

THE PARABLES OF JESUS  
APPLIED TO MODERN LIFE

BY  
J. CYRIL FLOWER, M.A.

FOREWORD BY  
L. P. JACKS, M.A., LL.D.

LONDON  
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## FOREWORD

THE Parables of Jesus reveal him as a quick and diligent observer of what was going on about him. Study of their form has led me to the conclusion (by no means peculiar to myself) that many if not most of them are literal transcripts of fact, in contradistinction to the kind of story which is invented or 'made up' for the purpose of illustrating some moral truth. This, of course, is not true of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where the work of the imagination is evident. But that parable stands in a class almost by itself. The parable of the Prodigal Son, on the other hand, suggests to my mind a piece of real family history with which Jesus, in the course of his ministry, had been brought into direct personal contact. In the parable of the Barren Fig-tree, again, I think we may recognize an actual conversation

which Jesus had overheard between the owner of the tree and his gardener. No inventor would have contented himself with a thing so entirely commonplace in its form, however profound it may be in its inner meaning. I well remember a conversation which took place between my own gardener and myself on a similar subject, and how surprised I was afterwards on realizing that our speech had been an almost word-for-word reproduction of this parable. It is also very remarkable that the parable of the Prodigal Son, perhaps the profoundest of them all, stands in the text without one word of comment or explanation. Jesus seems to content himself with placing the facts of that history before us, leaving them to tell their own tale. We are reminded of a fine saying of Thoreau's—'Every parable contains a moral; but the innocent enjoy the story.'

If this is true it throws an important light on the psychology of the Master, and indicates what after all is the most effective method of moral and

religious teaching. It consists in fixing attention on those details of the common life, and there are millions of them, in which the eternal values are revealed. Once the detail has been rightly selected—which of course presupposes the eye of the seer—it may be safely trusted to produce its own effect. One may argue about Justice in the abstract to little purpose; but exhibit a just man in the act of doing a just deed, and some at least of the spectators will inevitably become juster. It was in this way that Jesus, imitating the divine method of educating the human race, 'opened his mouth in parables and declared things hidden from the foundation of the world.'

There are two methods open to us for using the parable as an instrument of Christian teaching at the present day. One is to go about the world looking out, as Jesus did, for those significant moments in the lives of men and women when the absolute values flash forth into the light of day, and then hold them up as beacons on the common



highways of the world. The other is to content ourselves with the original parables of Jesus, a rich and varied material, and draw out their wealth of application to the problems of modern life. This is the method of Mr. Flower in the volume which now follows. It is a delightful task, and as inexhaustible as it is delightful. There is immense profit for everyone in this kind of study. All the parables of Jesus produce immediate re-actions of one kind or another in every mind that encounters them; but, as always happens with perfect things, the re-actions they produce in one mind are seldom the same as those they produce in another. Not the least interesting part of our experience in reading this book is to note the difference between the author's way of reacting on the theme and our own. I could write much on this difference so far as it concerns myself; but I have no doubt that the reader, when he had compared the two sides, would find good reasons for preferring Mr. Flower's way to mine. A story was once told

me about a little girl of nine years old to whom her mother had been reading the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the reading was over the little girl broke out into loud and piteous sobs. Naturally the mother thought that the child had been touched by the moral of the parable; but to make sure she put the question: 'What is it, Mary, that makes you cry?' 'Oh, mother,' came the answer, 'it's that dear little calf.' My own re-actions on reading the parables are often of this kind. All the more do I welcome a book which interprets them to modern readers, as this book does—so admirably and with so much loving reverence for their inimitable Author.

I find a true and deep pleasure in writing this Foreword; and the pleasure is all the greater because Mr. Flower, who has asked me to write it, is one of my former students.

L. P. JACKS.

OXFORD,

May 16, 1920.

## CONTENTS

I	TEACHING AND DISCIPLES OF JESUS	I
II	THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE . . .	10
III	PROFESSION AND DEED . . .	26
IV	WEALTH AND VALUE. . .	35
V	THE LOST SHEEP, THE LOST COIN, AND THE LOST SON . . .	44
VI	THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD . . .	53
VII	THE RICH MAN AND THE BEGGAR .	65
VIII	THE IMPORTUNATE WIDOW . . .	74
IX	THE SOWER . . .	84
X	THE LAW OF INCREASE . . .	92
XI	THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY .	101
XII	FACING THE ISSUES . . .	108

## I

### INTRODUCTORY

#### TEACHING AND DISCIPLES OF JESUS

THERE are signs that the world has begun to realize afresh something of the potent and disturbing influence that attaches to the name of Jesus. Men and women worship the name, they deny the name, they explain away the name, they reconstruct the whole story concerning the name: but in doing any of these things they pay tribute, sometimes unconsciously, to the power behind the name. There has been growing recently an uneasy feeling, both inside the churches and beyond their pale, a feeling, accentuated by the bitter experiences of the war, that Jesus represents something other than a dogma, a myth, a false claim, or a

peg to hang contentious theories on. But as yet there are relatively few who have got beyond a vague uncertainty and unrest : few realize at all definitely wherein the grip of that name resides, or why it is that people who are only moved to ridicule and scoffing by metaphysical expositions of the theological Christ, have become thoughtful and inquisitive at the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter.

It is one of the astonishing facts of human nature that exceptional greatness generally leads to suffering, misunderstanding and often death, especially when the exceptional greatness is moral and spiritual. Nothing seems to arouse the mob passion in the ordinary human being more than the contemplation of a greatness which is unintelligible to our own littleness, especially when that greatness makes a demand upon our hearts and consciences. Consequently the mob generally ill-treats really great men and women ; though it is by no means always the mob which is most cruel and relentless in the persecution of

greatness. It is vested interests that excel in this direction. It was the Jewish vested interests that engineered the torture and death of Jesus. The mob was only stupidly annoyed at its own inability to understand him, and was then easily led to echo the cry suggested by the vested interests. It is practically always the way. So, no doubt, the war was engineered in Germany. As long as you can keep people in subjection, and so on the level of the mob, ruled by mob passions, so long you can get them if you are a skilful autocrat, or bureaucracy, or demagogue, or militarist party or what not, to echo your battle cry, and even die for your vicious sentiments. That is the secret of success for despotisms. Happily for the world mobs have a habit of awakening sooner or later.

It may seem a curious assertion to make, but it is undoubtably true, that the Jewish vested interest of Pharisee, Scribe, Priest and Company probably understood Jesus a great deal better than either the mob, or even many of



his own disciples. And that is why they determined that he must be killed. They were generally intelligent men, the best educated among the Jews, and no doubt sincere to a certain point, at least in the view that privileges were a good thing: that the people ought to be kept in subjection to their spiritual betters; and that the system of Jewish hierocracy was a thing to be safeguarded and perpetuated. They recognized that Jesus was proclaiming a teaching which, once understood, would smash that system to pieces and herald a revolution in the affairs of men. Whereas the mob only looked upon Jesus for the most part as a wonder-worker and a quaint talker in parables; and the disciples for the most part looked upon him as a magnetic and lovable man who was likely to become the leader of a great nationalist movement—or who, failing that, might be expected to lead them by miracle into a new Kingdom of Heaven in which the present arrangements should be done away, the judgment throne of God erected, he himself

appointed King of the new community. So they used to quarrel as to which of them should sit on the right hand and left of the King when he was established on the throne of his dominion. A careful reading of the gospels reveals the fact that it was the common thing for the disciples to misunderstand, or fail to understand, Jesus and his teaching. The simplest parables, themselves offered to make clear beyond all possible confusion the principles of the teaching, had to be interpreted, and the most obvious actions—obvious that is to one who grasped the faith and spirit and purpose of Jesus in any measure—had to be explained and justified against the most unintelligent opposition.

Not only was this the case with the twelve, but still more so with the four evangelists, whoever they were. Nothing is clearer to a thoughtful reader than the fact that these narrators did not in any full measure apprehend the nature of the teaching they were trying to record. This is probably largely due to the fact that they were trying to



harmonize the essentially unrelated teachings of Jesus with those Christological developments of a later generation which we owe to Paul. But the records are conspicuous for their disorder; sayings of Jesus are lumped together without connexion, and often entirely divorced from the incidents with which they were actually associated; other sayings obviously distorted and made to express a meaning diametrically opposed to the moral and spiritual teaching of Jesus as elsewhere manifest. One is tempted to say in view of all this that one of the most authentic miracles in connexion with Jesus is the fact that so much of his teaching should have been preserved and correctly reported when there are all the signs of a failure in any full measure on the part of the narrators to comprehend the explosive force of what they were relating.

It thus came about that from the very dawn of the church it was the personality of Jesus that dominated men's hearts and lives. It was the

personal magnetic charm which held the disciples through all their lack of understanding; and it was this impression of magnetic personal power that they communicated to others. Fortunately in the endeavour to communicate this impression through written narratives, a large and invaluable body of the teaching of Jesus was incorporated with the legends and interpretations and other literary elements which were the vehicles through which the personal power of the teacher was reflected.

One of the greatest captives to the representations of Jesus as a mysterious and divinely potent personality was Paul; and in surrendering himself to this influence, he took upon himself the task of providing a new system of forms and images in which to wield the influence upon others. Paul, who never knew Jesus, and does not show much evidence of having learnt much of his teaching, was subjugated by the idea of the personality, and this served him as the nucleus of his remarkable doctrine

of the heavenly Christ, to all intents and purposes indistinguishable from God. Paul then founded a new religion, whose God was Christ (the chief connexion between this 'Christ' and Jesus being the historical fact of the crucifixion), and whose Apostle was Paul. Thus the church was founded primarily not upon the teaching of Jesus, but upon Paul's doctrine of the person of Christ. Unfortunately that has been a predominant feature of Christianity ever since. And that is probably one of the reasons why the world has not yet been conquered by the spirit of Jesus: for his teaching has been subordinated to, if not submerged in, the speculations and dogmas concerning his person. Truly Jesus came to send on earth a sword with which the ancient evil and injustice of the world should be smitten hip and thigh, and that sword was his teaching; teaching which is one of the most vital and piercing bodies of ethical, social and spiritual truth ever gathered into one whole. But the church receiving the sword did not understand that it was

for use. Its priests and dignitaries fell to trying to determine the nature and origin of the steel of which it was fashioned; and then after much argument they placed it reverently on a cushion in a glass case, and even drew a curtain over the glass lest the vulgar gaze should contaminate the sword, or its useless brightness dazzle their eyes. And it became heresy to say that the sword was a weapon to be used in man's warfare against the world, the flesh and the devil, and not a talisman for priests and parsons to guard and mumble over.

The time is at hand when we shall cease to chatter about the person of Christ, and when the world will catch a glimpse of the real man of Galilee, and give ear to a teaching which, like the seed growing in secret, shall germinate in the hearts of men, and revolutionize our social life, our industrial order and our religion.



## II

## THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE

'A man who had a fig-tree growing in his garden came to look for fruit on it and could find none. So he said to the gardener, "See, this is the third year I have come to look for fruit on this fig-tree, and cannot find any. Cut it down. Why should so much ground be actually wasted?" But the gardener pleaded, "Leave it, sir, this year also, till I have dug round it and manured it. If after that it bears fruit, well and good; if it does not, then you shall cut it down."—LUKE 13<sup>6-9</sup>—(Dr. R. F. Weymouth's translation).

WHEN Jesus in his teaching made use of parables, some of which have been preserved in the gospels, he was undoubtedly able to drive home in a vivid and striking way truths of a very practical and far-reaching kind. They were not fairy stories for the amusement of a careless multitude, but simple illustrations of laws of life and truth drawn from the daily life and

common experience of the men and women to whom he spoke. It is unfortunate that in many instances the writers of the gospels appear to have forgotten, if they ever knew, the context to which the parables belonged. The homely illustration of truth remained, and was easily handed down by memory, but the circumstances and the teaching thus illustrated had been forgotten. The result is that in the gospels we have many parables standing quite apart from any relevant context, and others placed in a context which is obviously inappropriate.

The task of getting back to the universal principle embodied in a given parable would be easier, in spite of lost contexts, were it not for the fact that there have been such abundant crops of misinterpretation. There has been a widespread tendency to treat the parables of Jesus—and other teachings of his too—as antiquaries treat ancient coins. They are collected, furbished up, classified, labelled, and then placed in glass cases for display, where they

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

are carefully locked up. Consequently we have often to overcome a deep-seated prejudice against treating the parables as being of real and practical value, convertible by intelligence into modern currency; good not for the shelf of a museum, but for the market-place of conduct.

This particular parable of 'the barren fig-tree' is, as it were, thrown at us in Luke 13<sup>6-9</sup>, without any sort of relevant context. It is a mere disconnected fragment. The sort of way it has been treated is indicated by its classification in 'Helps to the Study of the Bible.' Here it is an isolated specimen, labelled and respectfully locked up in a glass case; and the label attached to it purporting to express its meaning is 'Unprofitableness under grace'!

The right and sensible method of treating the parable is to search for what may have been a likely setting. Jesus had a good deal to say about the growth and cultivation of trees, and it will probably be helpful at once to read this parable in conjunction with other

## THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE

passages of the kind. Let us dovetail it in between Matthew 7<sup>16-20</sup> and Matthew 7<sup>21</sup>: 'By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Therefore by their fruits ye shall know them. . . . And he spake this parable: A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit thereon, and found none. And he said unto the vine-dresser, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree and find none: cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground? And he answering saith unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it: and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well; but if not, thou shalt cut it down. . . . Not every



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.'

It does not require any very great imagination to perceive the universal principles Jesus was embodying in these teachings. He is speaking to the people not about metaphysics, or theology, but about life, personal and social. He is telling them of the laws of the Kingdom of God: the conditions of personal morality and social justice. He tells them in this concrete and forceful way:—You can only achieve good results by adopting the right means—for the law of cause and effect is God's law, operative alike in external nature, and in human society. You can only gather grapes from vines—not from thorns. Not only so, but you can only gather grapes from normal, healthy vines. If the vine is deprived of its necessary nourishment, or if it is radically diseased or corrupt, you will get no good grapes from it. You will not attain social harmony from the conflicts of self-interest. Any

## THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE

social institution or law which is founded in injustice, and starts from disregard or contempt for the dignity and liberty of persons, is incapable of promoting the Reign of Righteousness, the Kingdom of God. Whatever in personal character, or in social life, is radically corrupt must be rooted out and swept away before you can hope to secure the good fruit of happiness and social harmony.

Nevertheless, Jesus goes on to teach (in the parable we are particularly considering): You must not hasten to draw sweeping conclusions from this. You need to be certain that a tree is radically corrupt before you hew it down. Not every tree that has not actually brought forth the fruit we hoped for is necessarily corrupt; it is always possible that it has not been properly looked after, not given a fair chance. Let it be clearly understood that the tree of the parable is a symbol—a finger-post; and what it represents, or points to, is man's effort to achieve some end that seems to him good. The parable then begins to live. It becomes

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

current coin of the social and spiritual realm, and ceases to be an antique.

All about us in the social and international life there are various embodiments of man's desires to attain ends that seem to him good: in laws, customs, traditions, institutions, etc. These are 'trees' planted in the hope that there will be a gathering of fruit from them. The teaching of Jesus is this: that what you can be certain of is that any of these arrangements—laws, institutions, etc.—which produce definitely and wholly evil results are intrinsically corrupt, and must be swept away. There was no hope of a fully healthy, happy and harmonious life for Europe, or the world, under a governmental system yielding the fruit of Tsardom in Russia, or Kaiserism in Germany. We rejoice that these things have been swept away. But it does not follow that because nowhere yet have we attained perfect social harmony, that every effort so far made, embodied in system of government, law, institution, or only formulating itself

## THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE

in aspiration or ideal, is corrupt, and must be swept away likewise.

There are those who talk loosely about the failure of civilization and the attempt it represents to achieve liberty and happiness, because it has not yet borne the fruit of everlasting peace between nations, or perfect harmony within the social life of nations. Others speak even more vehemently of Religion as if it were evidently a corrupt tree because it has not yet brought forth in fullness the fruit for the sake of which it is planted. So also in regard to other movements, aspirations, institutions which aim at the ennoblement and enrichment of life, but have not yet achieved all that we long for.

Jesus enunciates a principle which goes to the root of the matter. He does not say: Go forth to hew down and destroy indiscriminately; become anarchists; abandon faith in every organized effort for the better life. But he says, in effect: Have you devoted enough skill and science to the effort to enable these things to



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

bring about the results you long for—or have you left them rather to chance? It is not enough to found an institution, make a law, or proclaim a teaching that aims at the good. You must give time, service, devotion: be ready to take pains and to make sacrifices for the cause. Civilization will not achieve the end of a great and happy world-order if you just leave it to evolve of its own accord. Mere evolution may just as well lead to damnation as to salvation: it is intelligent progress that must be secured, through the minds and hands of intelligent agents. Religion will not establish the dominion of God in the world until men and women are aroused to become religious; for the Kingdom of God is within you. In a word: the trees are not as fruitful as we could wish. If, Jesus teaches, you were to make a much more strenuous effort to help them to be productive—if you were to become gardeners instead of possessing spectators—and they still proved barren, or productive of evil fruit, then cut them down: sweep them

## THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE

away, for they would be uselessly and harmfully cumbering the ground. But many are the trees whose unfruitfulness is due to the lack of digging and dunging! What we need in Europe and all the world to-day is not the people who can only hew down corrupt trees. We want gardeners who know how to cultivate good ones truly and well.

In order to bring out in greater fullness the practical significance of this parable it is worth while analysing it somewhat carefully. Let us therefore return to the story and take note of some of the details.

A certain man in possession of a garden, or vineyard had, among other things growing there, a fig-tree. The manner in which this is expressed suggests at once that he himself did not plant the tree. It may have been planted by his gardener, or by some one else before he came into occupation of the garden. His relation to the tree is a purely utilitarian one. Every year for three years he comes in the fruit

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

season to see if it has yielded any figs. The tree is growing in his garden, occupying space in his ground, and he expects without any thought or effort on his own part, to get fruit from it. When for the third time he is disappointed, he bids his gardener cut it down, because the space might be more profitably occupied. He might build a pleasant arbour in its place : or put up a garden seat—or rather to judge from his attitude, cause some one else to do it for him.

Now let us pause and consider in how many respects we are situated like the owner of the garden. We all of us enter in life into a certain heritage : it may be smaller, or larger : but life is for all of us in some measure a garden of achievements and possibilities, in which we find already certain things growing. We are born, not in a desert, but in a land which is already in part cultivated, thanks to the labours and sacrifices of our ancestors—land not merely in its territorial sense, but meaning here the whole environment, social, intellectual,

## THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE

religious. Institutions which are the result of the experience and effort of our forefathers are already established. Scientific discoveries, representing years of devoted labour, are at our service for the enrichment of life. The aspirations and inward experiences of great and true men and women are embodied for us in literature. Faiths and hopes which have proved an inspiration to the past, are handed on to us in church fellowships. Look where we may, we must recognize that the world is planted with trees which we did not set, but from which we are free to gather whatever fruit may come.

It is well enough known that the most prolific fruit tree may become barren if it is left to itself ; and equally that any institution, any machinery, is likely to become useless lumber if it is not renewed, and vitalized by the work and superintendence of human beings. Now the ' certain man ' of our parable admitted no responsibility : he only made a claim. The tree was to supply *him* with fruit : nothing else mattered.



It was none of his business *to make the tree fruitful*. If he could not gather figs from the tree, the tree was waste, and must be cut down.

There are not wanting the modern counterparts of the owner of the vineyard. We can meet them in all sorts of places, under all sorts of names. They come into the garden and they want to know, concerning trees that they have had no hand in planting or in tending, what is the actual value in terms of their special and momentary interest, of that tree. If it is weighed in the balance of their expectation and found unproductive of the profit they are looking for, they say, 'Let's get rid of it.' They do not ask whether if cultivated and revived by toil and care the tree might yet bring forth a fruit for the healing of the nations. They merely say, 'If the tree had been capable of such fruit it ought to have brought it forth long ago: it's none of our business to cripple our resources with unfruitful trees.'

Let us get back to the point of view

of the seer of Nazareth, and borrow again other words of his about trees and fruit. 'The tree is known by its fruit.' He does not say that every tree is known and judged by its lack of fruit. You do not gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles because no amount of cultivation will alter the nature of these plants; and so the only way to get grapes where thorns grow is to root out the thorns and plant vines. But concerning the tree that is a fig-tree, but which has not yet produced figs, the seer, speaking as the gardener, says, 'Don't cut it down, but dig about it, and manure it. If it is a healthy fig-tree, it will bear figs if it is properly attended to. Its barrenness is probably the result of neglect. But if after thorough cultivation and care it does not bear, it will prove that it is diseased, corrupt: then let it be cut down.'

Let us apply this principle close home. In our garden of this world we find growing one particular tree, one special idea, which is embodied in most forms of religion—in our own patch of the

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

garden, in Christianity. That idea is that the wild beast in human nature can be tamed only by love; that the divergent interests and passions of human beings can only be overcome, subdued into harmony, by the full and generous practice of the twin commandments, Love God and Love man. That idea, that faith, that conviction of the only way of salvation, we find already planted. We did not plant it. The vital question is, Do we tend it, cultivate it, desire to see it fruitful? Is our attitude simply this: this tree is very old, and what fruit it may have borne has long since been eaten, and we must occupy ourselves now about ideas that are more practicable—more in harmony with our current conceptions of profit and loss: therefore let us either cut down this tree, or continue to neglect it? The worst enemies of the Kingdom of God indeed are not those who frankly want to eliminate the idea as being sentimental nonsense, but those who consistently neglect it, suffering it still to grow, unfruitful, in the garden,

## THE UNFRUITFUL FIG-TREE

where they occasionally go out from their absorption in other affairs to see whether the forlorn, uncultivated tree has wrought the miracle, beyond expectation, of fruit bearing.

This idea has borne fruit in proportion as men and women have wanted it to bear fruit, and wanting, have toiled to *make* it fruitful. And in the future it will be fruitful under the same conditions. It calls for workers, not patrons; gardeners, not possessors of vineyards.

## III

## PROFESSION AND DEED

'A man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, "Son, go work to-day in the vineyard." And he answered and said, "I will not"; but afterward he repented himself and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, "I go, sir"; and went not. Whether of the twain did the will of his father?'—MATTHEW 21<sup>28b, 31a</sup>.

IT has often been the case that an established conventional faith is one of the greatest obstacles to progress and the spiritual life. The most serious opposition Jesus had to meet was not the weakness or wickedness of the people, but the professional and traditional 'piety' of religion. It was the leaders of religion who stirred up questionings, fomented suspicions, made accusations, and finally succeeded in terminating the career of the prophet

by compassing his death. And why? Because he challenged and disregarded many of their cherished dogmas and ritual forms; insisted that religion was a life, and not a mere profession; that to do the will of God, not to theorize about it, was to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

The leaders of religion were quite confident that they knew the way of salvation. The right faith and the proper worship had been revealed in Law and Prophets as interpreted by themselves and their forerunners in office. When the peasant prophet arose and proclaimed alike in teaching and in life, that there was no way save the way of doing the will of God—that ceremonies and assertions of belief were only hypocrisy unless the life were devoted to goodness and to God; when he went about doing good without regard to the artificial conventions about sacred days and places—then the preservers of the traditional faith rushed to him, and asked, 'By what authority doest thou these things?' We, they



implied, have all the authority, ours is the faith once and for all delivered : how dare you teach that God approves of goodness which is not expressed in the forms and ceremonies of our faith ? How dare you interfere with the Temple regulations which we permit : how dare you violate the sanctity of the Sabbath in the interest of men's bodies ?

Their test was not the test of goodness, of love, of progress, of human well-being : it was the test of authority and tradition. Is this in harmony with the established faith as handed down by priest, scribe and elder, and as interpreted by us ? No ? Then the man is a false prophet, a blasphemer : his good works are sin, due to the influence of evil powers, and his teaching is a snare and a delusion.

The reply of Jesus, conveyed in the brief parable Matthew 21<sup>28-30</sup>, is a characteristic utterance, demolishing the whole edifice of spectacular ritual and tradition. All the play-acting of religion—and what is ritual but a sort of play-acting—is dismissed by this teacher

in silence as irrelevant. Religion expresses itself with him inevitably in the terms of everyday life, thought and deed. So here he goes at once to the root of the matter concerning goodness, and the will of God. A man had two sons. He bade one go into the vineyard to work, but this son refused ; later on he repented, and went and did what his father wanted. The father told the other son also to go ; he at once said he would. But he too changed his mind, and in the end refused to do what his father wanted. To ask which of these did the will of his father would have been an insult to the intelligence of most people ; but Jesus extorted from these 'leaders of religion' the acknowledgment that the son who refused, but actually went, had done what the father wished.

It is, then, not what a man *says*, what he professes, what he denies, what ceremonies he performs or repudiates, but what a man *does* that counts. That man is religious who though he denies the authority of the Father in words,



fulfils the will of the Father in deed ; and that man is irreligious who, however ardently he acknowledges in words the authority of the Father, denies it in deed. It is not the faith that a man professes, but the life that he lives which makes him a citizen of the Kingdom of God, or excludes him therefrom. 'The publicans and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you,' Jesus said. And it is still true—that there are many whom the conventionally righteous think defiled, sinners, and infidels, who are nearer the Kingdom of God than are some of the pillars of respectability.

Professor Schuster once remarked that 'it is the most dogmatic of dogmatists who tirades against dogma, and only the most hopeless of theorists can declare that a thing may be right in theory and wrong in practice.' We may well add that it is no sign of liberalism or spirituality in religion to pay no attention to the form of faith—to the dogmas we actually find helpful, and the theories that are related to

practice. But the need is here as elsewhere to see in right perspective. The form of one's faith is an important matter to every one who has a mind and an ideal ; but its importance is relative. The form of faith is to the substance of faith very much what scaffolding is to a building. It is useful while the building is being erected : it makes it possible to get on with the building. But if the builder were so foolish as to think of nothing but scaffolding, he would never achieve his purpose. But if he rightly designs and uses the scaffolding, the result is that he is soon able to dispense with it. Particular forms of faith : creeds, ceremonies and the like, are valuable in giving us a foothold while we seek to build the Temple of Religion. And as most of us are still in the early stages of this task we are few of us superior to the need of such helps. But at least we can recognize their essentially provisional nature, and learn to test the value of other people's scaffolding not by its similarity to our own, but by its capacity to enable them

to get on with the work of building.

The foundation of religion is not faith, in the formal sense, at all, but love. The vital impulse of all genuine religion, of whatever name, is the love of God, the Ideal, and the love of man : a love which makes us achieve, imposing on us the duty of service. It manifests itself in various movements, various kinds of service ; and as men and women band themselves together to work, they formulate their faith, whether it be an economic, moral or religious one. They find often enough that the faith thus wrought out is not strong and adaptable enough to enable them to build the great Temple they seek to erect on the foundation of love ; and then it must be remade. But it also happens, as it happened in the official circles of Jewish religion, that a narrow faith having been made, people will not enlarge it, but insist on limiting their building operations to the capacity of a very inadequate scaffolding. They demand that the Kingdom of God shall be limited by the measure of their particular creed.

It is against that attitude to ' faith ' that Jesus protested. The great task of man is the building on earth of the City of God ; and the foundation must be laid, broad and deep, upon love. ' Thou hast not commanded faith,' says Rollo Russell in his *Psalms of the West*, ' Thou hast opened to every mind the freedom of perfect love.' No tradition or faith handed down from the past, or said to be once and for all delivered to the saints, will serve as the foundation for the brotherhood of man.

That we differ in our faiths matters nothing if we are united in our love. Our value to our brother men and our Father God is not what we profess or do not profess, but what we *do*. God demands of his children not that they should call him a particular name, celebrate his worship in a particular attitude, or picture him in this or that set of images or ideas : but that they should love him in every vision of truth, beauty and goodness they see, and serve him in every human need that they can respond to. He requires of us

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

that we should do his will, not that we should be skilled in speculations concerning his substance and attributes ; and all of us, from the least to the greatest, from the most ignorant to the most learned, have a full and clear enough knowledge of the practical imperatives of that divine will to work along with.

Some day, when men and women have finished perfecting their scaffoldings, and the Temple itself is being built, a new visible fellowship of the church on earth will arise, linking together all those who love, whatever the form of their faith. For the basis of membership in the church of God is not what people profess : or even believe ; but how much they love.

## IV WEALTH AND VALUE

' For the Kingdom of Heaven is like an employer who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard, and having made an agreement with them for a shilling a day, sent them into his vineyard. About nine o'clock he went out and saw others loitering in the market-place. To these also he said : " You also, go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." So they went. Again about twelve and about three o'clock he went out and did the same. And going out about five o'clock he found others loitering, and he asked them, " Why have you been standing here all day long, doing nothing ? " " Because no one has hired us," they replied. " You also go into the vineyard," he said. When evening came, the master said to his steward, " Call the men and pay them their wages. Begin with the last set and finish with the first." When those came who had begun at five o'clock, they received a shilling apiece ; and when the first came, they expected to get more, but they also each got the shilling. So when they had received it, they grumbled against the employer, saying : " These who came last have done only one hour's work, and you have put them on a level with us who have worked the whole day, and have borne the scorching heat."



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

"My friend," he answered to one of them, "I am doing you no injustice. Did you not agree with me for a shilling? Take your money and go. I choose to give this last comer just as much as I give you. Have I not a right to do what I choose with my own property? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last shall be first, and the first last.—MATTHEW 20<sup>1,16</sup>—(Dr. Weymouth's translation, except the phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven,' which he renders 'Kingdom of the Heavens').

IF we leave on one side the question of economic wealth, and use the word in the deeper sense of that which has intrinsic value, the teaching of Jesus concerning wealth may be said to be the very heart and soul of his gospel. The way not to grasp the meaning and apprehend the application of that teaching, is to search through the gospels for every reference to riches, wealth, treasure and so forth, and to imagine that the particular things Jesus is reported as having said under special and peculiar circumstances, are to be held as applicable and authoritative without modification under all and any circumstances. For example, Jesus told his disciples not to take money on the mission on which he sent them: he

## WEALTH AND VALUE

uttered a beatitude for the poor, and a woe for the rich: he declared that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. All these, and similar sayings, were true in relation to certain specific circumstances. We are poor truth-seekers if we do not constantly bear in mind the principle of Relevancy. It was the custom in those days for people to provide hospitality to wandering preachers, and Jesus wanted his disciples to accept the hospitality of the common folk, and get into close personal touch with them. It is not the custom now, and it is wiser for the preacher and speaker to be furnished with money for his journeys. It was, similarly, not the formulation of an eternal principle, but a plain statement of fact resulting from Jesus' own experience, that it was hard, inexpressibly hard, for the rich Jews to accept his teaching and apply it; just as it was a statement of fact, and not the formulation of an unchangeable law that 'the

poor ye have always with you.' To make every word that Jesus ever uttered, or is reported to have uttered, into a universal law binding for all time and under all circumstances, is a complete failure to grasp the very essence of his teaching. 'It is the spirit that quickeneth.' It is the broad guiding principles that he expresses in particular teachings and in definite relationships with men and women that we need to understand, interpret and apply in the changed and varied circumstances of modern life. In a mere battle of texts and tags Jesus can be made to stand as a pacifist or a militant; as an individualist or a socialist; as an oriental Jew or a modern English liberal Christian. But those who can penetrate behind the particular and special to the universal and fundamental know that Jesus was none of these things merely, because he was greater than all of them.

There is no possibility of misunderstanding what the teaching of Jesus was concerning wealth as intrinsic value.

It is this: wealth is life: life which is abundant: life which is free under those constraints which are the essential conditions of freedom—life, that is, which is dominated by ideals aiming at an equal opportunity for fullness and richness of life in all men and women as in self: life which is not self-centred, but God-centred, and willing to be merged in self-sacrifice even to death for the sake of promoting abundant good and free life for others. That is Jesus' teaching concerning real wealth; that is his treasure in heaven, his good treasure of the good man; life which consisteth not in the abundance of the things which a man possesseth, but in an intrinsic essence of goodness and love which Jesus calls being 'rich toward God.'

It would be good if we could read the parable of the labourers in the vineyard with a mind oblivious of traditional ideas: read it with a fresh and unbiased receptivity. It contains the very heart and soul of the teaching of Jesus. It may sound bad economics—it is not



intended for economics. It is a lesson in the morals of religion. It is a telling rebuke to the whole way of looking at life, work and wealth which the Jews, presumably, had adopted; and which there is no doubt the modern world has only too largely adopted also. The whole point of the parable is that the material reward (if it is adequate to secure what is materially necessary as a basis for good life) is relatively of small concern, but that the faithful use of opportunities of good work and service is itself wealth. The man who worked all day for a shilling was wealthier than the man who worked only for one hour, because he had had the joy of doing more for the common good, he had enjoyed the privilege of larger opportunities of exercising his talents for the commonwealth. The man whose opportunities were few, but who made the most of them, flinging himself heart and soul into the fullest possible exercise of his talents, got his shilling also: but wished he could have done more in the earning of it.

As long as our eyes are directed, and our deepest desires attached, to external and material objects as the rewards we crave for most we necessarily tend to miss the attainment and enjoyment of the real wealth of life about which Jesus spoke. The continued existence of social conditions which encourage and tempt people at one end to sell their souls in order to fill their money-bags, and which enslaves people at the other end to an economic necessity of struggling and fighting to get enough to fill their bellies, is simply a manifest social rejection of the teaching of Jesus. Here as everywhere a tree is judged by its fruits; and it avails little to classify a country as 'Christian' if the conditions of its organization embody principles which Jesus explicitly condemned. It is, of course, open to argument that Jesus was wrong. In that event the obviously honest course is to reject him and his teaching, and no longer masquerade under a pretence of 'Christianity.' But if we reject him and his teaching as inapplicable to the



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

affairs of social and political and everyday life we cannot perpetuate the fatuity of professing to accept his teaching as true for a 'Kingdom of Heaven' which does not exist, and never can be brought into being in this world.

Wealth is life : life more abundant. The community would be wealthier if no labourer were paid less than his 'shilling' : if the hearts of all could be turned away from the deceitfulness of riches as the mere abundance of material things that can be possessed. No community, and few individuals have consistently practised this teaching. It means that the aim of social life should be that although a man works with only the one talent of a limited natural endowment, and though he be therefore only a humble contributor in the vast machinery of production, he is worth a standard wage which will enable him to have life and have it ever more abundantly. A wage, that is, that shall remove the obstacles to free opportunities of mental, spiritual and physical

## WEALTH AND VALUE

development. Nothing less than this is the right of the most poorly endowed ; nothing more than this is the right of the most richly endowed. Every human being who is led either by greed to worship money, or by need to be able to think of nothing else, is a deprivation of the true wealth of the community ; for it is loss of vivid, fresh, creative, glad life.

## V

THE LOST SHEEP, THE LOST COIN,  
AND THE LOST SON (LUKE 15).

WE are fortunate in Luke 15 in having parable teaching which is clearly in its right setting. The key to the significance of the three parables contained in this chapter—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (or traditionally the ‘Prodigal’ son—a term which misses its vital connexion with the two preceding parables)—is to be found in the first two verses. Tax-gatherers and sinners drew near to Jesus, and he fraternized with them. The Pharisees and Scribes were shocked and angry. A respectable and properly authorized teacher would have nothing to do with religious and social outcasts. So they ‘murmured, saying, This man

receiveth sinners and eateth with them.’ They were perhaps glad of this opening to attack a dangerous and popular teacher whose words were inevitably undermining their authority over the common people.

Jesus turns to them, and replies in the three parables. The first two are drastic and terrible enough in their scathing, though perhaps veiled, rebuke. There is no mistaking their meaning, however, when we remember all that Jesus stood for. He faces the Pharisees and Scribes, and says to them: ‘If you lose your *property*, sheep, or money, you spare neither time nor trouble in seeking to regain it: and having succeeded you make it a matter of social rejoicing.’ But it is only in the third parable that the climax is reached. ‘But see, if you have lost from your common life, your religious fellowship, your citizenship, a son, a brother—you care nothing. On the contrary you forbid anyone to try to restore such a lost son or brother by inventing cruel and heartless rules of

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

defilement. You value your *property*, you waste and despise human souls. It is not so in the sight of God. There is more joy in heaven over the one sinner that repents, the one lost son who is found, than over ninety and nine people like yourselves who are smugly secure in the righteousness of ceremony and law. There is, maybe, nothing externally unclean or unrighteous about you; but the ways of your thought, the things you most value, these are abomination in the sight of God.'

Following the sequence of the three stories carefully we can trace the growth of this thought in the mind of Jesus, even as he is speaking, and he works out in greater fullness and subtlety the true values of life, as estimated by God, in the parable of the lost son. We need to exercise our imagination, and try to see again in its vivid reality the picture of Jesus, talking face to face with Pharisees and Scribes, in the presence of a gathering crowd, among whom are some of the despised tax-gatherers and sinners. For being a com-

## THE LOST SON

rader to these 'lost sons'—for trying to help them—Jesus has been angrily condemned by these pillars of orthodox faith. It is not merely a study in the everlasting mercy. It is a study in the contrast between the everlasting mercy of God, and the hideous intolerance of human self-righteousness. And the contrast is brought out not by opposing some theological doctrine of the Divine mercy to the harsh facts of human intolerance, but by opposing a truly human, comradely, fatherly attitude to the superior, self-righteous and mean-spirited attitude.

The prodigal, who is lost, is, of course, the tax-gatherer, the harlot, the sinner: the person excommunicated from contact with a respectable Jew because of 'defilement.' The person, in a word, who revolts from human society, and its laws and duties, and has lost his citizenship. The father of the story represents human society as it would be if it were inspired by a genuine religion. The elder brother is the Pharisee and Scribe: the person who has never



broken the letter of the law, but whose sin against God and man is far more deeply seated in the worship of false gods, the service, within the letter of the law, of mammon, under a profession of love for God. It is inevitable and right that the father should be more rejoiced over the return to life and sonship of the son who was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found, than over the son who though always with him in one sense—never broken away in passionate revolt—is in a more hopeless manner dead and lost.

For here is the point—of crucial significance. The elder son—that is the conventionally religious and respectable, too lethargic to be capable even of passionate wrong, the Pharisee and Scribe—complains that he has not broken the commandments; he has observed all ceremonies and rituals; yet there has been no joy in his life: no occasion for rejoicing. And in this complaint he passes judgment on himself. There is no need, no room for many words. 'Son, thou art ever

with me, and all that is mine is thine.' These words are, if we understand, the most piercing and tragic words that can be spoken. They mean:—If you have had no joy, you have never really attained sonship. You have been absorbed in the extraneous things and ignored the spiritual realities of relationship, of fellowship, of love. You have worked, indeed, and have observed all the outward forms, have kept the outside of the cup and the platter clean; but you have worked with no thrilling sense of a common family life, of which you are a member in all its joys and all its sorrows; its comradeship has meant nothing to you: your casket may shine like polished gold, but within is the mere death's head of a crass selfishness. The whole of your life might, and ought to have been radiated with joy: the joy of love which made toil and hardship and suffering things of wealth and good because endured for the commonwealth, the family happiness. The joy of fellowship was ever open to you, and you

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

rejected, despised it. The fault with you is a selfishness more deep-seated even than that of your brother, who was lost. It made him wayward, dissolute, a passionate, self-indulgent rebel against society and fellowship. But it has made you a self-righteous corpse: a traitor within the gates of fellowship, against which you were too coldly calculating openly to rebel. Your righteousness, of never having transgressed the letter of a commandment is no virtue: it is a mere selfish calculation. One gleam of generous virtue based in love is worth all the negative morality of untransgressed commandments in the interests of respectability and worldly esteem.

Jesus is not whitewashing the sinner and tax-gatherer, or teaching that God has no joy in those sons and daughters who have not passionately revolted, and been restored, but are patiently striving to live the good life of fellowship and loving-kindness amid the often unexciting monotonies of existence. What he teaches is that the good man, the

## THE LOST SON

good community, takes more care of sons, than of things: and rejoices over a lost son who is restored far more than over the restoration of material property. Moreover that restoration of a lost son cannot be effected by despising, condemning and tabooing the lost; but only by loving and seeking them. Further, that far more menacing to society (religious or political) and its ultimate welfare, are those who are in it, but not of it: who do not break away by violence of passion, but who are never joined to it in the bonds of a common love and fellowship: who are interested in their sheep and their coins, but not their fellows.

And Jesus teaches that God loves the sons and daughters who have never gone wildly astray; who in patience and with courage have sought the good of their fellows, and the better life of the community; whose will and effort are ever directed, according to the light of their understanding, to the doing of the will of God, and the true enrichment of human life. For the words which

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

are the judgment of the self-righteous hypocrite are the gracious experience and inspiration of the genuine: 'Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine.' The most abiding satisfactions, the uncorruptible wealth is ours, if we but claim and make it our own. In whatever difficulties and trials, through whatever dark hours, under whatever load of disappointment or suffering, we can be always in the home of fellowship, with all the resources of comradeship, love, God as our inspiration. A wealth, maybe, which the world does not greatly value, but which makes the soul infinitely 'rich toward God.'

## VI

### THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD

(LUKE 16<sup>1-17</sup>).

THERE was a certain man who was the trusted manager of a large business undertaking. It came to the knowledge of his employer that he had been taking advantage of his position of trust to swindle and rob him. Accordingly he summoned the man to his presence, asked him to give an account of himself, taxed him with dishonesty, and finally informed him that his services would no longer be required. The man was incompetent as a worker, having trained himself in the arts of the parasite, and he was horrified at the realization that he could only expect to avoid starvation by going to the workhouse, or begging in the streets. The



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

idea struck him that by committing a final act of cheating he might secure at least some chance of avoiding this. Consequently he wrote to certain debtors of his employers and informed them that he was instructed by his firm to allow them to settle their accounts with an enormous discount if they chose to avail themselves of the opportunity immediately; giving them clearly to understand that they owed this good fortune to his own influence with his chief, which he was using out of friendship for them. However, news of this culminating attempt at swindling reached the employer. But he, being something of a worldly cynic himself, forgot his displeasure at the attempted trick, and expressed admiration at the cleverness of this parting shot at crooked business, as being excellent worldly wisdom, inasmuch as, had it succeeded, it would have secured the defaulting manager the friendship and countenance of those customers who had been given the advantage.

This little story of trickery and cor-

## THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD

ruption is not taken from the pages of the newspaper: it is only a modern rendering of the parable attributed to Jesus in Luke 16<sup>1-13</sup>. The curious thing is not that he should have told the story, but that he should be represented in the account as approving the conduct and motives both of the defaulting manager and the cynical employer. But what is even more curious and interesting is the fact that in the same account Jesus is also reported to have condemned, as typical examples of the prevailing worldliness, this very kind of infidelity. On the one hand he is represented as saying: 'Follow the example of this steward of unrighteousness—allow no scruples about honesty or justice to prevent your making powerful and wealthy friends who may be able to help you in an hour of need.' On the other hand he is reported as teaching that anyone who lapses from the rules of honesty and justice in small matters is not to be trusted in the conduct of large ones: he who has been immoral as a business man will be un-

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

trustworthy in matters appertaining to the truth. You cannot serve two masters, God and mammon; you cannot at once be both honest and dishonest.

There has quite clearly been confusion in the compiling of this chapter. There is only too abundant evidence in the gospels of how frequently and profoundly the disciples misapprehended Jesus and his message. And when in addition to this fact we remember some of the conditions under which the records concerning the life and ministry of Jesus were handed down it should cause us surprise rather to find the accounts usually so consistent and relevant, rather than to discover instances of confused interpretation or even evident misstatement. The important question is here: Have we the clues necessary for resolving the confusion, and recovering what was probably the significance of this story told by Jesus of the prevailing trickery and corruption of the times?

Beyond all reasonable doubt we have

## THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD

these clues, both in what precedes and in what follows this parable. What precedes it<sup>1</sup> is the fact (Luke 15<sup>1, 2</sup>) that Jesus was freely associating with outcasts—tax-gatherers and sinners—and for this he was attacked by the nominal leaders of religion. Jesus replied by administering the pregnant series of parables on the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son, to try to show these people that human life is the true wealth. After the parable of the Lost Son, which emphasizes nothing if not that human personality is of infinitely greater importance than property, there immediately follows this story of trickery and dishonesty. Why? Obviously to drive the point home by a glaring contrast. The parable of the Lost Son indicates what a well-ordered community ought to aim at: this parable indicates what spirit it is that Jesus actually finds predominant among the rulers and those who exercise authority: a spirit of worldly wisdom and sharp practice stopping short of no dishonesty

<sup>1</sup> See previous Essay.

and meanness which will secure selfish prosperity—though cleverly kept by the Pharisees and Scribes within the letter of the Law. The idea that Jesus should have said (Luke 16<sup>9</sup>) that this was the way his disciples were to act stands condemned as incredible, and must be attributed either to corruptions of the text, defects of tradition, or else to grotesque misapprehension on the part of the writer. In further proof of this there is the fact already mentioned, that the right emphasis is also given to the significance of the parable in Luke 16<sup>10-13</sup>: ‘He that is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much: and he that is unrighteous in a very little is unrighteous also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?’ Finally, there is the evidence of what immediately follows the parable in verses 14 and 15: ‘And the Pharisees, who were lovers of

money, heard all these things; and they scoffed at him. And he said unto them, Ye are they that justify yourselves in the sight of men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.’ Why did the Pharisees, who were ‘lovers of money,’ scoff at him? Obviously because he put human values before financial or property values. Money lovers would not have scoffed at one who instructed them as a matter of religion to make to themselves friends of the ‘mammon of unrighteousness.’ Have the wealthy and possessing classes ever scoffed at a religion which taught the poor man to be content with the humble position in which a benevolent Providence had placed him?

It has often been said that the figure and the teaching of Jesus are remote from the facts and life of to-day, and such confusions as this are pointed to in support of the statement. It may be true that what is often offered as the figure and the teaching of Jesus is



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

remote, and worthless. But the exercise of a little common sense and sympathetic criticism—not of the learned kind necessarily—withdraws the veil, and ever more clearly reveals to us at once a teacher and a teaching in contact with the vital and perennial problems of conduct. The power of Jesus does not depend upon theological theories concerning his personality, but upon the reality and science and wisdom of his teaching, and the magnetic attraction of his character as revealed to us in priceless fragments in the gospels. And on most of the problems of individual and social life it would be difficult to find a more coherent or scientific teaching than that of Jesus, as regards the fundamental principles involved. Again and again modern writers, consciously or unconsciously, restate principles enunciated by Jesus, and urge that they should be applied in social reorganization.

Take the teaching embodied in the series of parables Luke 15 to 16<sup>13</sup>. We are frequently told that in modern

## THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD

industrial and business life the conditions are often such as to render it practically impossible that the higher standards of morality, honesty and goodwill, should be applied. Without entering into the nature of the evidence it is sufficient to say that it is of such a kind as to compel most of us to accept the statement as substantially true. Apparently things were much the same in the time of Jesus. Now to the unsophisticated person there seem to be two straightforward things to choose between. One is to say that the ideas of morality and religion are not applicable in the world of business. That means that straightforward people will definitely disavow these ideals, and decline to sail the good ship mammon under the colours of God. It is a false and pernicious sentimentalism that asks that these ideals should still be preserved for admiration and lip service in church as suitable for women, children, and parsons if they are not applicable to the general conditions of life as it must be lived by men, women, children,

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

and parsons alike. The other thing is this : to proclaim the universal validity of the ideals of morality and religion, and to recognize that the fault for their present non-application is not so much individual as social ; the result of a system of habits and ideas that have grown up and exercise authority by their own unchallenged momentum, but which are radically wrong. And that what is necessary is to aim at reconstructing that system, so that it shall not automatically shut out the applicability of the best human ideals of good fellowship. It is futile to demand that young people entering business and industry shall stand out against everything that falls below the ideals they have been taught in church and home. That would probably mean not merely the futile sacrifice of the individual to a vast machine, but the involving also of others dependent upon them in ruin. The blame for the dulled moral sense, the gradual habituation to doubtful practice in business, is not with the individual : it is with the social, in-

## THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD

dustrial, economic order, of which we are all a part. Or, to put aside the epithet 'blame,' it is simply a case of the working of law, in regard to which it is easier for heaven and earth to fall than for one jot or tittle of it to fall ; namely, that an order, an industrial system, a social atmosphere in which material prosperity is the supreme object, is one in which it is impossible fully to worship and serve God. If we acquiesce in conditions regarding the gaining of material wealth which encourage and even produce hardness of heart, greed, sharp practice, deceit, dishonesty—if we are unfaithful that is to our ideals in the lesser things—we cannot be faithful in things appertaining to truth, we are not to be trusted with the 'true riches.' This is the law that Jesus proclaimed, and it goes to the root of the matter.

The line of advance towards overcoming strife within and between nations ; of increasing the spirit of fellowship, if we really think these things more worth while than struggling

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

to feather our own nests, is to study the conditions of a new organization of our economic system, and to work along scientific lines to secure such readjustments as will at last make the old proverb really and fully true—that honesty is the best policy.

## VII

### THE RICH MAN AND THE BEGGAR

(LUKE 16<sup>19-31</sup>).

THE parable of the Rich Man and the Beggar follows directly in the course of the teaching of Jesus which was called forth by the attitude of the Pharisees and Scribes to his association with tax-gatherers and sinners—with one interpolation which is obviously out of place, Luke 16<sup>18</sup>, concerning marriage.

Jesus is here still speaking directly to the Pharisees and Scribes. He has already rebuked them in the telling series of parables already considered for their love of money and callous disregard for human well-being. When they scoff at him for his cloudy idealism and lack of knowledge of the world and its ways, he replies (Luke 16<sup>14-17</sup>) that



though the world may be largely unfaithful to God, yet the world is still God's, and that often what is most exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God—for instance, greed for sheep and coins and contempt for human souls. 'But,' he goes on to say, 'though you fondly imagine you are wise, and are getting the best out of life, I tell you that you are making the most terrible and ghastly mistake. God's laws still hold, though you may imagine that you can disregard them and prosper. There is nothing in heaven or earth so immutable as the laws of God, and if you violate them you will pay the price in full. It is a law of God that there can be no abiding individual happiness secured at the cost of other people's unhappiness. If you do not love your neighbour as yourself you cannot enter into the Kingdom.' And then, as his custom is, Jesus illustrates his point with a parable: that of the Rich Man and the Beggar.

It is quite clear, working up to this parable in continuity with what has

gone before, that the purpose of this story is not to open a sort of back window into the mysteries of the state after death. Jesus frequently employed the prevailing ideas about paradise and hades, and made use of these images to illustrate his truths, but we have no reason to suppose that he had here any intention of trying to impart information about the hereafter. All he did assert was that there moral issues are the same as here, and that there was no escape by an easy gateway of death for one who had violated God's laws with apparent success here. The effects of thought and conduct are engraved in the soul, and by death the soul is not set free from itself.

That this story refers to death, hades and paradise, is accidental, not fundamental, to the truths which it was intended to illustrate. These truths have already been mentioned—that abiding welfare and happiness can only be achieved through obedience to the laws of God, and that the laws of God are adequate, immutable, and eternal.

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

The interpretation of the parable becomes clear when we regard it as essentially a member of the series which has led up to it. The rich man enjoying himself with no concern for the state of the beggar at his gates, represents the class of people to whom the Pharisees and Scribes belonged. People, that is, who were rich in the sense that they had abundant opportunities of understanding and applying the divine laws of moral and social life. But, like the Pharisees and Scribes, they used their wealth only as an opportunity of lording it over others ; they enjoyed a sense of spiritual, as well as material, superiority, and encouraged the people, whom they should have instructed and served, to look upon them as peculiarly virtuous and good. The beggar in his miserable state represents that class for fraternizing with which Jesus had incurred the animosity of the Pharisees and Scribes, the tax-gatherers and sinners : or more generally, the common people who were not privileged to share either the opportunities of studying the

## RICH MAN AND BEGGAR

Law and Prophets, or the prestige of those who usurped authority in the name of religion.

And the moral of the story is this, that, as Jesus said elsewhere in so many words ' the publicans and the harlots go into the Kingdom before you—you who are reputed to be the respectable and the religious, but who use your respectable religion as a cloak for hardness of heart, greed, and selfishness. Wrongdoing which is a result of ignorance of the law does not create a gulf between the soul and God, and many of these people, of whom you should be the ministers and teachers, only await instruction, light, understanding to become worthy citizens of a good society, worthy members of the Kingdom of God. But you, and people like you, are creating an impassable gulf between your souls and God, because with exceptional opportunities of knowing his law, and professing to accept and dispense it, you deliberately and cold-bloodedly violate it, and are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. The



time will come, sooner or later, when you will be faced by the gulf you have made; when the uncleanness of your souls will make it impossible for you to abide in the presence of God. It is the eternal, immutable law: practise hypocrisy and you become a hypocrite; practise dishonesty and selfishness and in the end you become morally diseased unto death. And whatever may be the cure for hypocrisy and moral disease, mere physical death is no cure. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap, and the process of moral and spiritual recovery is probably the more painful, even excruciating, the longer it is postponed: the more deeply seated the disease is. Neither would the supernatural event of one rising from the dead to warn you of the effects be a cure. You cannot be cured of moral disease and spiritual corruption by the mere fear of penalties. Only by understanding and obeying God's laws as they are manifest is the way of salvation. God has established and proclaimed the laws of the moral and

spiritual realm, even as he has established and proclaimed the laws of nature. He has endowed man with reason to understand and interpret these laws, given him a heart to reverence them and a will to apply them. He has done more: he has raised up great seers, prophets and lawgivers to formulate many of the divine commandments into a code for you: if you will not hear a lawgiver like Moses, or prophets such as have arisen among you, then no supernatural warning or transitory emotional shock will suffice.'

Quite essential to the teaching of Jesus, specially this aspect of it, are those closing words of the parable, 'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rise from the dead.' It is an unqualified assertion on the part of Jesus, not merely of the immutability of the fundamental moral laws, but of their accessibility and their adequacy. If we will only take the trouble, we shall find that God has revealed his purpose sufficiently to enable us to walk up-



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

rightly, and to establish such conditions of life in this earth that the 'heavenly Kingdom' will have come. But there are so many people who will not take trouble in these matters. Like the Pharisees and Scribes they will take infinite trouble to rescue sheep and find lost coins; but will not devote, in any seriousness, time, intelligence and energy to reading the great truths of morality and the spiritual life written over the pages of history, on the face of nature and in the heart of mankind. The world does not need a new or miraculous revelation of the laws of God and the good life; that revelation is being continuously unfolded before the unseeing eyes of humanity. Only the Spirit of God can interpret the things of the spirit: but the Spirit of God is wondrously outpoured in human reason and conscience, if we will but make serious and effective use of our faculties.

It is a very relevant and helpful word for us all in these days. We seem to be faced by chaos in all departments

## RICH MAN AND BEGGAR

of life. We are inclined to call out for a leader; some one who shall clearly tell us of the way out of chaos to order. The great leader and teacher of Galilee tells us we have to be our own leaders. There is order, law and reason behind all the confusion and chaos, and we must seek earnestly, hopefully, courageously for the principles of order; and if we seriously seek, we shall find. For man's genuine thought and intelligent effort are the working of the divine spirit. 'Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.'

## VIII

## THE IMPORTUNATE WIDOW

'And he spake a parable unto them to the end that they ought always to pray and not to faint; saying, There was in a city a judge which feared not God, and regarded not man: and there was a widow in that city; and she came oft unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming. And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge saith. And shall not God avenge his elect which cry to him day and night, and he is long-suffering over them? I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily.'—LUKE 18<sup>1-8a</sup>.

THE purpose of this present essay is not to wring out of this parable by a clever trick of intellectual jugglery a meaning which is obviously not involved, but simply to suggest that the reporter of the parable has got confused: that he has preserved a storv

told by Jesus, but forgotten (if he ever knew) the lesson that Jesus was illustrating; and that either he, or some later interpolator, attached a lesson to the parable which answered to his own misapprehension of the nature of the teaching of Jesus. The fact that most modern interpreters of this parable feel constrained to perform feats of mental gymnastic in order to square the unsavoury terms and suggestions of the story with their own insight into the character of Jesus suggests that in simple reality the idea that Jesus ever told this story *to instruct his disciples 'always to pray and not to faint' is incredible*. People who were capable of making the many and big mistakes about Jesus which the writers of the gospels confess to, were capable of missing the meaning of a parable.

If we put the story briefly into modern words, the incredibility of its stated intention stands out in naked clearness. A certain widow wanted revenge upon some person against whom she had

enmity. Accordingly she applied to the local judge. He was a mere worldling, indifferent alike to God and man; and he scornfully dismissed the woman and her plea. She, however, was exceedingly keen to have revenge on her enemy. So she continued to worry and badger this judge, till eventually he decided that it would be less trouble to grant her request than to be perpetually molested by her irritating importunity. The record then goes on to make the outrageous assertion that God is like that: if people only assail him with frequent and vehement enough repetitions and prayers, he will—not merely pay heed to them through weariness—but ‘avenge them speedily’!

Now, if that had been the ‘gospel’ of Jesus, the world could have advantageously dispensed with it. It is not for a pictorial rehash of the childish errors of barbarism that Jesus has won the moral and spiritual crown among all great teachers. On the contrary, the whole tendency of the thought and teaching of Jesus concerning God and man is that

God is in a parental, a fatherly relation to man. God indeed is not a magnified man, but on the other hand he is no mere remote Force or Energy which is totally indifferent to man and his fate. Man, he teaches, is the offspring, the child of God; and God is at once aware of and concerned in all human experiences whether of joy or of sorrow. Prayer is not a formal approach of the soul to the august presence of an almighty emperor who has to be flattered, bribed (or *wearied* by importunity): it is the spontaneous outflow of the soul seeking the communion and inspiration of the Infinite source of life and love: it is like a child calling in the darkness to its mother, and hearing her dear voice, and holding that loving hand, regaining peace and confidence. Therefore ‘in praying use not vain repetitions as the Gentiles do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not therefore like unto them; for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him.’



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

The quoting of these words of Jesus suggests a clue. How does the parable of the ' importunate widow ' fit in with this teaching? In one sense, not at all; but relations are not all of similarity: they are of contrast too, and an illustration of how things should not be is often an effective support to the teaching as to how they should be. In this sense, the parable fits exactly. Following that teaching we can well believe that ' he spake a parable unto them to the end ' . . . that they should not use vain repetitions, as the Gentiles: to show them, in a word, how *not* to pray. One can imagine Jesus saying: I will tell you the only sort of conditions under which the policy of ' much speaking ' is likely to be successful, and you shall judge for yourselves if you think those conditions apply to God who is like a Father. . . . The mere importunity of much speaking is only capable of moving a man who is neither God-fearing, nor man regarding, who is an unrighteous judge: and the only reason it moves him is because he is

## THE IMPORTUNATE WIDOW

a clever and calculating self-seeker, and he judges that it will more conduce to his happiness to give way, than to hold out. Shall we, then approach the Heavenly Father in the manner of a revengeful woman who tries to weary out a callous judge with much speaking? Not so, at least Jesus teaches: let us judge: ' . . . every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, who, if his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone; . . . If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?' It is not a father who requires persevering verbosity to move him; it is an unrighteous judge who fears not God and regards not man.

Clearly then this parable was spoken to rebuke the endless repetitions, formalisms, and pious verbiages of people who regarded God as a potentate to be

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

influenced by this sort of baksheesh. He tells the people so clearly that we can hardly fail to see it in spite of the evangelist's inversion, that the implication of such an attitude if they would but think it out and face it, is that their god is an unrighteous judge.

And there is here a principle well worth the effort of recovery and re-statement. God is known and only known effectively in experience. A mere tradition, or hearsay, about God which does not bear upon the actualities of life, nor harmonize with and illuminate the facts of experience, is simply myth. Now a great part of our experience of God comes to us in our relation with our fellows. The love, goodness, heroism, idealism, wisdom which we find in human beings, *or which in them finds us*, we feel to be a concrete manifestation of the Infinitely great spirit of love. All through the ages man has largely learned to approach God through fellowship with man, and so it has come about that God is thought about as being a very great Person. While there

## THE IMPORTUNATE WIDOW

is much truth in this conception, there is also great liability to error; and the error Jesus exposes in this parable. In effect he is saying: You are only too apt to fall into the mistake of thinking that God is amenable to the same sort of baser influences that carry weight with the ordinary human being: and so you think of him in personal terms as a very powerful and irresponsible monarch, tyrant, autocrat—or a supreme 'unrighteous judge.' Therein is total and pitiful misapprehension. God indeed is in a sense personal, but his personal characteristics are not those appertaining to what men often call (or miscall) 'greatness.' They are those which appertain to love, fatherliness, sympathy, comradeship. If you seek for an image of God in terms of personality, in terms of human relationship, avoid, Jesus teaches, all the artificial and unreal and unworthy elements of personality and relationship, and fasten upon the natural, beautiful, real, enduring elements, wherein the good of human life consists. For God



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

is manifest in those, and not in the others. Motherhood and fatherhood; the relation of husband and wife, of loyal friends—these are natural and enduring: these are by divine appointment, and are the vehicles for the expression of a love and comradeship which are his. Judges, princes, kings and the like are mere local and artificial arrangements, usually productive of much evil, at best only stopgaps and interim artifices in human self-realization and government. To confuse the mind with all the paraphernalia and artifice, all the pomp and display surrounding these ideas and relationships in our approach to God is to unfit ourselves for the knowledge of and communion with him who is spirit and who is love.

Love is the master word; the master idea. If you must fashion God forth—as indeed to some extent we all must—in terms of personal life, then choose that which is the agelong universal relationship of creative love; parenthood. Think of him as a Father, or

## THE IMPORTUNATE WIDOW

as a Mother: and regulate your thought of him and your approach to him in the light of the child's simplicity, confidence and affection in its approach to the mother, to the father.

Therefore, be not like the importunate widow, battering the gates of heaven with many words in order to reach the ear of an imaginary unrighteous judge within. That is to be an idolater, the worshipper of a false idol or image of God. Be rather like the child who asks in simple confidence for bread, not like one who expects to receive a stone; unless he so wearies the parent that an evil intention is changed for acquiescence. If our minds and wills are set upon being comrades and lovers of our fellows, we shall find that there is ever with us the Supreme Comrade and Lover; whether we be in the secret place of the inner chamber, or in the crowded street.



## IX THE SOWER

‘Listen: the sower goes out to sow. As he sows some of the seed falls by the way side, and the birds come and peck it up. Some falls on the rocky ground where it finds but little earth, and it shoots up quickly because it has no depth of soil; but when the sun is risen, it is scorched, and through having no root, it withers away. Some, again, falls among the thorns; and the thorns spring up and stifle it, so that it yields no crop. But some of the seed falls into good ground, and gives a return; it comes up and increases, and yields thirty, sixty, or a hundred-fold.’—MARK 4<sup>3-8</sup>—(Dr. Weymouth’s translation).

THE essential point that Jesus was illustrating in this parable is one of those broad truths of a perfectly simple kind which have an extremely wide application, once they are really recognized, but which we are all liable to overlook. The truth is this: that it is not just what comes from outside through the senses and to the mind of man that constitutes reality: it is what

comes from without *rightly received, interpreted and formulated*. We are given to understand that the seed that fell by the wayside was of the same quality, value and potentiality, considered in itself, as that which was cast on good ground. But the results were essentially different. In the one case the seed was food for birds: in the other case it took root, yielded a harvest, and provided food for man.

With a certain subtle humour, which seems to have been characteristic of Jesus, as other passages in the records show, the teacher applies the principle he has been trying to illustrate to those who are listening to his parable. ‘Listen,’ he added, ‘every one who has ears to listen with!’—or in the more familiar, and convincing language of the Revised Version: ‘And he said, Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.’ In other words: The value and significance of the teaching embodied in this parable of mine depends not merely on its own inherent truth, but equally upon the reaction you make to it. The

most stupendous revelation of truth is quite ineffective apart from a heart and mind which are in some degree capable of its reception and interpretation.

Error, infidelity, ignorance, self-satisfied dogmatism—these and similar things are due quite as much to a failure of imagination and insight, as to false teaching. The teacher may proclaim powerfully and eloquently a great truth, but if people will not or cannot apprehend it; if instead they misinterpret it, distort it, or allow it to lie idle on the surface of their minds, it is for them ineffective. The very best of seed may be sown, but if the ground is hard and rocky, there can be no taking root there, and the seed is carried off by the birds of the air. People may listen to this very parable, but if they have not the ears that can hear more than the mere words, it will seem to them nothing but a fanciful tale about an ancient agriculturist.

Now this is quite a simple, and, one would think, a very evident truth, but it is astonishing how slow the world is

to apprehend it, or in any adequate manner to make use of it. Indeed the world is still largely steeped in the idea that the mind is a *tabula rasa*—a clean sheet of paper—on which experience writes its story. The truth is quite other. Experience, far from being the story-writer, is really a sort of raw material, in regard to which the mind is at once architect and builder. It is the mind which has to design and to build the best edifice it can out of the materials of experience.

There is a suggestive passage, illustrative of this fact, in King Henry V, in the Prologue, where Chorus comes in to introduce the play. The success, he says, of what is to be presented, depends on the co-operation of the audience, through the effective use of imagination. The kingdoms of France and England, great armies, the ocean—these cannot be brought on the stage: they can but be suggested. So

' 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour glass.'



And the principle here involved is increasingly being appreciated and applied in all branches of art. Minute, elaborate and gorgeous scenery on the stage is giving way to a simpler environment which makes a demand on the imagination.<sup>1</sup> The modern painter does not depict every possible detail that would appear in a photograph, on the canvas, but provides a stimulus for the active imagination: he presents an idea the value of which to any seeker depends on what is brought to the study of the picture. This tendency (*mutatis mutandis*) applies even more conspicuously in literary art: where in place of the detailed descriptions of the older novelists, we are accustomed to the almost cryptic style of writing which compels our minds to fill in, according to suggestion, the gaps which are purposely left. In all these cases if the artist eliminates the need for imagination by overloading his work with detail, the result can only be that he will be a mere imitator instead of a

<sup>1</sup> I refer to dramatic *art*—not musical comedy.

creator, and those who come to him for inspiration will behold not the vision of an ideal, but a mere reflection of the obvious, as if in a mirror.

That is one of the fundamental principles Jesus sought to inculcate into the minds of the people regarding life as a whole. It is not things, not circumstances, not external facts that count supremely; what is of supreme moment is what the human soul makes out of them. Man is something more than a sensitive photographic plate, capable of receiving a colourless impression from whatever experience it is exposed to. He is an architect, an artist, a creator, if he will but claim and exercise his mental and spiritual powers. By the alchemy of the spiritual life many a man and woman has woven hardship and tragedy, sorrow and suffering, into the fabric of a divine vision.

In recent years we were in danger of losing the courage and virility by which alone we could enter into our heritage of spiritual creation. In the years preceding the outbreak of the



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

war we seemed to have reached a point, or to be making for it, at which our life was beginning to depend less upon the inner resources than upon outward circumstances. We were beginning to look for happiness not in what we could make out of experience, but on what pleasure giving circumstances could make of us. The sorrows through which we have passed, the hardships and straitened circumstances which lie before us may prove yet to be the travail pains of new birth. 'The source of final happiness is in the heart, and he is a fool who seeks for it elsewhere. He is like the shepherd who searched for the lamb that was in his own bosom.' How many fools there have been, then, and are, seeking for happiness in the things they can eat and drink, and in the possessions they can call 'theirs,' instead of in that quality and vigour of inward life which can turn to the best account any seed that experience may drop upon its prepared soil.

Perhaps if we get more soul, we can

## THE SOWER

do with less wealth that is outward—that consists in the abundance of the things we can possess—we can endure with less luxury : we can learn to suffer hardship easily. The great in soul know that it is literally true that 'a crust shared with devoted friends is sweeter than the costliest pearls with those who love us not.' A crust shared with the consciousness that life and love are more than food and raiment, is a source of deeper and more abiding joy than all the gaudy trinkets and luxurious profusion that might be gained in exchange for the soul.

## X

## THE LAW OF INCREASE

'Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he thinketh he hath.'—LUKE 8<sup>18</sup>.

THE truth of this observation as a principle of economics is, under existing conditions, beyond question. Capital begets capital, while only too often ability denied the use of capital runs to waste, becomes dissipated and lost. This application of the 'law of increase' was not one which entered into the interest or intention of Jesus. With him this saying is a moral and spiritual principle: not an economic platitude. To discern what he meant it is worth while studying the contexts in which the phrase occurs. It is recorded, with slight variations, five

times in the Synoptic Gospels: three times (once each in Matthew, Mark and Luke) in connexion with the parable of the Sower, and again in Matthew in connexion with the parable of the Talents, and in Luke in connexion with the parable of the Pounds.

The parable of the Sower<sup>1</sup> might better be described as the parable of the Soil: it aims at showing that the fruition of right teaching depends upon the character and volition of the disciple. The stony ground, the thorny ground, and the prepared ground, receive the same kind of seed: it is taken away from the stony ground, choked in the thorn beset ground, but it yields a harvest in the prepared ground. That is the principle again and again emphasized by Jesus in parable, paradox and direct teaching: the gospel, the kingdom, truth, goodness, cannot be imposed on an unwilling heart. He who lacks the will for truth, honour, beauty, goodness, cannot receive them. But unto him that hath the will, it

<sup>1</sup> See Essay No. IX.

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

shall be given. From him that hath it not shall be taken away even what he thinketh he hath—that is to say he becomes more and more indifferent to the appeal of finer things. The voice of conscience is silenced. The moral sense becomes dulled, and finally incapacitated.

The parables of the Talents and of the Pounds have an economic flavour about them: but we are very gross if we imagine them to be studies in economics. They are precisely illustrations of this same principle. What a man has, in the way of personal equipment, conscience, intellect, appreciation of beauty, is given him for use and practice: and the law is similar to the law of interest. Use leads to increase: disuse to decay and loss. If a man makes use of his mind and heart, he increases his capital of mind and heart. If he fails to use them, he diminishes his capital and may even lose it altogether. Once again, unto him that hath shall be given, from him that hath not—hath not the energy, the morality,

## THE LAW OF INCREASE

to use mind and heart and will—shall be taken away what he thinketh he hath.

But there is a further point of interest and importance. If we take the trouble to study the three accounts of the parable of the Sower and the Soil, we can hardly fail to be struck by the contradictory and confused teaching that is recorded in Matthew and Mark. The disciples ask, Why teach in parables? Jesus is represented as replying—So that people shall be sure to misunderstand me; so that the teaching of the Kingdom shall be unintelligible mystery to every one but you. Matthew indeed leaves it at that. But in the Mark and Luke account there follows a passage, which incorporates the 'law of increase,' flatly contradicting this mystery making. 'And he said unto them, Is the lamp brought to be put under the bushel, or under the bed, and not to be put on the stand? For there is nothing hid, save that it should be manifested; neither was anything made secret, but that it should come to light. If any man hath ears to



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

hear, let him hear. And he said unto them, Take heed what ye hear : with what measure ye mete it shall be measured unto you : and more shall be given unto you. For he that hath, to him shall be given ; and he that hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath' (Mark 4<sup>21-25</sup>). Now what light, if any, do these complications throw on the principle itself ?

The fact that the disciples, who were accustomed to listening to Jesus, had to ask for an interpretation of so simple and effective a parable as that of the Sower and the Soil, does not speak very highly for their intellectual quickness. With such men for the recorders of the parables and teachings of Jesus it is no wonder that there is confusion in the accounts. Evidently what actually happened was that the people in general understood the parables of Jesus clearly enough : this one included : but some of his immediate disciples, full of dramatic ideas about the 'end of the age' and the coming of 'Messiah' did not always, or even often understand

## THE LAW OF INCREASE

the obvious and direct meaning of Jesus. They asked, therefore, both about the meaning of this parable, and why Jesus used parables so much in his teaching. His answer—if we read intelligently between the lines—is somewhat sarcastic. 'To you,' he says, 'it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven—you do not need parables : you who are with me, understanding my aim and purpose are able, or *ought to be able*, to understand without such aids. But the multitude are not prepared. They, with the faculty of vision, yet do not easily see : with the capacity of hearing, do not readily understand ; and therefore, to get these truths home to their hearts and minds I must make use of simple parables and illustrations dealing with the things of their everyday life, so that, if possible, none of them can help understanding.'

'In any case,' he adds (putting the drift of the discourse clearly in modern terms), trying to prevent the very confusion the disciples fell into, 'make no mistake. My parables are to make

clear and simple the laws of the Kingdom of God ; for no man puts a light under the bed, but on the stand. Mysteries, so called, exist in order to be solved. If occasionally I say things in a paradoxical way it is because I want you to think out their significance, and so make truth your own—nothing can come from a sowing of seed unless there is vitality in the soil. So take heed *what* (Mark) or *how* (Luke) ye hear, for whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away, even that which he thinketh he hath.'

It is at least clear that Jesus was not enunciating the feeble platitude into which this saying is so often translated in modern speech and usage, but was giving a paradoxical and challenging expression to a law of the Kingdom : and one which strikes deep if we to-day have ears to hear, minds to understand. We can trace the working out of the principle in various ways and manners in personal experience. Jesus himself frequently applied it. When the dis-

ciples asked him to increase their faith, he told them that if they had faith as a tiny mustard seed and exercised it, it would automatically in the exercise increase, and grow as it were into a great tree : he who has, shall have more, if he uses what he has.

If we never venture anything on the love, the faith, the hope that are as tiny seeds in our hearts, we shall lose them : they will gradually be taken away. This is no threat. It is simply fact. Religion as proclaimed by Jesus aimed not at denunciation and terror ; but at truth. He came not to threaten, but to teach ; to save not by rounding men and women up with sheep dogs of fear, but by showing them the way of life, health and happiness. Here as elsewhere he is revealing facts of observation in the spiritual and moral realm, not uttering veiled threats. The man who never exercises faith tends inevitably to lose the power of trust : grows suspicious, unbelieving, cynical, a misanthrope : and breeds the very evil he everywhere suspects. It is the work-



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

ing out of moral law. He who never tries to love, never exercises a sentiment of goodwill, loses the power. He sees only what is unlovely in his fellows, and attracts only that which is worse in them, having sacrificed the talisman that could call forth what is best. He who sinks before the conflict in hopeless despair and makes no effort to hope on for the breaking of the dawn, ceases to be able to hope, and will even interpret the paling eastern sky which heralds the dawn as an illusion. To have faith, hope, and love, and to use them, to adventure much because of them, is to increase in moral and spiritual stature. Faith becomes the assurance of things hoped for, the giving substance to things not seen. Love is the atmosphere in which we inbreathe the very life and spirit of God. And it is only from the increase that is given by the unchangeable laws of God's Kingdom to faith, hope and love, mightily held, faithfully practised, that there can come the new earth which has been the dream of prophet and seer, and is the desire of the nations.

## XI

### THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

'So is the Kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed upon the earth; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not how. The earth beareth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, straightway he putteth forth the sickle, because the harvest is come.'—  
MARK 4<sup>26-29</sup>.

THE main theme of the teaching of Jesus was, as we know, the Kingdom of God. The disciples were always wanting the master to be in greater haste to do something immediate and practical in establishing that Kingdom, which they conceived to be some kind of Jewish revolution, accompanied by a heavenly intervention, aiming at the restoration of the throne of David. To their eager questions as to precisely what the coming Kingdom is to be, how



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

soon they can expect it, what in particular they can be doing immediately to promote it, Jesus replies in this little parable of secret, or 'automatic' growth.

Through the medium of this parable Jesus endeavours to dissipate the pre-conceptions and wayward imaginations of his disciples concerning the Kingdom. It is not a political revolution or reconstruction to be carried out by force. It is something rather which grows in the hearts of men and women. As the seed cast into the ground grows gradually not by being constantly interfered with by the man who scattered it, but by becoming vitalized by the resources of the earth, so the Kingdom of God is something which can only come by growth from within. As Jesus elsewhere said, it cometh not with observation, for it is within you.

The Kingdom of God then is a rulership established first of all within the heart and soul of individual men and women: it is a rulership of God over all the impulses and passions and

## THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

thoughts of human nature. Or to adopt the later equation of the New Testament writer, it is the rulership of Love, for God is love. It is the acceptance and joyous carrying out of the principle that 'I will to subordinate all my ambitions, desires, thoughts, conduct to the ideal of promoting human fellowship.' From the fellowship of those in whom that seed is growing there will arise influences that will gradually, but surely, revolutionize the character of social life.

The Kingdom of God being this intimately inward fact, the soil of the Kingdom, upon which like seed it is scattered, is the mind, heart and soul of human beings. Elsewhere Jesus has taught in the parable of the Sower and the Soil, what are the conditions favourable to the proclamation and promulgation of the Kingdom. Here he emphasizes a truth to which in many ways, especially in education, we are laboriously approaching. The earth, he says, beareth fruit of herself. The earth bears fruit, that is, if we have sown

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

living seed, and made reasonable preparation for the elimination of rocks and thorns. Insufficient, or otherwise occupied earth, does not 'automatically' fertilize the seed. The emphasis of educationists is on this truth: that the art of education consists not in furnishing the mind with facts so much as in helping to draw out of the mind the latent, undeveloped powers of thought: in creating the thirst for knowledge and training and exercising a mind which for itself can draw water from the well. What is true in education here is true in religion. The aim is to give, or create, the opportunity for the hearts and souls of men and women to bring forth fruit of themselves: not to frighten or bribe them into the profession or even practice of religion. As there are in the earth—if rocks and thorns are removed—latent forces capable of vitalizing the seed and producing a harvest, so in human nature—if false and alien sentiments are removed—there are latent forces which will react on the ideal of the Kingdom if it

## THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

is rightly presented, bringing forth in gradual order the fruits of a new and divine life.

Do not, Jesus is teaching in this parable, get flurried and side tracked. There is one way, and only one, in which the Kingdom can come: it must spring forth as naturally from the heart of mankind as the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear, spring forth from the earth. Our task is to secure so far as possible that the earth is not incapacitated by the presence of alien growths, or clogged by stones. That is the heart of the problem, the essence of the task. We must dig up the hard trodden ways of custom and convention, blast up the rocks of indifference and prejudice, kill off the thorns of selfishness and passion: and then we must rely on the essential qualities and powers of the soil to fertilize the good seed.

Moreover, we must not lose heart if the process seems to be a very slow one. If we have done and are doing our best to give the seed its right soil, then like the caster of seed in the parable, we



## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

must be content to sleep and rise night and day : to fulfil faithfully and simply the round of our common duties, and not lose our balance in a frenzy of fanaticism. Loyalty to the Kingdom and its high and redeeming ideals does not excuse us from the routine of citizenship of this world and the tasks of living among men and women who may not yet have seen our vision, in patience, forbearance and love. We must not let our enthusiasm issue and dissipate in fussiness and froth, but let it direct the current of our energies towards the fulfilment of the common duties of daily life, and the bringing of joy and betterment even in a small circle.

Being and doing so, we need not be cast down, for though very gradually, yet very surely, the soil of human nature will bring forth of itself, 'automatically,' the new life. Amid the incalculable losses and sorrows of the war we can at least trace this among the benefits of which religious and moral statesmanship should take advantage : that the soil of human nature has been

## THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

profoundly disturbed. The tyranny of many old and false ideas has been killed. The thorns and weeds of many a prejudice and barren tradition have been ruthlessly uprooted. Stony tracts of lethargy and *laissez-faire* in social outlook and activity have been blasted and dug up. The soil is ready for a sowing : a harvest of some sort will ere-long be reaped, whether of thorns and stones once again, or of corn depends much on the sowers. Now is an immeasurably great opportunity for Christianity which is something more than a theory of God and a world hereafter, to follow its master into the fields, and sow after him the seed of the Kingdom of God : the ideal that is for this world, for this land, of a social organization in which fellowship in toil for the common good shall finally take the place of heredity, wealth or title as the supreme dignity of citizenship.



## XII

## FACING THE ISSUES

‘Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, doth not first sit down and count the cost, whether he hath wherewith to complete it? Lest haply, when he hath laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all that behold begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build and was not able to finish. Or what king, as he goeth to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and asketh conditions of peace. So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.’—LUKE 14<sup>27-33</sup>.

‘THE sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light,’ Jesus once said. Most people endeavour to make use of their faculties, intellectual and moral, to their utmost in dealing with the issues

of everyday life and material good. Relatively few make use of them in the realms of religion and faith to anything like the same extent. If we are going to build a house, we inspect the site, draw appropriate plans, prepare a bill of quantities, invite estimates, and then, and only then, when we have made adequate investigations, do we involve ourselves for better or for worse in the undertaking. If, however, instead of a house, we are seeking to build a faith in God, how many of us approach *this* task with the same acumen, alertness and acquaintance with the facts of life which ought to be taken into account? It is the fashion here to discourage rather than to demand the use of critical reason, the formation of balanced judgments of common sense. Here in the supreme undertaking of life we are encouraged by many teachers of religion to leap before we look, to accept blindly a report concerning God and ‘facts’ which we are to refrain from investigating for ourselves. That attitude is approved and applauded as a

meritorious act of faith, a childlike trust. It is not childlike at all, but childish; and it is high time that we put away childish things.

In uncritically accepting a religious faith which postulates a beneficent God who will protect all who have faith in him, and give them preferential treatment, either here or hereafter, over those who make no profession of faith, we are literally 'playing the fool'—that is, applying to the greatest of all issues a principle which we should be ashamed to apply in the minor issues of life. Such conduct in business would soon, and deservedly, lead to the bankruptcy court. And such conduct in religion most frequently also leads to spiritual bankruptcy. And for this simple reason: that the God of preferential treatment is a myth. If we took the trouble to investigate the facts before we accepted or formulated a faith, we should know that beyond all doubt. Faith in God does not make a soldier bullet proof; nor does it make a civilian immune from the germs of disease.

Under certain circumstances the most virtuous and unselfish men and women who seem to deserve, by our standards, health and enjoyment if any do, have to pass to death by a way of agony and suffering, and in so doing to involve their loved ones in a distress and a suffering no less poignant. How and why these things take place belongs to the sphere of natural law. It does not, maybe, harmonize with our aspirations for some kind of equation between moral worth and happiness: but it is a fact. Nobility of character, a heart of deep love, are not protection against rain, nor against the ravages of disease germs: that, however unfortunately, is one of nature's facts, very plainly written for those to read who have eyes and understanding; and that, and many other such facts, must be faced and thought about before we build our faith in God—if we want to be able to complete our tower, and ensure its stability. If we start with a naïve acceptance of a benevolent deity who may allow other people to suffer,



doubtless because of some good reason, but will preserve us because we believe in him, we are liable to end in disaster. When the facts of suffering and sorrow, with which we were mildly sympathetic when they affected others, are driven home to ourselves in some experience of exquisite agony, we are likely to awaken to the insoluble 'problem of suffering,' to find that the God we had imagined has failed us, and to say with one who is not politely described in the Psalms 'there is no God.'

A religion which encourages or commands us to set about building the tower of our faith in that manner is a false religion—as false in religion as is that business company fraudulent which propounds a scheme for raising money from shareholders without intending to recognize its liabilities. If we go to the masters of religious insight and experience we shall never receive from them a prospectus which guarantees enormous profits, and scouts the possibility of loss. Our own religious master said, 'Whosoever doth not bear his own cross and

come after me, cannot be my disciple.' The 'cross' in this context is not an item of ecclesiastical ritual. It is the term for sorrow, suffering, hardship, tragedy—very probably 'undeserved' by our human estimate. Jesus recognized and taught that in this world the cross was as present a reality, in one form or another, as happiness and joy. Every one who would become religious must face the fact that he is in a world where the cross may fall to his lot; and he must be prepared to carry it, and not expect God to suspend the operation of natural law on his behalf. Jesus illustrates his statement by reference to the ordinary human procedure in the event of a proposed tower, or in case of preparation for war. In these matters, he points out, you accept no hearsay, unless you are a fool and want to be mocked at for your folly; you estimate the cost, you examine cautiously and carefully all the relevant conditions and circumstances. Only then are you in a position to go forward—or if you are persuaded of the necessity, to hold back.



Why then accept the principle of folly in religion and receive on trust, by hearsay, the idea of God as a sort of all inclusive insurance policy ?

God will not be found by people who put the telescope to their blind eye. We cannot expect to get the truth by refusing to attend to facts which are not pleasant. If our house is built on the shifting insecurity of sand—mere hearsay and tradition—it will not stand to provide a shelter in the storms of life. If we investigated the facts, and learnt that storms occur as well as days of peaceful sunshine, we should be wise enough to postpone building till we had found a rock foundation. For the sand-foundation house is worse than waste : in the sunny weather we can get on without it, but in the storm, when we need it, it is shattered and ruined, and probably does us irreparable damage in its collapse.

Is there then a God to be loved and worshipped, known and served at all if life is really what we see it to be—a place of suffering, storm and cruelty, as

well as of happiness, sunshine and kindness ? The answer to that question is written deep in the heart of all men and women who have any conscience at all—written, maybe, in varying characters, but with one intent. Love is better than hate, goodness than evil, joy than misery : and whatever of hate, evil and misery there is in the world, there is potent and commanding also, love, goodness, joy. God is the inward urge and imperative that calls us, as we face life's varied good and ill, to choose our part with love and good ; to endeavour to alleviate the sorrows, and to remove the causes of suffering which by human love and knowledge are removable. Religion calls us to face and deal with facts, not speculations ; things as definite and concrete as building towers and going to war. And the simple facts which claim our loyalty and form the substance of faith are that by the cultivation of sympathy we can serve, can take some part in the universal strife of light against darkness, good against evil ; that it is not the

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

ingenuity of our creed, but the whole-heartedness of our love and comradeship in the world that help to build the temple of religion. God is not a mere sweet savour in the hours of joy, or a medicine in the hours of sorrow, but one whom, if we have the courage and loyalty to choose, we take 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.' Experience offers us the vision of a God *whom we can serve*, by faithful living, by sympathy with our fellow creatures, by the cherishing and promulgating of finer ideals of human life, health, wealth and goodness; not the vision of a God *who exists to serve us*, whether by securing us from suffering here, or guaranteeing us 'glory' hereafter.

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