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The Parable of the Money-lender and his Debtors (Luke vii. 41-47).

BY PROFESSOR W. M. MACGREGOR, D.D., GLASGOW.

THIS Parable is so embedded in a story that it cannot usefully be treated alone. It was devised by Jesus in order to help His table companions to understand what was going on before their eyes. On the surface, no reading but the one seemed possible. Here was a notorious wanton—a creature without restraint and without shame, who had slipped into a men's dinner-party, and, lying now behind a couch, was clinging to ('toucheth' in v.³⁹ is much too colourless) the feet of one of the guests and covering them with kisses. It looked so impudent and bold that the Master's endurance of it called for explanation. So He gave it to them, declaring how He interpreted both the woman's behaviour and the mind of God towards her and her like. Parable and incident hold so closely together that neither can be rightly read without the other; and a multitude of readers, forgetting the Parable, have actually blundered into the astounding mistake that her sins were forgiven on account of her love, though that, as John Weiss says, 'strikes the parable a blow in the face.' Nothing could be plainer than its assertion that love is the consequence, not the occasion, of forgiveness; and when Montefiore drags in Goethe's famous ballad of 'The God and the Dancing-Girl' as a parallel, one can only stand amazed at the stupidity of which commentators are capable.

1. Jesus' explanation of the bewildering emotion of the scene is contained in three words in His apologue—a certain money-lender (v.⁴⁰), they had nothing to pay (v.⁴²), he freely forgave (v.⁴²). These give the whole story. This reckless girl had awakened somehow to the sense that she was at the end of her resource. Year after year she had laughed away any thought of to-morrow or the life she was living; but time ran on and the claims mounted, and now when all was to pay she realized that she had nothing in hand. Jesus made use of a grimmer and more sinister word than the vague 'creditor'; He talked of a money-lender, the tyrant of the improvident. By shifts and promises and renewals his day may be postponed, but he will not always be played with; and when he acts

it is with effect. Commonly he contrives to have the Law on his side; he can point to conditions known and accepted, which must now be fulfilled, and, with whatever reluctance, the judge has to support his claim. The age of Jesus knew nothing of an easy bankruptcy and discharge; in another parable (Mt 18³⁰) we read of a debtor thrown into prison, or even (v.³⁴) 'handed over to the torturers till he should pay all the debt.' The use of such a word in this connexion is one of the audacities of Jesus; but like His servant Paul He was bold to say, 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked,' for in the background of every human life He recognized an element of the inexorable. And this poor girl had drifted under the appalling shadow of that.

There is no need for laying stress on what Robert Burns calls 'the quantum of the sin.' It has been maintained by some that the way to the Father's heart, and the best robe, and the high seat at the banquet lies through the harlot's house and by the swine troughs, and Jesus Himself declared that some who had been last would in the end be first. 'Christ has but little thanks,' says Bunyan, 'for the saving of little sinners. He gets no water for His feet by His saving of such. There are abundance of dry-eyed Christians in the world, and abundance of dry-eyed duties too—duties that were never wetted with the tears of contrition and repentance, nor sweetened with the great sinner's box of ointment.' No one can read the Gospels without noting the Lord's leniency towards the sins of passion. It is clear that He felt that the energies which carry many into grave fault are vital energies, and that if these could only once be captured they might rush men on to sainthood and heroic service. To Him the one thing unendurable in man or woman was to be neither cold nor hot but tepid, for He believed in life and in the burning heart, which flings itself vehemently upon its chosen course. But whilst this is true we must not run to the perilous conclusion that great sin naturally tends to a man's advantage as giving rise to a greater love. It often leads rather, as Paul

notes (Eph 4¹⁰), straight to insensibility, which is also Burns's witness :

It hardens a' within
And petrifies the feeling.

It is not the mere quantum of the sin which counts, but the sense with which it is regarded. Paul claimed that according to the Law he had himself been blameless, though he confessed himself the chief of sinners. Bunyan talks savagely of the exorbitance of his own offences, and yet he protests his own chastity in a lewd age, and he has nothing worse to charge against himself than a vile habit of cursing and an excessive fondness for dancing and for games on Sunday. The appeal is not to any outward standard but to one's own quickened perception.

What Jesus here suggests is that a man, whether his fault in actual amount be great or little, is left without excuse as soon as he comes face to face with God ; he knows that he has nothing to pay. These two debtors were conscious that all the legalities were against them, and that they were exposed to everything the Law prescribed. Nothing could be gained by pleading or by promising ; the blunt fact was that they were beaten, and they knew it. And that, says Jesus, is where this woman woke to find herself, where nothing could be done or even hoped for. Life turned upon her a face as grim and un pitying as that of any usurer, and thus she was thrown back on her self-reproach and her impotence and despair. But then, to her amazement, a door opened and she passed through, leaving these behind. She found herself in 'a new-washen earth' where cleanness was expected of her, and the powers of life were full. Her debt had been forgiven, and she herself was sayed with such a salvation ! And it had come unsought. Do you wonder, says Jesus, that she is moved ? Do you dare to reproach her, you chill-blooded creatures who never once faced God nakedly in your sin, because her behaviour is passionate and wild ? It is in the first amazement of pardon that she has come here, and if she is beside herself it is to God.

Was there ever an interpreter like Him of this queer human heart, where strand is intertwined with strand, lovely things with things base and hateful ? Often we angrily draw back from the blundering misjudgments of neighbours, but all things are naked and open in the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

2. The Parable also gives us Jesus' reading of the mind of God towards baffled, beaten creatures. Comments are often passed upon the naturalness of the parables of Jesus, but there is room also for some note of their occasional and deliberate unnaturalness. In His thoughts of God our Lord was governed by the conviction that God's ways are as much higher than ours as heaven is above the earth, and thus the ordinary standards do not apply. The vine-grower who gave a full day's pay, and who gave it first, to all late-comers who attempted no bargain with him, was clearly an exception in his class. Jesus of set purpose depicts him as what we call 'a character,' unlike anybody else. And when commentators speak of 'the Parable of the Two Debtors,' they are leaving out what is far the most interesting figure, for that is the money-lender, who again is a character, a solitary specimen. The question raised at the close—Which of the debtors will love him most ?—is one which the ordinary usurer would hear with a smiling sense of irrelevance. I do not want to be loved but to be paid, he would say ; if sometimes I make a blunder and give loans which cannot be recovered, I write them off as bad debts, but I am not caught again by the same person. He ceases to concern me. But here is a money-lender of another class, who actually finds pleasure in being loved, who not only forgives men's iniquities, but crowns them with loving-kindness and tender mercy. It is no wonder that David should exclaim : 'And is this the manner of men, O Lord God ?' or that Samuel Rutherford should call himself 'God's drowned dyvour,' or bankrupt, sunk beyond reach of any grapnel in the ocean of his debt and of God's unfathomable mercy.

This reading of God's nature as infinitely unlike the ordinary ways of men appears often in the teaching of Jesus, and it was confirmed by His behaviour. Whilst Simon watched his Guest with the woman at His feet only two constructions of the scene looked possible : either Jesus did not know what kind of life she had led, and thus He was no prophet, or He did not care, and thus declared Himself indifferent to morality. But what if God is not like men, but loftier ? and what if this Man of Nazareth is here to show us the extent of this unlikeness ? Sir John Seeley notes how Jesus might have justified His claim to be the Founder of a new society and the Judge of men by sheer miraculous power or by overmastering persuasion ;

'but He adopted a third plan which had the effect not merely of securing obedience but of exciting enthusiasm and devotion. He laid men under an immense obligation.' That exactly matches the account which Jesus gave of the ways of God to men. So far from being rigorous in exacting His dues, He shames and bewilders men by the profusion of His bounty.

When we try to do justice to the Lord's sketch of this extraordinary usurer, and assume for the moment that the love of a forgiven debtor may possibly be of interest to Him, we find that Jesus has frequently uttered that assumption. Twice over in St. Matthew's Gospel (9¹³ 12⁷) we find Him borrowing words from Hosea in which to describe God: 'I want leal love from you, and not sacrifice'—the free moving of the heart, and not any formal gifts. In all that Jesus says about the Divine pardon there is never a suggestion of a *quid pro quo*—of something offered or something done in any quarter to make forgiveness possible. It was left to theologians coming afterwards to devise such suggestions, and they have so elaborated the notion of securing satisfaction for God's honour and God's law as to obscure the instinctiveness of His mercy and the amazement of it. In labouring to explain how it became possible for God to pardon, they have drifted away from the naïve confidence of Jesus that God's forgiveness needs no other explanation than that it is His 'nature and property to show mercy and to forgive.' Luther speaks for a great host of scholars under Christ when he explosively concludes, 'Therefore shall this word "satisfaction" continue no longer, and it shall be dead in our churches and our theology, and handed over to the judges and schools of the law where it belongs, and whence the Papists took it.' God pardons, so Jesus protested, not because the account has been cleared and equity now demands it, but wholly because He delights in mercy. It was enough for the Publican in the Temple to say—God be merciful to me the sinner! and God was merciful. In both the debtor parables (Mt 18²³, Lk 7⁴¹) no reason is suggested for the discharge of the debt except the plea of empty hands. 'They had nothing to pay.' The sole underlying assumption is of a magnanimous God, whose heart is clear for mercy. The Prodigal Son, on his way home, found the Father running far out to welcome him, without any consideration of slighted dignity or of outraged law. These may engage the attention of

divines, they had no interest or reality for Jesus. To Him it was clear that God forgives because He wishes to forgive, and because His heart is very great; and it is perilous for us to seek to be wiser than our Lord, or to carry up our hampering precedents and analogies into a world of larger air and clearer sight than ours. It is in the definite context of forgiveness that Isaiah asserts of God that His ways and thoughts are higher than ours; if the wicked will only return to the Lord, he has said, God will abundantly pardon, and then he adds: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts,' restricted, encumbered, without effect. 'He will abundantly pardon.'

3. But though Jesus asked for no equivalent or guarantee in pardon, He did look for a reply and a result. In this woman and in all who have known the magnanimity of God, He expected appropriate fruits of character. Magnanimity begets its like: we love, says John, because He loved us first (1 Jn 4¹⁹). Love is not the occasion of forgiveness, a remedy for the disease of sin; as Coleridge says, 'In the large apostolic sense of the word, charity is the health which comes through use of the remedy,' and it was in this sanguine fashion that our Lord anticipated the woman's future. 'Go into peace,' He said; for love, which is the fruit of pardon, was already showing, and He was convinced that it would not be blighted. In this He was simply renewing the confidence of the greatest of His predecessors, for when Jeremiah proclaims the coming of a new covenant, under which all men for themselves and without need of any teacher shall know God, he adds, as the vital force which makes such revolutions possible, 'I will forgive their iniquities, and their sin I will remember no more.' This reign of law in the heart, of right instinct and right conduct, is to be set up by one huge act of Divine magnanimity. There Jesus and Jeremiah were at one: Divine forgiveness first, and, following upon it, love and health and moral order.

He knew the heart too well to be staggered as they were by the extravagance of her demonstrations. What He dreaded much more was spiritual torpor, for He cordially believed in life, even if sometimes it ran to excess. A widow, in a burst of noble providence, flung her last coppers into the Temple treasury, and faced the next day with no security except the faithfulness of God; and from Jesus she gained unstinted admiration. A rich

youth, forgetful of his rank and the people's talk, came running and fell at Christ's feet on the public road to ask the way of life, and the Evangelist records that Jesus loved him. In this woman the tides were running in breast-high—hope and gladness and life and love; but Jesus did not cynically reckon that what had 'flowed like the Solway would ebb like its tide.' He believed in the power of God's mercy to create a goodness that can endure, and a goodness of a more heroic sort than is engendered by the sober moods of every day. Bunyan justly distinguishes the 'dry-eyed duties' and notes how often they stop short of the highest. The Pharisaic spirit, says Bruce, may sometimes protect a man from sinful excess, but at the same time it may disqualify him for heroic virtue, and doom him to 'moral monotony and mediocrity.' But where the amazement of God's love had been discovered, and glowing love had sprung up in response to it, Jesus looked for something great in achievement. For emotion, at its noblest is that which impels and inflames and invents and persists.

But does it persist? Is it not bound in the nature of the case to burn itself out? And is there not a store of sad experience pointing in that way? Certainly there is, and Jesus knew of it, and He sometimes warned His friends against the perils of unsteadfastness; but He did not therefore abate His confidence in the renovating power of emotion. The flame of love is bound to burn down, but what

of that if the steady glow persists? The first of Luther's Wittenberg theses was—'When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent, He intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence'; and in the same way Jesus would have claimed that love ought to last on unchilled through all of life, renewed perpetually by the love which first enkindled it. In the Revised Version of forty-five years ago few alterations came home more closely than the change from past to present in Rev 1⁵. 'To Him that *loved* us' was familiar and most worthy, but it has the defect of suggesting that that love belongs to one particular point in history, whereas it is timeless—yesterday and to-day the same, and for ever; and therefore the Apostle wrote, 'To him that *loveth* us.' His mercy is new every morning, and every morning the wonder of His patience astounds and silences the heart, so that the impulse which once launched man or woman forth on ways of gratitude is continually renewed. Love now is not content to fall at His feet weeping; it works and dares and endures all things, for the emotion persists though in altered form, and finds expression in self-forgetting service and in prosaic fidelities. And if in any one this overmastering gratitude for the mercy of God seems to die out, the remedy must be sought in some fresh manifestation of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which alone can bring men back to His feet.

Literature.

THE TEXT OF ACTS.

THE appearance of another volume of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, edited by Professors F. J. Foakes Jackson, D.D., and Kirsopp Lake, D.D. (Macmillan; 30s. net), is a notable event in the theological world. The leading idea of this new series of studies in Christian origins is to continue the work begun by the late Bishop Lightfoot in editing Christian documents both critically and historically. Part I. of the series treats of *The Acts of the Apostles*, as being the first documentary source for the beginnings of the Christian religion, and the aim is, or was, to extend the series down to the time when the

Christian Church obtained official recognition by the Roman Empire. We trust the learned and distinguished editors see to the end of their great undertaking.

Part I. will consist of four volumes. The first volume, which appeared in 1920, seeks to portray the Jewish, Gentile, and early Christian Backgrounds of the Acts. The second volume, which appeared in 1922, discusses the composition and purpose of the Acts and the question of authorship, giving also an account of the history of the literary and historical criticism of the book. The third volume, now before us, offers *The Text of Acts*, and is for the most part the work of Professor