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PIETY AND MORALITY

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TWO SERMONS,

PREACHED IN THE

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, YONKERS, N. Y.,

DECEMBER 9TH AND 16TH, 1877,

BY THE PASTOR,

T. RALSTON SMITH, D.D.

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I

ROMANS 13:8.—“*Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*”

This portion of the Epistle to the Romans is a standing proof of the dominion which the Christian religion asserts over the whole domain of practical morality. The state of divorce which has sometimes been assumed between piety and good morals was something unknown to the Apostles. With them faith implied obedience, and obedience covered the whole life, both in its divine and its human relations. For a long time it has been growing more apparent that this primitive view of a man in the matter of his duties to his fellow-men is distinctly conceived and held as a principle of conduct by the church itself, and the doctrine which it has fallen under reproach. And new attention is called to the importance of relieving the Christian from unjust imputation,

(RECAP)

by requiring the Christian conscience to set up the old standard of morals, and to maintain it with the same loyalty we expect and require in matters of doctrinal faith.

The teaching of this chapter has reference to the duties of men toward the government and toward one another. The verse preceding the text says, "Render, therefore, to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor." Then come the words which form a fitting climax, and which gather up the whole scheme of duty under one comprehensive principle, "Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law."

I need hardly pause to say that this precept does not forbid commercial credit. It does not mean that it is an unchristian thing, or an immoral thing, in itself, to be in debt. Without credit the great trade of the world would be an impossibility. The true sense is that all obligations, political, business and social, are to be discharged. They are incurred with definite understandings, and under definite rules, and are to be met faithfully. But the obligation of love can never be discharged. It is renewed as often as it is exhausted. Love is never satisfied. There is no point at which we can stop and say, "We have done all that love requires." Here we must always be paying, and yet always be in debt.

Love is something which we owe perpetually. It makes an incessant demand upon the moral nature. And only he who admits the unlimited responsibility imposed by love can be said to fulfil the law.

To the same general effect the Apostle wrote to the Galatians : " All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this : thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The reference, of course, is to the second table of the law, as separate from the first. But in both, love is alike the underlying principle of obedience. The primary authority for thus reducing the expression of the law to a single word is the supreme, divine authority of the Lord Jesus Christ himself : " Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." From this point of view nothing is easier than to defend the spirit of our religion. Love to God is true holiness. Love to man ensures uprightness. The wisdom of the world can find nothing here to improve.

Society, however, has been forced to take note of some very mournful facts. The recent records of wrongdoing have stained the reputation of the church to an unusual depth. Men long believed to be good have fallen, notwithstanding their Christian professions. The

fact has not only awakened consternation in the bosom of the church, but it has led to very grave discussions in the secular press. If in these discussions some things have been said very wide of the mark, and very unjust toward evangelical religion, we may none the less be glad that the debate has arisen. Wise men may learn, not merely from the wholesome warnings of friends, but also from the intemperate criticism of enemies. And if the church is founded on that solid basis upon which we believe it to stand, it has nothing to fear from the most rigid inquiries, from any quarter, into its principles, or the methods of its teaching.

For the sake of simplicity and compactness we may propose to ourselves two questions, which it concerns us to settle honestly, and which we ought to be as eager to discuss as the world may be eager to impose them upon us. The first is, how far is the church responsible for the moral lapses of Christians? The second is, what remedies are to be applied, on the part of religion, to ensure the prevalence of a purer and loftier moral tone?

It is important here to note in what sense the church and religion are identical, and in what sense they are distinct.

The power and value of the church do not reside in any absolute ecclesiastical authority, or in any intrinsic saving virtue. Whatever legitimate influence the church

possesses, it has only as it holds and inculcates the truth of God. We measure the claims of the church by the claims of that divine system which it is appointed to maintain and extend. Hence the ideal church is the exponent of revelation. It is the working out, in an organized form, of principles which are derived immediately from God. So far as the church is true to the theory of its structure and spirit, it can neither advance beyond the sacred teachings, nor fall short of them. In this view, to say that a man is a member of the church, is to say that he is a religious man. He does not belong to the church as he belongs to a political party, or to a club. His relation is determined by his spiritual status. Faith in Christ logically involves the confession of that faith by an intimate and indissoluble union with the institution to which God commits the custody of his oracles, and the spiritual nurture of the soul. To this extent, and in this sense, the church and religion are identical.

On the other hand, however, it must be admitted, as it must equally be admitted in respect to all institutions which embrace the human element, that the ideal is superior to its realization. This indeed is essential to progress, as much as it is the inevitable consequence of an imperfect state. To regard any attainment achieved by men as a finality would be to stop the process of growth, and to circumscribe unwarrantably all the inducements to virtue. Hence religion is not to be judged

solely by the lives of those who profess it. The church as we find it is not the ideal church. The religion founded by Christ, and delineated by the Apostles, goes far beyond any practical development of its principles which the world has ever seen. If the church were far purer than it is, the same thing would still be true to a less degree; and it ever must be true to some degree, so long as the conditions of human nature remain what they are.

In this sense, therefore, we may distinguish between religion and the church. We cannot at all separate them. We cannot put one over against the other. We cannot make religion one thing, and the church a different thing. We can only concede that so far as they are not coincident it is because religion is divine, and therefore perfect, while the church is made up of men, and is therefore imperfect. The standard erected is unimpeachable. The church sets up no lower standard, and confesses no other aim than the attainment of it. But the performance may still fall far below the promise.

In so far as the difference reaches no deeper than this, it is clearly unjust that religion itself should suffer prejudice simply because the religious life is not always found moving on the highest plane. Yet it is not altogether unnatural, however it may be indefensible, that men at large should transfer the poorest qualities of the church to the faith it professes to hold. They are

prone to judge of the gospel by the lives of its least faithful adherents ; and where the church is weak, they are apt to attribute the weakness to a defect in the principles on which it rests. Nothing could more clearly enforce the necessity of a universal watchfulness of Christians over their own hearts and lives, that they may not only save the truth from absolute reproach, but may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour by the beauty of consistent and honorable behaviour.

In considering the responsibility of the church for the evil which may be found within it, the first inquiry obviously is, whether the truth which it holds and teaches is in anywise defective. On an issue so simple as this it would seem that few words need to be expended. The universal creed of the church is contained in a single, compact volume, which has remained unchanged for eighteen hundred years, which nothing in the shape of philosophy has been able to supersede, and which is accessible to every man who wants to know what the faith of the church is. The Bible, professing to be the direct revelation of God, has proved itself the only permanent standard of belief and practice ; and it is the only book which has held its ground, refusing to be amended, and yet claiming always to be abreast of human progress. Through all the multiplicity of its teachings there run two great and parallel laws, which are never lost sight of. One of these requires supreme love to God, a love

than which nothing can be more excellent, since it is the love of infinite holiness, justice and goodness. Nor are these qualities admired simply in the abstract. God is a personal being. His attributes are manifested in his government of men. And to love him is to love a ruler who is perfectly pure, and who displays his character in rewarding the good and punishing the bad. Anything loftier than teaching like this it is impossible to conceive. Nor can we propose to ourselves any affection which is more likely to re-act upon one's self in the formation of a good character, than the sober, honest, intelligent love of a human soul for a holy God.

But the practical difficulty is more with the other branch of the question. It is at least hinted that in this exaltation of the thoughts heavenward, the earthly obligations of men are apt to be treated as of light account; and that the enthusiasm and sentiment of worship becloud the perceptions of the mind in respect to the mutual duties which make up the morals of society. The second great divine law comes in as the complete answer to all such criticisms: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." This, the Divine founder of the church declared to be the supreme rule of mutual duty. It is the summing up of religion on its human side. No more radical or sweeping, no more beneficent principle could possibly be framed in language.

When we come to the expansion of this law, to its application, to the divine measurement of its scope, we find the utmost rigor in the precepts of the New Testament. Take for example this very chapter in the Epistle to the Romans. All the volumes on morality that have ever been written cannot go one hair's breadth farther ; and can go as far only by echoing the Apostolic teaching. The second table of the Mosaic law is recited in detail, a law which, though some men may have chosen to overlook the fact, is as binding now as it ever was. And then, to cover any possible exception which the perverse ingenuity of the heart may assume to make, the rule of love, as it came from the Saviour's lips, is re-asserted with this exhaustive comment, " Love worketh no ill to his neighbor." Here is a deadly blow to all selfishness, to all deceit, all fraud, all oppression, all wrong-doing of every kind between man and man as individuals, or between the individual and society.

Consistently, throughout the New Testament, is this supreme ground maintained. The works of the flesh are put in sharp contrast with the fruits of the Spirit. Unholy anger, idleness, lying, stealing, malice, deceit, are unsparingly denounced. Things true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report, are commended. The love of money,—not its possession, not its legitimate enjoyment and wise use,—but the covetous greed of money, is condemned as a prolific root of evil. And so all

through the writings of the Apostles. Indeed, to one who has never taken pains to collate such passages as these, it will be matter of astonishment how much space is given in the New Testament to the discussion and enforcement of morals. The Christian law follows a man incessantly. It covers his whole life, inward and outward. It recognizes no separable and contradictory functions of the conscience. There is one unalterable rule, demanding obedience in all the relations of the being. Every word and every act, no matter whether in worship, or in trade, is to be the offspring and expression of love.

Wherever the difficulty lies, therefore, it does not lie in the nature of the Christian doctrine, or in any want of fullness and explicitness in the Scriptural representation of it.

The inquiry naturally follows whether the church, having an all-sufficient body of instruction in its keeping, is unfaithful in giving that instruction to its members. Such unfaithfulness there could be in any one of three forms. First, positive error might be inculcated; or, secondly, without the actual teaching of error, important truths might wholly be suppressed or neglected. I do not believe that either of these faults can justly be alleged against the great body of recognized religious instruction in our day. No book of Christian morals, and no Christian pulpit, dares to depreciate the second table of

the law, dares to tell men that they owe it no obedience, dares to hint to them that their disobedience is a matter of secondary moment. Nor is there ground for supposing that, with any conscious and deliberate purpose, those who are charged with the exposition of God's word suppress and hide what it says about the duties which men owe to one another.

But there is a third method of misleading men which requires a somewhat fuller notice. While abhorring false teaching either in its direct or indirect form, the church might so destroy the balance of truth, might so neglect to maintain the equipoise between its two sides, as practically to divert the attention from the positive and emphatic claims of morality. This very course is now alleged against it in a prominent quarter. "It is notorious," we are told, "that with the great majority of teachers, the emphasis of preaching is laid now, and has been for ages, on the dogmatic and pietistic elements of religion, rather than on the moral and practical,—on faith and feeling, and not on deeds and principles. What is the grand object," the critic goes on to ask, "of all those plans of salvation which constitute so large a part of the popular theology, what especially of this very doctrine of the Atonement on which such enormous emphasis is laid, but to find some other way in which a person can escape from the penalty of his sins than by that of his own life and conduct?" "Even

with those preachers who recognize in some degree the importance of the moral element of Christianity, it is not as an equal factor of religion, good in its own nature, not as a quality which of itself and independent of faith in Christ will ever help in the salvation of the soul, but only as an offshoot of piety, and dependent for all its value on its being done out of love to God." And much more to the same purpose.

Now here is a very grave issue to be met. In so far as there is any plausibility in this statement, it is essentially a quarrel with evangelical religion, though it may at the same time furnish us some salutary hints. The pulpit does declare that for a man to be honest will never save his soul. But the pulpit declares it because the Bible says so. "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight." If this is not true, the fault does not lie with the pulpit or the church, but with the Christian religion itself. Revelation comes to man just because the light of nature is insufficient, just because schemes of morality have been demonstrated to be incapable of restoring the soul to the divine favor, just because the wreck and ruin of the race have been established as facts by the gross and fearful immorality which has prevailed in all ages, and which has defied the efforts of philosophers and rulers. We have no hesitation in avowing that the primary and immediate end of the gospel is not to make men virtuous, but to save them

from the just condemnation under which they lie for having fallen from virtue, and to place them in a condition in which virtue and uprightness shall be possible. If a physician is called to see a man who has exhausted his vitality by all manner of excesses, and brought himself to a dangerous pass by willful vices, the first object is to cure him. Of what use would it be to preach mere morality to such a man? Tell him that henceforth he must lead a pure life, and his answer will be, "I must first be made alive. I am already undone. The question is whether I shall live at all. This nature of mine must be renewed and built up, before I can choose and follow the right. I want a remedy for the past, and not simply a rule for the future." By trying to cure that man, the physician is not misleading him as to his duty, he is not putting a premium upon his sin, he is not underrating the importance of surrounding him with moral checks, and planting within him sound moral principles. The whole process of final and permanent restoration embraces both the cure and the proper means of perpetuating its benefits; but the primary and all important end is one of recovery.

This illustrates, by a fair analogy, sufficiently close for our purpose, the true office of the Gospel. The Gospel is a remedial scheme. It comes to men dead in trespasses and sins, and offers to re-instate them in the favor of God by virtue of the substituted righteousness of

Jesus Christ. The condemnation on human wickedness has already been passed. There is no escape from it, under a perfect law and a perfect government, except by an atonement. Jesus has died, the just for the unjust. There is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus. The specific object of a religion given to fallen men is, and must be, that of cure, of rescue, of salvation. Morality is not at all a factor in the scheme. Skepticism may make the most out of the concession, but the concession is inevitable, unless we abandon the Gospel altogether. And the mere religious moralist is the last man to demand this, because he can oppose to the genuine, however limited, success of the Gospel, only an unbroken series of absolute failures on the part of every scheme which has attempted to take its place.

But it shows a very narrow perception in any one to say that because honesty is not an equal factor with the blood of Christ in the work of man's salvation, therefore the Gospel does not put morality as high in the scale of Christian duty as it is possible for it to be placed. I have already shown that it does. The most exacting could require no more emphatic and abundant testimony than I have quoted from the divine word. The Bible does say to every soul, "your own righteousness cannot save you," but it equally affirms that you must be righteous or you can have no well-grounded hope of salvation. It does not teach that if a man has faith, it is

of little account how he lives, but it does teach that faith without works is dead. It does not allow that if men only profess belief in Christ they may gamble, steal, sell their votes, cheat the widow and fatherless, assist in the oppressiveness of corporations, or be tricky and dishonorable in politics. On the contrary it assures men who do these things that their professed faith counts for just nothing at all. This indeed is the inexorable logic of the Gospel plan. Faith is such an apprehension of Christ as makes the believer one with Christ. The union produces Christ-likeness, limited only by the conditions of a finite nature. And Christ-likeness is shown in a life which respects and observes the will of God in little things as well as great, in morals as well as in worship.

Thus far then the record of the church is defensible on the highest grounds. But perhaps we may not be altogether so ready to assert that the pulpit has preserved the true balance of the truth in its teachings. I deny that it is in error. I deny that it means to suppress or neglect any vital subject. But may it not be that insensibly it has come, in some instances at least, to lay too little stress upon the preceptive part of religion, and has allowed men to drift into some very defective views as to the relations of morality to piety?

If this indeed is the case, it may partly be laid to the fact that there is a two-fold function in the pastoral

office, and that the harmony of parts has been disturbed by the obscure notions of a good many Christian hearers. In every pulpit two things have to be done. One is to preach the Gospel to impenitent men with a view of saving them, through their repentance and faith. The other is to teach the Gospel as a rule of conduct for Christians, with a view of educating, elevating and strengthening their piety, and leading them to all manner of good works. The essential importance of the first can never be over-estimated. There is no greater thing which any man can be the instrument of than the saving of an immortal soul. Every pastor exalts and emphasizes this part of his work. I call you to witness that in this pulpit it has ever been made a matter of the very highest consequence. And I have striven so to preach Christ to your souls that if any of you refuse to accept Him I can say honestly that I am pure from your blood.

Nevertheless the distinctive work of the pastor is the spiritual training of God's people. And the trouble is that they do not always see this to be the real fact in the economy of His kingdom. It has long been an injury to the church that a great many people judge of a pastor's work solely by the number of conversions under his ministry. They never ask whether his people are gaining in scriptural knowledge; whether they are being rooted and grounded in the faith; whether they are be-

coming more laborious in Christian service, more self-denying, more benevolent, more like the Master in spirit and life. All these great questions are passed by and forgotten in the perpetual inquiry, "how many have been added to the church." The pastor is mistaken for the evangelist, and the edifying of the body of Christ is set aside and sacrificed in a professed zeal for souls.

This error is partly due to wrong education and false habit; but is it not also in good measure to be ascribed to the sluggishness of the religious life? How often, when men talk of saving the unconverted, do they mean by it simply that the pastor shall save them, while they merely look on and admire? To magnify this work is to distract their attention from their own hearts and lives. In emphasizing evangelism they soothe consciences that might else be troubled by the neglect of self-culture. So long as souls are added to the church they assume that the church is all right within,—an assumption as gratuitous and unfounded as anything can be. If these additions were always the result of a vigorous church life, shown in the fidelity of every Christian to the work appointed him, the inference would indeed largely be a just one. But to put the numerical growth of a church wholly in the place of its inward growth in heavenly graces is to sap the very foundations of practical piety.

There are multitudes of Christians who understand this, but I fear there are larger multitudes who do not.

I mourn over the reflection that everywhere there are professors of religion who do not really want religious education. I have known Christian people, who have been trained from childhood in the soundest faith, to abandon the church of their fathers because they could not endure the preaching of the doctrine of eternal retribution. We continually find church-members running after excitement, instead of food ; seeking entertainment, rather than instruction ; and regarding the pulpit as a human rostrum, or an exhibition platform, rather than the official post of God's ambassadors, who come to them freighted with messages from the throne of heaven. All this shows an utter misconception of Christian responsibility. And even where the mistakes are not so excessive, we still have the plainest evidence that there is a too general disrelish for instruction, in the insensibility with which instruction is received—the slowness with which it is responded to.

What wonder then if, in some instances, ministers, however well-meaning, find themselves yielding to the clamor on the one hand, and the lethargy on the other, and trying to excite, with condiments, the digestion which refuses plain food ? What wonder if we do not hear, as often as we might, the good old substantial doctrines on which our fathers were nourished ? What wonder if there is some timidity about driving at the Christian conscience, and telling professors of religion to their faces

that what is wrong in a moral point of view is wrong in a Christian point of view, and that for a man to pretend to be religious when he is not pure in his morals is a flagrant mockery of the gospel.

So far as the pulpit thus gives way to men, pandering to their tastes and prejudices, I would hold it responsible. But I regard as still more seriously responsible the false tastes and false demands which so largely distinguish modern religion. When the whole church wants honest and fearless preaching it can have it. When Christians really desire to be established in the knowledge of the truth, and educated in the activities of a holy life, they will find ministers only too glad to gratify them. But so long as there is any considerable drift in the opposite direction, the ultimate tendency must be to weaken the sanctions of religion, and to encourage men to make piety a thing of sentiment, wholly apart from the sober realities of the earthly life.

But all this forces us to take note of a difficulty yet more radical. Why is it that there is so wide an aversion to sound and sober teaching from the pulpit? It is surely not that it is least interesting. However dry it may seem to some in any particular instance, it is certain to wear better than any frothy and showy substitute. There must be a cause deeper down than the mere itching of the ear. And this cause lies, I apprehend, to a great degree, in the increasing worldliness of the church. The

church and the world are not as distinct from one another as they once were. Christians as a whole are not careful to live in the world as not of it ; to use the world as not abusing it ; to set their affections on things above, not on things on the earth. In their business they give too much place to a worldly spirit. In their recreations they are too eager after worldly amusement. Social practices once gravely questioned are indulged in without the raising of a suspicion. Practical piety is reduced to a very small amount of church-going, and a secondary interest in the great vital concerns of God's kingdom. Christians are tempted to put themselves in competition with those who have no pretense to Christian principles ; and to make the competition equal, they must meet the world on its own ground. The greed of the age has infected the holy precincts of God's temple. Self-sacrifice is too seldom regarded as the normal law of a holy life. And when men chafe against the barriers that restrain them they soon find a way to break them down. Hence, of necessity, the great doctrines of God's holiness and justice begin to offend. The voice of the law sounds harshly. The principle of retribution becomes offensive. The grasp relaxes upon the great, fundamental truths of religion. Errors are easily taken up. The heart begins to sympathize secretly with the skeptical speculations of science, and to question the foundation on which faith has been accustomed to rest. It becomes unpleasant to

hear vices rebuked, and the unhealthy conscience condemned. Men begin to demand, as they did in Isaiah's day, that God's prophets shall not prophesy right things, but rather speak smooth things and prophesy deceits. And so it follows that the religious sentiment must be weakened, and religious principle disregarded, to such an extent that even in the church itself crimes may be perpetrated that horrify society, and dishonor the Gospel in the sight of all men.

I regret that the other branch of our subject must needs be kept for a separate discussion. There may, however, be an advantage in leaving you now chiefly to consider the peril in which we stand, the difficulties with which we have to grapple. Thank God, there is yet a vast deal of true and sound piety to build upon. There are men enough yet loyal to the faith to secure a revival of the primitive belief and the primitive practice. There are multitudes, here and everywhere, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. I see before me an abundant representation of real spiritual piety, of high Christian integrity, to which I may confidently commit the weighty matters I have now felt called upon to deal with. Let us do what in us lies to check incipient skepticism in the church. Let us teach our young men that no success in life, no glitter of fortune, no gratification of ambition, can atone for the loss of moral purity. The great demand of the law is that we love one another

with that love which neither works ill to our neighbor nor suffers us to work such ill in a sphere apart from our religion. The piety that does not insist upon honesty, equity, faithfulness to trusts, and honorable dealings in all things, is a delusion. The piety that does not force a man to shrink from dishonor rather than from poverty is not the piety of love, not the piety of this heavenly Gospel. The one obligation that can never be shaken off, never wholly discharged, never put among the things of the past, is the obligation of love. To that we must be faithful at every sacrifice. And though to the eye of worldly wisdom the spirit of love may seem a poor substitute for earthly ambition and shrewdness, it will enjoy an approbation greater than that of the world, the approbation of Him who never forsakes the righteous or disappoints their trust in His paternal care.





II

I JOHN, 2 : 3, 4.—“ *And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*”

In continuing the discussion which we were unable to complete on the last Lord's day, I can choose nothing more pertinent to the subject than these words of the Apostle John.

It is here implied that the chief attainment of a human soul is the knowledge of Christ. The Son of God stands in such a relation to the race, that its most radical want can be supplied only by an acquaintance with Him. It is not a matter of option whether we shall know Him or not. No other knowledge can be put in the place of this. It will not answer merely to know about God as the Supreme Being, or to know about His law. Jesus Christ is to us the very essence and substance of all spiritual truth. To know Him is to know the Father. To know Him is to possess the Holy Spirit. In a word, it is to be transformed within, to be regenerated.

to be made into a new creature. Hence this knowing is the knowledge which is confined to a believing and loving heart. We may know *of* Christ without knowing *Him*. We may be possessed of every fact in His history, without having a personal interest in His work. We know Him, in the sense of this text, only by the inward communion which springs out of faith in Him as our Redeemer. This knowledge is essential to salvation and holiness. If we know Him not, we have no part in Him.

If such knowledge is thus radically important, there is nothing after it so important as the clear proof that we possess it. The Apostle tells us there is such a proof. It is a single and a simple one, easily seen and appreciated by ourselves and others. We know that we know Him if we keep His commandments. This is the final and all-sufficient evidence. It is not profession that settles the matter. It is not excited or tender feeling. It is not solitary deeds, however glittering. There is just one thing that can establish any man's claim to be a real Christian, and that is, habitual obedience to the will of Christ. If any one declares, "I know Him," and yet does not obey Him, the truth is not in that man. Whether he misconceives the whole case or deliberately means to be a pretender, it must still, of necessity, be admitted that the ground of his profession is wholly fallacious.

Here is another evidence of the vital connection between personal religion and right living. The commandment of Christ covers all the moral relations of men. It requires them to love God and to love one another. It exacts truth, justice, equity, charity, sincerity. Nothing that a man ought to do toward himself, toward his family, toward society, toward the State, escapes the notice and regulation of Christ's law. And the conscious weakness and insufficiency of the human nature in respect to all these duties is met by that unfailing supply of wisdom, strength and grace which comes from the indwelling of a divine principle.

Taking this comprehensive scripture as the broad basis of our inquiry, we are now to consider this question, What can the church do to ensure the prevalence within it of a purer and loftier moral tone?

Our investigation so far has had reference to the degree of responsibility attaching to the church for the moral lapses of professing Christians, so many painful instances of which have startled and humiliated us within the past few years. We are substantially told, by critics who stand without and look on, that the church as an aid to good conduct, is, on the whole, a failure. It is more than hinted that the virtues of those Christians who have maintained their integrity must be ascribed to something different from the influences of their religion. And we are virtually called upon either to abandon the

claims we make in behalf of the Gospel as a complete and effective rule of life, or to make good those claims by presenting hereafter a cleaner record.

In meeting this issue we have been obliged to confess that the church has suffered deep reproach by the flagrant wrong-doing of not a few of its members. Some of the most cruel offences against good morals have been laid at the door of those who have long been the accredited disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot wonder or find fault if people have begun to ask very seriously why this is so. And in seeking an answer to this very proper question, I think we found, to our entire satisfaction, that it is not because the Scriptures are defective on the score of moral teaching. No system of ethics could possibly excel the word of God in the breadth and minuteness and rigor of authority with which it requires an observance of all the virtues.

We also saw sufficient reason for the belief that the Christian church, in giving and expounding the Scriptures to the people, neither teaches actual error on this subject, nor silently suppresses the truth. If it is in fault at all, the utmost that can be affirmed is, that evangelism, so excellent in itself, has, in a measure, been allowed to crowd out the supreme duty of building up the Christian character. It is a fair, as it is a most serious question, whether we are not conspicuously overlooking the interior needs of the church, and suffering

the hearts of Christians to drift too far away from the doctrines which promote their personal sanctification.

If there is any reason for believing this to be the fact, some light is thrown upon it, as we observed, by the growing distaste of many professors of religion for solid spiritual food, by their passion for novelties and sensations, by their love of what amuses them, and their dislike of everything that stirs up their consciences and requires them to practice self-denial. False tastes and morbid cravings indicate an unhealthy condition of the spiritual system, just as surely as similar symptoms indicate a derangement of the physical system. And the gratification of false tastes, the indulgence of morbid cravings, aggravate the difficulties out of which they spring. Thus there is constant action and reaction, tending all the while to impair the sense of clear and definite obligation, under which every Christian should act habitually.

Searching farther after the still deeper roots of the trouble, we were led to ask whether these might not be found in the growing spirit of worldliness in the church, in the virtual extinction, in frequent instances, of the dividing line which separates the church from the world. Too many Christians have suffered themselves to be caught and carried along by the huge wave which has been swelling and rolling over society with prodigious force during the last fifteen years. They have removed

their pleasures and their business from beneath the inspection of conscience and the yoke of the Gospel. They have fashioned their daily lives after the spirit of the world, and left their religion to be enjoyed as a sentimental luxury on the Sabbath. And the real difficulty has been, not that piety is ineffectual as a restraint, but that their piety has been diluted until its flavor and strength have well nigh been lost altogether.

The reasonableness of this view, a view upon which I must beg to enlarge a little farther, is sustained by the fact that those gross sins within the church, which the world is making so much of, have been almost all of one general character. Church members have not fallen, to any noticeable extent, under charges of pilfering, burglary, impurity, blasphemy, murder. The offences into which so many have been betrayed are of a sort which grows out of the general tendency of society in these latter days. The war left us a huge legacy of extravagance, in the joint inheritance of which almost all have shared, from the highest grade to the lowest, in the church as well as out of it. Our financial system, by making money cheap, has fostered a pernicious greed. Speculation has run wild. Men have been crazy after fortunes. The money power has been worshipped as a God. And the one great aim which multitudes have allowed to overtop all others is the aim to be rich—to take advantage of the wonderful facilities that have been

afforded in great variety and abundance for striding into wealth, instead of slowly acquiring it by painful industry. Old and sober heads have been turned by the excitement of the chase; and the generation which has come on to the stage of action within the last decade has suffered the misfortune of an education which is not conducive to the highest views of integrity and honor.

Right in the midst of this condition of things, when the frenzy was at its highest, there came a tremendous and fearful collapse. Reckless speculation on the basis of unlimited and indefinite promises to pay could have but one result. Its coming was only a question of time, and the time arrived unexpectedly and suddenly. There was universal inflation, and when the bubble burst there came an instantaneous shrivelling. The great financial world was sailing up aloft as in a balloon, when there flashed forth as it were a stroke of lightning, that rent the canvas, and sent everything toppling down to the earth. What did this crisis reveal? One thing which it revealed, to my certain knowledge, was a great deal of Christian patience and faith. I doubt whether in modern times we have had any more convincing proofs of the value of religion, and its power over men, than have been furnished by the lives of some who were overwhelmed by that disaster. As they had striven to honor God in their business, so in the meekness of their submission, in the uncomplaining endurance of trial, in the

steadfastness of their hopes, they have demonstrated a dependence upon some resource which is utterly beyond the experience and comprehension of an earthly mind.

But this was by no means the universal result. Men long accustomed to success, were not all able to reconcile themselves to adversity. Obligations had to be met. Long indulged tastes had to be gratified. The old passion remained. And the temptation to recover fortune by irregular methods became so strong, that instead of wondering why so many yielded, we may almost the rather wonder how so many resisted. Ever since then, society has been trying to inflate the balloon without mending the rents. Good men have been experimenting hopelessly. Foolish men have been aggravating the difficulty by proposing inadequate and questionable remedies. While bad men, and some weak ones who have not meant to be bad from the beginning, have resorted to fraud to gain what honesty would not give them.

It is precisely here that the church has become implicated. The crimes which have polluted its fair garments are the crimes of fraud and defalcation. They are all of one general kind. The inconceivable fierceness of the temptation has proved too much for those who have fallen. Professors of religion though they were, they had a position to maintain in social and business life, which they could not maintain without sacrificing that keen

sense of honor which we may charitably believe they once cherished. And having allowed their interests to become so interlocked with those of the world, they have acted in contempt of their own professed beliefs, and brought disgrace upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The shame of it we all feel. The dishonor of it we all resent. But let us not forget at the same time, that there is a solid mass of piety in the church, which is yet unshaken, and is still pure, though its fair face may bear the stains which unhallowed hands have splashed upon it from the mire of earthliness and avarice.

Now let it unequivocally be said that the church does not justify or palliate the crimes of its members. So far from this, it is willing and anxious to address itself to the problem of dealing with these startling phenomena. The motive to this is not one of fear. We are not apprehensive lest the gospel should be repudiated and forgotten, and the church abandoned as a water-logged wreck. No reasoning can be more shallow than that which would infer that our religion is not divine and all-sufficient, or that the church is not both a necessity and a blessing, simply because out of the many millions of professing Christians, a few score, here and there, may have proved inconsistent. The very outcry against these men shows how generally the world recognizes the loftiness of the gospel teachings. It is just because a religious profession implies exalted living, that great crimes in the

church fill men with horror. To put peculiar emphasis on the wrong-doing of church members is equally to put emphasis on the superlative excellence of Christian principles honorably carried out. The world tacitly confesses that if all Christians were what they engage to be, they would stand as the foremost models of the noblest virtue. And such models we are able to point to in vastly greater number than all the cases of treachery that can be enumerated.

But more than this, we have the warrant of our Lord himself for expecting that tares will grow up with the wheat. The faith, the purity, the heroism of the Apostles are not to be questioned because there was a Judas among them. And the church is not a failure because some of its members have bowed to awful temptation.

The true motive of our inquiry is a practical one. What can we do to strengthen weak disciples, to rescue those whose moral principles are in peril, to elevate the general tone of religion throughout the church, to maintain the honor of Jesus Christ! We are not engaged in a despairing effort to save a leaking ship. The ship is sound. The masts all stand. The sails draw. The noble craft mounts the billows with grace and power. But the best ship will be caught in the storm, and the sailors may need to be lashed to the rigging to save them from being swept overboard.

The discussions of this subject by the secular press have not only pointed out the evils to be contended with,

but have also informed us what remedies should be applied.

Singularly enough we find our censors not at all agreed among themselves. On the one hand we are told that the church is suffering from a loss of faith in the dogmatic part of Christianity, that is, in its positive and distinctive doctrines. People do not believe as they once did, in human depravity, in the atonement of Christ, and in the certainty of damnation as the punishment of sin. Even those who, when arguing with skeptics, boldly avow the largest faith in their religion, are not so bold, it is said, when they go into their closets and review their belief. Opposition puts them on their mettle. But in the secrecy of their own hearts they waver in their conviction of the truth of those great and imposing dogmas which have so long controlled the faith of the world. Religion has become in good measure a luxury for the enjoyment of the refined, and largely ceased to be a system of self-denials and checks, holding steadily in view the retributions of the eternal world. From all this it follows that doctrine must be emphasized, and the church must be brought back to a simpler life, a life of comparative asceticism, in which men shall sensibly feel the pull of the rein and the pressure of the curb.

This, however, we are told immediately, will not meet the conditions of the question. The difficulty, it is urged,

lies in the very stress which has been laid upon dogma. Piety and morality have been separated. Men have been told to get a new heart, to fill their souls with love to Christ and faith in His blood, and nothing else will be needed to form the character and shape the conduct aright. It is charged that holy men for centuries have been uttering slurs against morality, and man's personal righteousness ; and that the legitimate fruit of such teaching is dishonesty, fraud and corruption. The cure therefore would seem to lie not in preaching dogma, but in preaching morality. Let the pulpit resound with the lessons of honesty, and then we may look for results which faith in Christ is incapable of producing !

There is some truth here on both sides, along with a great deal of error. And we may be patient over the mass of mistakes and misrepresentations, if we can only gather out of it an element of wholesome and serviceable suggestion.

I am inclined to think there is ground for saying that the belief in the great fundamental doctrines of the gospel has been impaired in some degree. I fear that when we speak of total depravity and eternal punishment, there are Christians even, who listen with disrelish, if not with actual incredulity. But this is not because such doctrines rest on any less solid basis of proof than formerly, or because any satisfactory substitutes have been offered. Religious men are human,

like other men ; and the church, so long as it mingles with the world, will take on something of the complexion of the age in which it exists. Our own age is notably one of skepticism. The current speculations in science and philosophy are peculiarly fascinating. And that large class of persons in the church who are uneasy under the pressure of religious obligations, find a sensible relief in doubts which give a refuge to the conscience, while they do not compel an utter surrender of Christian hope. Some people seem actually to imagine that they can cull out of Christ's teachings just so much as pleases them, and discard the rest. They do not appreciate the fact that this compact and logical system of truth is like a structure of mortised stones, which must either stand in its entirety, or fall altogether in a mass. They believe in the gospel and in the Christ of the Gospel, but they are not so sure about this or that particular doctrine. They are a little uncertain about the wisdom of creeds. They think it is not best to push matters of faith too far. A sort of dreamy apprehension of the benefits of religion takes the place of a firm intellectual grasp, and a strong spiritual appreciation of the clearly defined and positive enunciations of God's word. False teachers are run after,—not so much those who boldly reject and denounce the Gospel,—as those, still more dangerous, who hold on to just enough of the truth to make their errors specially insidious and hurtful. Our

children are permitted to listen to men whose instructions are at variance with those which we nominally uphold in the pulpit. And the inevitable result is, that without openly breaking with evangelical religion, the Christian begins unconsciously to suffer the films of error to be drawn over his eyes, and the fibres of his spiritual nature to be relaxed.

If there is danger in all this to the present generation, what are we to expect in the generation to come? How will our young men and women turn out, who are now allowed by parental negligence, or induced by parental example, to tamper with sound doctrine, and to play with the toys which error puts into the hand as a preparation for the weapons it means to put there by and by? The question is one of living and tremendous interest. For unquestionably, if we are dislodged from the truth, we are in some respects worse off than if we had never held it,

Our dread here, I wish again to say, is not a dread that the Gospel will be overturned. Science has as yet established nothing, absolutely nothing, to compel us to reject or even question a single great truth of Scripture. It is just because we believe in the whole substance of our religion that we tremble for those who are loosening their grasp upon it. And while I believe that the main bulk of the teaching in our churches to-day is sound, I think the time has come for the inquiry

whether we are not yielding too much to timidity, and failing to give sufficient prominence to those great doctrines which pierce to the depths of the soul, and make the conscience alive with the sense of an awful responsibility to God.

Now, to substitute for such teaching as this the mere inculcation of morals, will not, manifestly, gain the desired end. Morality must be built up on sanctions, and these sanctions are found in the principles of the divine government. There is, unquestionably, a science of ethics apart from religion. There is a moral code which largely affects men who are not directly controlled by religious motives. And yet the force of this code is due in a great degree to the sentiment which is wrought into the nature of the individual and society by the Gospel of Christ. Take your morality in its purest form, and plant it among a people utterly ignorant of Christianity, and what power will it wield? It is a simple fact that modern civilization is saturated with the influences of a supernatural religion. And while a particular individual may live up to the moral standard of his day without owning his obligation to God, it is nevertheless the broad fact of the divine authority, recognized somewhere, which makes that standard a thing he is compelled to respect. Once remove this ultimate foundation, and there is nothing to guaranty the stability of any moral system, however wise and pure.

But, as we are concerned now with the church especially, it is obvious that morality and piety cannot, on any theory which it recognizes, be separated. Our critics say we do separate them, and that the distinctive preaching of the Gospel is full of slurs against personal morality and righteousness. They insist that by emphasizing dogma, we obscure men's notions of right and wrong. They want us to let the doctrines go, and talk to men about honesty. They would have us concern ourselves less about a new heart, and more about business integrity and social honor.

I am willing to admit so much as this, namely, that the pulpit may not have laid sufficient stress on precept. I do not care to deny even that we may sometimes have been betrayed into dangerous faults. I think that by ostentatiously pointing to the sudden conversion of notorious criminals and hoisting them up to be admired before they have had time to prove that the gospel has reformed them, much harm has been done. I fear that the sentiment which has often enveloped the last hours of the murderer on the scaffold has tended to foster mawkish and sickly notions of piety, instead of that sinewy religious principle which is required by the Bible. I fully believe that God can convert instantly the most abandoned wretch. I know that the thief on the cross was pardoned by his suffering Lord. But I know, also, that human judgment is fallible. And when a man professes

to turn from peculiarly vile courses and to be a Christian, I would wait for some substantial proof before too loudly heralding his new-born virtue. There is a risk here that unthinking minds may be led to suppose that piety and morality are separable things, and that men may have good feelings, be able to talk in Christian phrase and lay claim to the character of Christ's disciples, before they have apprehended that a real Christian must be a man of upright life. And so, to meet such dangers, as well as to instruct the general mind, to guard the tempted, to strengthen the struggling, I would have more emphasis laid on moral duty. Let the law be preached, not as a means of salvation, but as the rule of life for saved men. Let us be careful when we tell people that their righteousness can never of itself commend them to God, that we also tell them that the Lord loves the righteous and abominates transgression. Let us have sermons on honesty. Let us fearlessly probe the ulcer of financial corruption. Let men in the church be told that success in life is not to be the main object of a Christian's thoughts ; that to be smart at a bargain, quick to take advantage of human weaknesses, and to have a reputation for sharp practices, are not the qualities which make them resemble the Lord Jesus Christ. Let it be understood that the gospel requires just weights and measures, fair and open dealing, transparency and truth in all transactions, and a sense of honor

more keen than even the world exacts of us. The preaching that aims at these results will be timely and wholesome preaching.

And yet to treat these things as truths which are distinct from Christian doctrine, and which lie in a wholly different plane, is to take away the very prop on which they rest. We do not and cannot preach honesty on the ground that it is the best policy. The very statement embodies an immorality. We do not urge men to be upright because uprightness is respectable. We are not to declare to our hearers that they must do right as a matter of mere grit, while all around them multitudes of worldly men are cheating, and prospering in the process. On the contrary, we must take a vastly higher position. We must exalt the ultimate and supreme standard of right and wrong, which is a divine and not a human standard. We must exhibit the intrinsic worth and glory of that integrity only which is founded on the preferences of the heart. We must display the character of a holy God, as the pattern for our imitation. We must prove man's need of some interior force foreign to his fallen nature, to guide and control him. We must explain how the Christian profession binds every one who makes it to practice, in all relations, things that are lovely and of good report. We must lay emphasis on the fact that God's law denounces iniquity, and that retribution for sin in another world is an awful reality.

The man who hates sin because it is hateful, and fears it because it is dangerous and may be fatal ; the man who loves the truth because it is infinitely worth loving ; the man who is so allied to Christ that the will of Christ is his supreme law and supreme delight ; the man who can trust God in adversity and honor him in prosperity, is the man against whom temptation beats only as the surf dashes on the rock, to fall back in harmless spray.

The truth is that what God has joined together we may not put asunder. The doctrine and the life of piety are united by indissoluble ties. They must be preached together in their relations. To know Christ is the condition of that spiritual power which enables us to keep his commandments. True Christian morality is not a mechanical affair. It is the offspring of a right heart. The man that truly knows the Lord will obey him, and if he does not consciously obey, he has no right to say that he knows. But if he does obey, he will obey in the directors' room, in the counting-house, in the savings bank, in the life insurance office, in the trust company, in his professional life, in his politics, everywhere and in all things. There is juice, there is marrow in the morality which is practised, not out of expediency, but out of the wholesome fear and the filial love of God. And the preaching which thus takes hold of the whole life, inward and outward, is the preaching for the times.

There cannot be too much of it. It cannot be too bold. If the pulpit has thus a great work to do to elevate the moral tone of Christian society, a work no less important devolves upon the church. Listening to sermons merely is not the whole duty of the Christian. He must absorb what he hears. The truth must be taken into his nature, as the seed is taken into the mellow soil. He must come to church to be instructed, nourished, stimulated. He must go away to do what he has been taught to do. And when this is the motive and object of hearing, Christian men and women will be satisfied only with the preaching that addresses the conscience. A picture of a banquet may satisfy a man who is seeking only after art. But if he is hungry, he wants the real banquet itself. So, if we make our Sabbath privileges only an agreeable episode between the toils and struggles of two weeks, if the church service is to us only the week-day lecture and concert with a thin religious veil thrown over them to preserve appearances, it is plain that our object is indulgence and not spiritual profit. And then, naturally, we do not want to hear about depravity and future punishment and religious duty, for these are by no means entertaining topics, and they send us away to our Sunday dinners in a somewhat ruffled mood. But if we come to church with an awe-inspiring sense of God's presence; if we come to find nearness to Christ, to have our hungering fed, and our feebleness

supported by the assurances which address our faith ; if the minister is to us the mouth-piece of the Almighty ; if things unseen and eternal are apprehended as the realities of the life, then we shall want the very essence of the Gospel, we shall want to hear the most momentous themes declared in the most solemn way. And if our taste is not already established in this direction, reason and conscience must force us against our inclination to do with the means of grace what God requires us to do with them. If we recognize the perils that beset church members we must run to the defences which divine wisdom has appointed. We must take heed how we hear. We must keep before us the account which we surely are to render to God of all our privileges. And thus shall we most effectually be led to that true, sober, substantial knowledge of Christ and his truth, which will cause us to keep his commandments, and which will be an impregnable fortress for the protection of both our faith and our morals.

But, brethren, there is even more than this. The church must take pains to show itself distinct from the world, as God most surely declares it to be distinct. We can lay down no sumptuary law to prescribe how far Christians are to enjoy the things which give pleasure to men. Our religion, as we know in general, does not forbid us to engage in business, to enjoy nature or art, or to use in wise ways the riches heaven may

bestow upon us. So long as we are in the world we must have to do with the world. Yet there is unquestionably a limit. It cannot be that Christ's people are to make themselves undistinguishable from others. The great Christian law of self-denial means something. The duty of imitating Christ, who pleased not himself, means something. The plane of a holy life is certainly far higher than the plane of an earthly life. The motives of eternity surely are addressed to souls which can see how vastly these motives are exalted above the common actuating forces of society. And the way to find the limit is not by asking the petty question "may we do this?" or "must we give up that?" but it is by living near to Jesus, in habitual communion with Him, so that our tastes shall be moulded upon His will, and our energies shall spontaneously flow forth for His glory. When Christians seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, when they actually consecrate their lives and possessions to Him, when they visibly live before the world as with eternity in view; then they will not only find the path of duty plain, but they will give tangible and unanswerable proof that the religion of Christ is able to make of a man all that his nature is capable of in the way of truth, purity and uprightness. Here is the great remedy for the weakness of the church, the great protection against the seductive temptations that cause so many professors of religion to fall. Here is

the secret of building up a Christian power in the church which we may gladly and safely transmit to our children. And for them, as much as for ourselves, I would plead. I tremble for the next generation of Christians if this generation does not set the feet of the young firmly in the path of duty and turn their faces directly toward Christ and his Kingdom. The problem is not only how to rectify the wrongs of the present, but how to prevent the greater evils that threaten us in the future. And this problem we shall solve, by God's help, when we come fully to understand that knowing Christ can be proved only by obeying Him in all things.

In this life of obedience, piety and morality clasp hands. And if we earnestly purpose to adopt it as our own, we shall not easily mistake the superficial for the real. It is not religion merely to feel easy and comfortable in our hearts. It is not religion to be sentimental in our talk, and to weep easily when our emotions are addressed. It is not religion to hide our earthliness behind the graceful exterior of holy ceremonies. The religion which comes down from heaven is meant to extirpate the earthly element ; and the inexorable command of the Master to every disciple is, TAKE UP THY CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.





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