousands of men, firemen, soldiers, miners and the like, face death daily in the simple doing of their duty to earn their daily bread? Why should any fear of consequences lead to disingenuous lives? And lastly, what cause have we for subterfuges when this life itself is in the care of God and the very hairs of our head are numbered. There is but one thing to fear, and that is the state of the hypocrite, the soul leavened with insincerity, which is the hell of the spirit here and, conceivably, hereafter. The insincere, the self-conscious, the self-regardful, these are they who do not confess Christ, who have reason to fear the condemnation of "I never knew you."³

Continuing his investigation of the subject of the single eye, or, as we venture to call it, simplicity, our Lord utters words more marvellous, if possible, more divine, than any others we have on record. It is as if He looked into the hearts of his "friends" and saw there questionings as to his wisdom in thus outraging the powerful Pharisee; as if He looked on further and saw the doubt of Thomas, the denial of Peter, and, gazing still beyond the present multitude, down [p 50]

the ages of the church's history, saw the anguish of perplexity which Huxley expresses in the words, "I had and have the firmest conviction that I never left the *vera via*, the straight road, and that this road led nowhere else but into the dark depths of a wild and tangled forest." Looking forth upon this dark and tempestuous sea of doubt, whose billows have beaten against the foundations of the Church from that day unto this, Christ says, "Everyone who shall speak a word against the Son of Man—" We feel the trepidation of the disciples, such a terror of failure as came upon them later when each asked, "Lord, is it I?" Thought is quick and there were no doubt searchings of heart in the very space of time it took to complete this majestic utterance. There is profound anxiety amongst them as to whether they are fulfilling their relation to the Son of Man. We all know the pang of a sudden conviction of failure in our relations with our closest friends, but "We needs must love the highest when we see it," and what other treachery can equal this of speaking words against the Son of Man! Our Lord saw, we may believe, quailing of heart in his disciples, and the anguish of doubt in thousands who have denied Him since; and He ends his sentence with the most divine of all utterances, equalled only by that word on the cross,— "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" — "whoso shall speak a word against the Son of Man *it shall be forgiven Him.*" Think of the thousands who to-day are, let us not say lost, but bewildered "in sinless gulfs of doubt." Such men are often our teachers, they have learned from above many things for our profit. They often lead lives of purity and beauty; but they have no place for Christ. We look on and are not puzzled. We know that their wisdom and goodness also come from the Light which lighteth every man. We know that the words they speak against the Son of Man are forgiven; and we feel some faint touch of the Divine compassion that they should be constrained to utter words of such infinite pathos as these:—"Though I have found lions and leopards in the path; though I have made abundant acquaintance with the hungry wolf, that 'with privy paw devours apace

and nothing said,' as another great poet says of the ravening beast; and though no friendly spectre has even yet offered his guidance, I was, and am minded to go

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straight on until I come out either on the other side of the wood, or find there is no other side to it, at least, none attainable by me."⁴ This will be forgiven, let us remember, to those who walk by means of the Light, but do not see it. For ourselves, let us rather bear in mind that we each carry that which is as priceless to a Christian as is her honour to a woman. Let us treasure our loyalty as our life, remembering it is the one jewel which a subject has to offer to his king. "Loyalty forbids," that old motto of the loyal house of Basingstoke, is the answer to every assault of doubt. The subject who is not loyal is, as a subject, nothing; and this is never so true as when the subject is a Christian and the King is Christ.

Then follows a sentence as tremendous in its condemnation as the last is amazing in its tenderness:—"Unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Spirit it shall not be forgiven." Why this difference in the divine regard of sins that seem to us equal, or, if not equal, perhaps we feel that blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is a less extreme offence than blasphemy against the Son of Man? If we consider that our Lord's discourse is not a series of disconnected utterances, but a closely reasoned-out and amply illustrated argument, based upon the thesis, "When thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light," we are better able to follow the thought in this most anxious passage. It is perhaps possible to speak words against the Son of Man in sincerity and with a single eye; but blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, that calling of evil, good, and good, evil, of which we read in the previous chapter—when the Pharisees declared that by Beelzebub, the Prince of the devils, He cast out devils—this comes only out of a heart leavened, permeated through and through in all its substance, by insincerity, which is hypocrisy. It is not impossible that that quality to which we give the gentle name of tolerance calls for our scrutiny in this regard. Do we say of "extortioners, unjust, adulterers," "Ah, well, the devil is not so black as he is painted; he is a good fellow after all; one might have done worse oneself in his place." Do we ignore the means by which a man has made wealth and social position for himself, and rest content with the fact that he is wealthy, and able and willing to minister to our

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pleasure? This is what the world calls tolerance, and it is very like, and yet essentially unlike, the charity of the Gospels. A fair test of the sincerity of this tolerance of ours is our attitude towards people who are fighting strenuously with any one of the evils of the world. Do we speak with heat and contempt of the missionary as a luxurious liver and a tiresome person, who does more harm than good; of the philanthropist as a meddling fellow, who cannot let well alone; of the temperance worker as a common sort of person with a crank; and do we say these things without any careful study of the questions we thus sum up? If so, it is not impossible that this tolerance of the world, easy towards vice and bitter towards virtuous endeavour, is this very sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. For this sin there is no forgiveness, because there is no place for forgiveness, there is no single spot of the nature in which the leaven does not work—"it leaveneth the whole lump." There is no hope of reform for the hypocrites who deceive themselves into thinking evil, good, and good, evil, but there is the larger hope—"Ye must be born again."⁵

Our Lord's thoughts return to the sincere, "His friends," and He foresees the suffering,

persecution, martyrdom, which has attended them, more or less, through the ages. For all these occasions of distress He gives a single command,—not a counsel, not an entreaty, but a command—“Be not anxious”; and from this point the discourse takes a new note. Our Lord deals with another doubleness of human nature, another cause which militates against the simple life, the plain seeing of the single eye. The object lesson, as usual, introduces the teaching. There is a man in the crowd who is anxious. He is suffering, so he thinks, from an injustice. He is anxious to claim his rights. Here is a teacher, who “spake as man never yet spake,” surely He will see justice done between him and his brother. But, behold, Christ flashes upon him the light of his truth, and what he believed to be the desire for fair play stands revealed to him as covetousness. His anxiety clouds this man’s lantern, and he, too, cannot see.

From this point, though the single eye is still the subject under elucidation, the discourse takes a new departure; a new thesis is laid down—“A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth”; a new

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warning is given to those which are his friends—“take heed and keep yourselves from all covetousness.” Then follows the story of the man who had such abundance of things that he had no place for them all. His very abundance was a care to him. Before he could sit at his ease and enjoy, he must build, get room for his belongings. An old Jewish story, perhaps, but never was it more true than to-day. “Things are in the saddle,” as Emerson has well said, and man is the hard-breathed horse under this pitiless rider. We accumulate furnishings and pictures and appurtenances and belongings without end, and we say in vain, “Soul, take thine ease and enjoy that which though [sic] hast got,” because it is the very nature of this fever of covetousness, this desire for the accumulation of things, that it grows on that upon which it is fed, and each new possession turns on, as it were, a dozen new desires. There is no middle way; only the one counsel will save us,—that we beware of *all* covetousness. It is interesting to observe how many thinkers have reached this conclusion from quite another standpoint. Men who begin, not with a thought of obedience to Christ, but with desire to find some panacea for the world’s evils, tell us that there is no hope for us until we learn to do without “*things*.” I heard a well-known clergyman, who is working in the East End, say, the other day, that if anything could induce him to give up this work, it would be the desire to preach simplicity of life in the West End. Already many people are beginning to ask themselves, not what can we have, but what can we do without. People begin to see that a *room*, from its very name, implies space, space for people to move in and simple seats, like William Morris’ rush-bottomed chairs, for example, where they may sit and talk to one another; places which are cabinets, which are upholsterers’ stores, which contain more than space and seats, tables for occasional uses, and a few worthy art objects to satisfy and educate the eye, these should not be called rooms, for that is precisely what they are not. But our Lord does not limit his warning to “*things*,” though He emphasizes these. He bids His “*friends*” beware of *all* covetousness, for covetousness begets envy, and envy is as the rottenness of the bones, and the envious are excluded from heavenly places. This is true whether we covet a new gown or a lovely vase, advancement in life or our neighbour’s social advantages. Nor is that covetousness of the heart which we

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call jealousy exculpated. It would seem as if our Lord stripped us of the flimsy apron with which we cover the nakedness and poverty of our souls, and shewed us once for all, that much of that

which we dignify under the name of anxiety, and pity ourselves for enduring, shews, in the Light of life, as covetousness and of which we must be aware. This is true even when we have wrongs to endure, or when our anxiety is for others. There is no hint that the covetous man preferred a *false* charge against his brother, and it is very possible that wife and children were objects of his care. Even so searching is the word of God.⁶

There are few things more gratifying than to perceive that the mind of the Son of Man worked as our minds work, that a subject develops in his thought according as it would do in our own. And now we come to another such exquisite gratification; we perceive that the Son of Man is a poet also; and is there a poem in all the world which so fulfils all the functions of poetry, which is so full of sweetness, refreshment, rest, illumination, expansion, as that poem which bids us “Consider the lilies of the field,” and “the fowls of the air.” All poets see and know, and inasmuch as He sees with an unbounded vision, sees all the past and all the future and all the issues of life, how could our Lord not be a poet? These words are so dear to us all that it is hardly necessary to dwell on them. But see how large is the Divine thought. Beauty should go beautifully, and it is with grace and fitness as the lilies of the field—possibly the red anemones of southern Europe and Palestine—that our Lord would garb the human form divine. And for meat, how well for the birds who have a table ever spread with the food of their desire; and in this lavish and gracious measure, our Father knoweth that we have need of these “things.” How well the apostrophe fits our anxious hearts—“O, ye of little faith.” That is just it; we are not without faith, but we have so little, and the “doubtful” mind expresses our state so precisely. We *may* not be of doubtful mind, we *may* not be anxious, for this also is a form of insincerity and obscures the light of the Christian soul whose business it is to shine. Education is an atmosphere, and nowhere else do we get the atmospheric conditions proper for the living soul set before us in a manner so exhaustive, as in this discourse of the Son of Man.⁷

¹ St. Luke xi. 33–37.

² St. Luke xi. 37–54.

³ St. Luke xii. 1–8., R.V.

⁴ Professor Huxley’s Article on Agnosticism (*Nineteenth Century*, February, 1889).

⁵ St. Luke xii. 10–13, R.V.

⁶ St. Luke xii. 13–21., R.V.

⁷ St. Luke xii. 21–31., R.V.