

Man's Spiritual Development as Depicted in Christ's Parables.

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THE logical and historical sequence of Christ's parables given in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark has not only the notable although latent parallel of those recorded by Luke to give it confirmation. Any thoughtful consideration of the parables in the light of this parallel cannot fail to suggest several collateral lines of further commendation. Among these the most obvious will be the conformity of this sequence with the course of that spiritual experience in man to which these parables refer. It is of this that we here propose to treat.

Matthew's record of the parables, illumined by that parallel series supplied by those which Luke reports, makes it manifest that Christ's first teachings in this form dealt with the natural moral condition of mankind. It is here as Paul states it: 'That is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural.' In Christ's opening parable a full recognition is made of the defective morality and more than deficient spirituality of the natural man. There is a soil for the good seed, but no natural preparation of this for its receipt. The soil in the main is bad, and in large part incapable of culture without severe and costly treatment. The natural influences, too, affecting this field for the growth of the Word are in no way helpful to its preparation for the seed, but, on the contrary, most injurious to its value for agricultural purposes. The soil on which the seed falls is in large measure no tilled field, but a trodden and traffic-worn highway, the mossy covering of a rock, or some neglected piece of land, now a tangle of weeds. There is a wild variety of soil, but withal a general hopelessness in the prospect. It is only where the husbandman has been at work that the good seed of the kingdom has any chance of falling into fallow ground. A power outside of anything inherent in the soil is thus recognized as necessary to its fitness for any productive reception of the seed.

And is not this true to the state of man as the gospel finds him? There is diversity and gradation in the moral condition, ethically all sorts and conditions of men, but no promise of fertility on

the spiritual side apart from gracious and providential dealings at the hands of God. The procuring causes of this moral backwardness and spiritual non-receptivity are suggestively depicted in the parable. There is the natural selfishness, the neglect of moral discipline and culture, the heart-hardening engrossment in commercial and secular pursuits. Whether represented in the early parables as abandoned soil, lost coin, or straying sheep, man's state as here set forth reveals no element of self-recovery.

The fact that Christ's initial parable finds a field ready for the seed, while indicating a general unpreparedness for this, suggests that Old Testament verse, 'I am found of them that sought me not.' But while this is so, the view we are taking of the parable as a representation of man's natural state, points to recovery at the hands of another as the first need of the case, and to some apprehension of this as the most that can be looked for from man. This hopeful element we find, in the Parable of the Prodigal, represented by his recollection of his father and his home, 'the glories he hath known, and that imperial palace whence he came.' Nor is it only here, at this point in the parabolic teaching, that we discover some gleam of hope in the picture. In a less self-conscious symbol it appears as the corn which mingles with the Tares in the field of contending moral influence. For God hath not left Himself without a witness, and no man is wholly separate from Him. In the Parable of the Good and Bad Fish too, we have an early reference by Christ to the great consummation of all things as a survival of the fit, the mention of which thus soon points to that 'haunting of us by the Eternal Mind, those high instincts before which our mortal nature doth tremble like a guilty thing,' that dread of doom and boding lack of an immortal hope ever interwoven with man's separation from God.

It is on this unpromising scene that two distinct and yet related things are now introduced in the next group of parallel parables. Luke's contribution gives us the cry of man's distress, the

entreaties prompted to by his consciousness of need, while Matthew and Mark present us with the mystery of life at work, effecting strange and surprising results. Here on the one hand we have those parables which tell of the Growing Corn, the fermenting Leaven, and the spreading but tiny-seeded tree, corresponding on the other hand with those relating the supplications of the Midnight Borrower, the Importunate Widow, and the Penitent Publican. Here man asking God to be pardoned, protected, and provided for, and so seeking for life, gets the life that is everlasting. The prayers represent but the utterance of urgent and immediate wants, while the hidden life here told of, although almost indiscernible in its early workings, has a potency in it, alike as regards its inner and outer manifestations, which time and eternity too are needed fully to disclose. These parables of growth furnish the Synoptic equivalent of the new birth or regeneration of John's Gospel, the new creation of St. Paul.

The parables on prayer indicate for us no less the means of maintaining than gaining the divine and everlasting life. In regard to both alike we ask to receive, our petitions affording the best indication that we are realizing our condition and its needs, and thus apprehending that for which we are being apprehended of God's quickening Spirit. The divine life, too, has not only its beginning, but its manner of development set before us in the growth parables. Looked at conjointly, the two sets of parables remind us that it is rather of his needs than of his possible gains and advance, that man is at first apprehensive, and doubtless this is the normal spiritual progress.

The divine grace and eternal life, as blessings to be gained, are for the first time thus depicted in the next group of parables. This is most obviously done in the parables of the Hid Treasure and the Priceless Pearl. The gain is represented as a personal one, and as sought after in a distinctly selfish spirit. This but emphasizes that eager recognition of a great gain which is the advance to be marked here. Even the prodigal's escape from the service of the far country has been pictured but as a return home and the renewal of advantages formerly enjoyed. Here, however, the attractions of immediate possession and permanent endowment are both seen to be aroused by the discovery of hidden wealth, and even fear excited, lest the possible prize should fall into the hands of another.

At the stage we have reached we can appreciate the forward movement here. It is something when a man can even for himself recognize the value of the heavenly treasure. For being what it is, this cannot fail ere long to eradicate the selfish element from his nature.

And, indeed, in the very getting of the treasure, this process is already at work. For the finder's present 'all' has to be sacrificed in order to its acquisition, and in this a higher and better self is seen to have overcome the lower one. This thought of an ever better acquisition, secured at the cost of what had hitherto been most highly prized, is given expression to in the traffic of the pearl merchant, repeatedly parting with his best jewels to acquire still better ones, till at last the great pearl is his. And it is by such trading with and exercise of spiritual gifts that we grow in our possession of them, 'for if our virtues did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike as if we had them not.'

A further note, in this profit and loss aspect of the kingdom, is furnished by the Matthean parable of that Unmerciful Servant, whose lack of grace to his fellow-servant caused him to forfeit the grace he had obtained for himself. Matthew's 'good and bad' parables, with Luke's 'lost and found' ones, have shown the need of man's recovery by God, and in order to this of man's recognition that he requires to be put right with his Maker. The growth and prayer group of parables following these have set forth his possibilities of securing eternal life. And now this Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, succeeding the two which tell of the discovered wealth, declares this treasure to be grace. Already the Matthean parables have taught us that its due appreciation and exercise are essential to its receipt, that it must be thus purchased and passed on to others. And now that the nature of the treasure is disclosed, we see why it could not well be otherwise.

But this matter of grace being Luke's special subject, it is very fitting that the parables recorded by him should set it most fully forth. Suitably enough we find the value and wide scope of it depicted in the parable he puts first of all. Matthew's view of Christ's kingdom is primarily from the moral standpoint, and the frontispiece of his parabolic record is found in that picture of the various soils on which the good seed is sown. Luke starts not with this Parable of the Sower, but with that of the Two Debtors, finding men most

radically differentiated in respect of their attitude to grace. It is his appreciation of this, which enables Luke to give the parables which tell in plain terms where the priceless treasure lies, and in what manner the heavenly pearl merchant carries on his gainful business. This he does by recording the tale of the Rich Man who threw away his chance to win it, where, in dying Lazarus, it lay there at his gate, and by relating how the Good Samaritan acted, in order to make clear his title to the heavenly inheritance. The Matthean parables on this matter have taught us that without desire for, and sacrifice to get it, there can be no winning of the hidden treasure; while these Lucan parables, with that of the Unmerciful Servant, clearly proclaim that without a practical graciousness there can be no grace. Grace, indeed, is of such a nature that it cannot be where it does not shew, while its normal course is to shine ever more and more until the full-orbed day. Its human manifestations are of a moonlight nature, reflexions of the heavenly light, which man can only give by looking to and basking in the glorious sunshine of God's grace in Jesus Christ. And of this Matthew's parable reminds us, while Luke's Parable of the Two Debtors shows the fitness of the dense dark orb to be thus illumined, and utilized.

His recognition of grace is the coming to consciousness of the divine life in man. He may apprehend in dim fashion his disjunction from goodness and from God. He may feel his need of pardon, and protection, and spiritual provision at the hand of Him with whom he has to do. But, as taught in Matthew's parables of discovery, it is the vision of God as He is, and the ambition of being His, and becoming like Him, faith's sight of the beauty of holiness and the exceeding grace of God in Christ, which alone sets the soul on fire with devotion to the Divine Master. And hence it is only when in conscious possession of the new life and God's favour that the divine claims upon man assume for him their true value and importance.

And here at this point, as elsewhere, the parabolic representation answers to the growing requirements of the spiritual life. For it is of the divine claims that the parables now proceed to tell. Matthew, true to himself as Jew and moralist, sets these before us in the order of service, relationship, and occupancy, in the parables of the Labourers, the Two Sons, and the Husband-

men. Luke puts service last and occupancy first, in the Parables of the Barren Fig-tree, the Farm Servants, and the Pounds. The former arrangement is suggestive of the history of the Israelites, whose settlement in Canaan only at last comes as the reward of their service and crown of their relationship to Jehovah, while Luke's is more in keeping with the course of man's experience in this life. And in this connexion it is interesting to note that the three parables in Matthew are all reproofs adapted to the case of the Jewish people, to whose leaders the two latter ones were addressed, while the symbol of occupancy in the Lucan Parable of the Barren Fig-tree depicts very suitably the individual man in his natural estate.

Luke's sequence of these parables is thus seen to be the more appropriate one for our present study. To the man made alive to God's grace and that sense of divine indebtedness which this brings with it, no thought of himself will at first be more in keeping with his feelings than that of a cumberer of the ground. For to the conscious recipient of the divine grace, no reflexion is more natural than that of his own unworthiness and ill-desert. As he now regards this world and his place in it as of God, he will readily recognize in the Parable of the Husbandmen the gracious picture of his case, as the tenant of a good landlord who but looks for his just return in man's rendering of the fruits of the ground in their season.

Luke's Parable of the Farm Servant indicates that natural spirit of duty begotten in the man who is conscious at once of his dependence upon and affectionate relationship to God. His place in the divine household makes a ready and reverential obedience of his Master at once an obvious duty and a pleasant task. In the Matthean Parable of the Two Sons we have this, the spirit of adoption, compared with the false and hypocritical form of it which is divorced from its power. Like the prodigal in an earlier parable, the disobedient son in this one serves to remind us of that relationship to his Maker, from which he who does not appreciate and accept His fatherly grace distinctly turns away.

The Parables of the Labourers and of the Pounds set before us, in the two forms of the toiler and of the trader, that duty of divine service which lies on every recipient of God's grace. In them the

spirit and motive of service are put before every other consideration. The former, in keeping with the genial employer, must be that of grace and its appreciation; the latter, no solely commercial one, but that of loyal devotion and faithful stewardship to a gracious king. Grace, then, lies at the very root of all these divine claims, nor for so responsible a tenancy, so exalted a relationship, and so great a service, can any other inspiration be sufficient. Still it should be noted that the divine claims here set forth do not spring out of grace, nor are they so represented. Man, as the intelligent creature and offspring of the Beneficent Being who has formed and fashioned, and who provides for and protects him, may well recognize that, as such, God has claims upon him of stewardship, of reverence, and of service.

Hitherto the progression of the parabolic teaching in relation to the course of man's normal spiritual experience has been a most obvious one. The appearance, however, of those parables of judgment which mark the close of Matthew's parabolic record, may at first sight seem here rather out of place. But while dealing with judgment, these parables have as their subject the most advanced fruits of the Christian life. For it is the qualities required for the due discharge of man's high functions as the guest, the steward, and the partner of God which are here set forth. They thus treat of man's response to the grace, the confidence, and the fellowship of his Maker. Even this bare statement of the case reveals the holy ground on which we are treading. For to what an elevated position has his recall from the far country and his access through grace to the Father brought this erewhile prodigal son!

Grace is no less the Omega than it is the Alpha of the life which is hid with Christ in God. It is at man's direst peril that he dares to get beyond it. But of that dire peril man needs to be reminded, and no less at late than early stages of his spiritual course. And so in the course itself is there provision made for this, for as it brings man ever nearer to the light, does it cause the darker shadows to be cast around him. It is before the vision of the divine glory, and at the recognition of his renewedly gracious Master, that the Hebrew prophet and the Galilean apostle are abased at the sight of their foulness and their sins. Fittingly enough, then, at this late point,

in the excuses made for declining a royal invitation, and in the despite done to a gracious host's festal robe, are man's attachment to the things of this present life and his indifference to the divine grace forcibly set forth.

Vigilance and sagacity are qualities which presuppose experience, and are the outcomes not of immature but of ripened character in the spiritual realm. A paradox is presented no less in the personification of the former by bridesmaids, than in that of the latter by an unscrupulous agent. But conjointly the two Parables of the Ten Virgins and the Sagacious Steward give embodiment to Christ's commendation of the harmlessness of the dove with the wisdom of the serpent, and, indeed, serve to indicate how these are two essential aspects of the same virtue. Carelessness and over-concern for selfish interests are both alike represented as having their risks for the soul. And the lesson in either case is that a growing appreciation of God's grace and an ever-deepening gratitude for His daily mercies are man's best safeguards against departure from the path of life.

If these parables warn us too of the need alike for keen inspection and sharp outlook, the next pair, which includes Matthew's last parable, surely suggests the retrospect and prospect of a closing life. This Parable of the Talents, with its solemn after-discourse, strikes the note of doom more loudly than any other, while Luke's equivalent, that of the Rich Fool, echoes it in no less tragic fashion. The lurid atmosphere of these closing parables stirs thoughts of that darkening ere the dawn in nature, of which, as finding its counterpart at times in the experience of the dying Christian, a Scottish poet-preacher has sung. Nor should we for our comfort fail to mark this as a note in the glorifying passion of our crucified but triumphant Lord.

It is also to be noted that the last of the Matthæan parables gives, of all in this record of our Lord's teachings thus expressed, the fullest and clearest and least parabolic account of the great distinctions of the ultimate hereafter. It is authority over much and the joy of his Lord into which the faithful servant enters, while it is no Hades even, but the outer darkness into which the unprofitable one is cast. And hence there follows here, suitably enough, Christ's account of the great judgment scene of final separation, fitly

concluding His last and most solemn discourse in the temple.

Our study has thus, we think, made it apparent that the historic course of Christ's parables, as given in Matthew's Gospel, is one which fully

fits in with the normal development of the divine life in man, and that the parallel with these parables, which can be formed from those found in Luke, admirably serves to confirm and establish this.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF DEUTERONOMY.

DEUTERONOMY XXII. 6.

'If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way in any tree, or on the ground, with young ones, or eggs, and the dam sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young.'

EXPOSITION.

'If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way . . . thou shalt not take the dam with the young.'—This law is peculiar to Deuteronomy. It is generally considered to rest upon a humanitarian motive (cf. 25⁴), and to direct regard to be paid to the parental relation in animals (cf. Lv 22²⁷); but Fenton (*Early Hebrew Life*, p. 48) thinks it 'rests upon the idea that one may have "right of user" in the bird to the extent of sharing in its produce; but one may not claim entire possession of it.'—DRIVER.

THE Israelites were forbidden to take the mother bird with the young, perhaps because the mother at such times will not avail herself of her power of concealment and flight. The object of the law was to cultivate a merciful regard for the maternal instinct, not merely to preserve game.—G. E. Post in Hastings' *D.B.*

EVIDENTLY the ground of sympathy here is the existence and sacredness of the parental relationship. The mother bird is sacred as a mother; and length of days is promised (v. 7) to those who regard the sanctity of motherhood in this sphere, as it is promised to those who observe the Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue. Thus intimately the lower creation is drawn into the human sphere.—HARPER.

THE SERMON.

Birds' Nests.

By the Rev. Joseph Parker, D.D.

What a singular command to find in a Book which we should expect to be wholly occupied with spiritual revelation! What lessons has it for us?

i. It is a most powerful illustration of the minuteness of Divine government. If God is so careful of a bird's nest, surely He will be pro-

portionately careful of all things of higher quality—human hearts and human homes.

ii. It is not enough for us to keep the law in great aspects; we are called upon to pay attention to the most minute features of character. We are called upon to do this for no pedantic reason, but because the morality of the Bible goes down to every root and fibre of life. In the smallest act of daily life the moral element is present. Our life must not fray out in loose ends while we are content if the middle portion is fairly well connected. Our small acts are an index to our whole character. The man who can take care of a bird's nest because it is right to do so—not because of any pleasure which he has in a bird's nest—is a man who cannot be indifferent to the circumstances of his fellow-men.

iii. Our motive for being careful of little things must be the right one, or our carefulness is worse than useless. We all know the man who is careful of his horses and dogs, and careless of his children and servants. His feeling is pedantic, it is a mere expression of vanity. How then shall we distinguish between a right and a wrong consideration of small things? Christ Himself tells us. The right consideration of the lower becomes still tenderer kindness to the higher. He tells us how carefully a man looks after the life of his cattle, and then He adds, 'Are ye not much better than they?' In Old Testament times the hand was called into active requisition, and was made to do much in the way of moral industry, but He who called the hand into such service intended through it to find a way into the heart. But we live in New Testament times, and the morality of Christianity is intensely spiritual. If we pass by a bird's nest, and desire it, but do not take it simply because the law has forbidden it, we are in our