

to mankind. Few may seem to have within their reach opportunity of great service. And yet until we actually make the attempt it is impossible to say what is or is not within our reach. And what is life worth, if in the retrospect we see nothing generous and self-sacrificing, nothing richly profitable to any one, rising above the flat commonplace and daily routine of common toil? It is not our position in life that is at fault, nor altogether our position that gives us our opportunity. A man's life is determined from within, and his usefulness or uselessness is measured by his capacity for self-sacrifice.

MARCUS DODS.

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON.

VI.

"Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my heart in Christ. Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say. But withal prepare me a lodging: for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you.

"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, saluteth thee; and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."—PHILEM. 20-25 (Rev. Ver.).

WE have already had occasion to point out that Paul's pleading with Philemon, and the motives which he adduces, are expressions, on a lower level, of the greatest principles of Christian ethics. If the closing salutations be left out of sight for the moment, there are here three verses, each containing a thought which needs only to be cast into its most general form to show itself as a large Christian truth.

I. Verse 20 gives the final moving form of the Apostle's request. Onesimus disappears, and the final plea is based altogether on the fact that compliance will pleasure and help Paul. There is but the faintest gleam of a possible

allusion to the former in the use of the verb from which the name Onesimus is derived—"Let me have *help* of thee"; as if he had said, "Be you an Onesimus, a helpful one to me, as I trust he is going to be to you." "Refresh my heart" points back to *v.* 7, "The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by thee," and lightly suggests that Philemon should do for Paul what he had done for many others. But the Apostle does not merely ask help and refreshing; he desires that they should be of a right Christian sort. "In Christ" is very significant. If Philemon receives his slave for Christ's sake and in the strength of that communion with Christ which fits for all virtue, and so for this good deed—a deed which is of too high and rare a strain of goodness for his unaided nature,—then "in Christ" he will be helpful to the Apostle. In that case, the phrase expresses the element or sphere in which the act is done. But it may apply rather, or even also, to Paul, and then it expresses the element or sphere in which he is helped and refreshed. In communion with Jesus, taught and inspired by Him, the Apostle is brought to such true and tender sympathy with the runaway that his heart is refreshed, as by a cup of cold water, by kindness shown to him. Such keen sympathy is as much beyond the reach of nature as Philemon's kindness would be. Both are "in Christ." Union with Him refines selfishness, and makes men quick to feel another's sorrows and joys as theirs, after the pattern of Him who makes the case of God's fugitives His own. It makes them easy to be entreated and ready to forgive. So to be in Him is to be sympathetic like Paul, and placable as he would have Onesimus. "In Christ" carries in it the secret of all sweet humanities and beneficence, is the spell which calls out fairest charity, and is the only victorious antagonist of harshness and selfishness.

The request for the sake of which the whole letter is written is here put as a kindness to Paul himself, and thus

an entirely different motive is appealed to. "Surely you would be glad to give me pleasure. Then do this thing which I ask you." It is permissible to seek to draw to virtuous acts by such a motive, and to reinforce higher reasons by the desire to please dear ones, or to win the approbation of the wise and good. It must be rigidly kept as a subsidiary motive, and distinguished from the mere love of applause. Most men have some one whose opinion of their acts is a kind of embodied conscience, and whose satisfaction is reward. But pleasing the dearest and purest among men can never be more than at most a crutch to help lameness or a spur to stimulate.

If however this motive be lifted to the higher level, and these words thought of as Paul's echo of Christ's appeal to those who love Him, they beautifully express the peculiar blessedness of Christian ethics. The strongest motive, the very mainspring and pulsing heart of Christian duty, is to please Christ. His language to His followers is not, "Do this because it is right," but "Do this because it pleaseth Me." They have a living Person to gratify, not a mere law of duty to obey. The help which is given to weakness by the hope of winning golden opinions from, or giving pleasure to, those whom men love is transferred to the Christian relation to Jesus. So the cold thought of duty is warmed, and the weight of obedience to a stony, impersonal law is lightened, and a new power is enlisted on the side of goodness, which sways more mightily than all the abstractions of duty. The Christ Himself makes His appeal to men in the same tender fashion as Paul to Philemon. He will move to holy obedience by the thought—wonderful as it is—that it gladdens Him. Many a weak heart has been braced and made capable of heroisms of endurance and effort, and of angel deeds of mercy, all beyond its own strength, by that great thought, "We labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him."

II. Verse 21 exhibits love commanding, in the confidence of love obeying. "Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say." In *v.* 8 the Apostle had waived his right to enjoin, because he had rather speak the speech of love, and request. But here, with the slightest possible touch, he just lets the note of authority sound for a single moment, and then passes into the old music of affection and trust. He but names the word "obedience," and that in such a way as to present it as the child of love, and the privilege of his friend. He trusts Philemon's obedience, because he knows his love, and is sure that it is love of such a sort as will not stand on the exact measure, but will delight in giving it "pressed down and running over."

What could he mean by "do more than I say"? Was he hinting at emancipation, which he would rather have to come from Philemon's own sense of what was due to the slave who was now a brother, than be granted, perhaps hesitatingly, in deference to his request? Possibly, but more probably he had no definite thing in his mind, but only desired to express his loving confidence in his friend's willingness to please him. Commands given in such a tone, where authority audibly trusts the subordinate, are far more likely to be obeyed than if they were shouted with the hoarse voice of a drill-sergeant. Men will do much to fulfil generous expectations. Even debased natures will respond to such appeal; and if they see that good is expected from them, that will go far to evoke it. Some masters have always good servants, and part of the secret is that they trust them to obey. "England expects" fulfilled itself. When love enjoins there should be trust in its tones. It will act like a magnet to draw reluctant feet into the path of duty. A will which mere authority could not bend, like iron when cold, may be made flexible when warmed by this gentle heat. If parents oftener let their children feel that

they had confidence in their obedience, they would seldomer have to complain of their disobedience.

Christ's commands follow, or rather set, this pattern. He trusts His servants, and speaks to them in a voice softened and confiding. He tells them His wish, and commits Himself and His cause to His disciples' love.

Obedience beyond the strict limits of command will always be given by love. It is a poor, grudging service which weighs obedience as a chemist does some precious medicine, and is careful that not the hundredth part of a grain more than the prescribed amount shall be doled out. A hired workman will fling down his lifted trowel full of mortar at the first stroke of the clock, though it would be easier to lay it on the bricks; but where affection moves the hand, it is delight to add something over and above to bare duty. The artist, who loves his work, will put many a touch on it, beyond the minimum which will fulfil his contract. Those who adequately feel the power of Christian motives will not be anxious to find the least that they durst, but the most that they can do. If obvious duty requires them to go a mile, they will rather go two, than be scrupulous to stop as soon as they see the milestone. A child who is always trying to find out how little would satisfy his father cannot have much love. Obedience to Christ is joy, peace, life. The grudging servants are limiting their possession of these, by limiting their active surrender of themselves. They seem to be afraid of having too much of these blessings. A heart truly touched by the love of Jesus Christ will not seek to know the lowest limit of duty, but the highest possibility of service.

“Give all thou canst; high heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely calculated less or more.”

III. Verse 22 may be summed up as the language of love, hoping for reunion. “Withal prepare me a lodging:

for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you." We do not know whether the Apostle's expectation was fulfilled. Believing that he was set free from his first imprisonment, and that his second was separated from it by a considerable interval, during which he visited Macedonia and Asia Minor, we have yet nothing to show whether or not he reached Colossæ; but whether fulfilled or not, the expectation of meeting would tend to secure compliance with his request, and would be all the more likely to do so, for the very delicacy with which it is stated, so as not to seem to be mentioned for the sake of adding force to his intercession.

The limits of Paul's expectation as to the power of his brethren's prayers for temporal blessings are worth noting. He does believe that these good people in Colossæ could help him by prayer for his liberation, but he does not believe that their prayer will certainly be heard. In some circles much is said now about "the prayer of faith"—a phrase which, singularly enough, is in such cases almost confined to prayers for external blessings,—and about its power to bring money for work which the person praying believes to be desirable, or to send away diseases. But surely there can be no "faith" without a definite Divine *word* to lay hold of. Faith and God's promise are correlative; and unless a man has God's plain promise that A. B. will be cured by his prayer, the belief that he will is not faith but something deserving a much less noble name. The prayer of faith is not forcing our wills on God, but bending our wills to God's. The prayer which Christ has taught in regard to all outward things is, "Not my will, but Thine be done," and, "May Thy will become mine." That is the prayer of faith, which is always answered. The Church prayed for Peter, and he was delivered; the Church, no doubt, prayed for Stephen, and he was stoned. Was then the prayer for him refused? Not so, but if it were prayer

at all, the inmost meaning of it was "be it as Thou wilt"; and that was accepted and answered. Petitions for outward blessings, whether for the petitioner or for others, are to be presented with submission; and the highest confidence which can be entertained concerning them is that which Paul here expresses: "I *hope* that through your prayers I shall be set free."

The prospect of meeting enhances the force of the Apostle's wish; nor are Christians without an analogous motive to give weight to their obligations to their Lord. Just as Paul quickened Philemon's loving wish to serve him by the thought that he might have the gladness of seeing him before long, so Christ quickens His servants' diligence by the thought that before very many days He will come, or they will go—at any rate, they will be with Him,—and He will see what they have been doing in His absence. Such a prospect should increase diligence, and should not inspire terror. It is a mark of true Christians that they "love His appearing." Their hearts should glow at the hope of meeting. That hope should make work happier and lighter. When a husband has been away at sea, the prospect of his return makes the wife sing at her work, and take more pains or rather pleasure with it, because his eye is to see it. So should it be with the bride in the prospect of her Bridegroom's return. The Church should not be driven to unwelcome duties by the fear of a strict judgment, but drawn to large, cheerful service, by the hope of spreading her work before her returning Lord.

Thus, on the whole, in this letter, the central springs of Christian service are touched, and the motives used to sway Philemon are the echo of the motives which Christ uses to sway men. The key-note of all is love. Love beseeches when it might command. To love we owe our own selves beside. Love will do nothing without the glad

consent of him to whom it speaks, and cares for no service which is of necessity. Its finest wine is not made from juice which is pressed out of the grapes, but from that which flows from them for very ripeness. Love identifies itself with those who need its help, and treats kindnesses to them as done to itself. Love finds joy and heart solace in willing, though it be imperfect, service. Love expects more than it asks. Love hopes for reunion, and by the hope makes its wish more weighty. These are the points of Paul's pleading with Philemon. Are they not the elements of Christ's pleading with His friends?

He too prefers the tone of friendship to that of authority. To Him His servants owe themselves, and remain for ever in His debt, after all payment of reverence and thankful self-surrender. He does not count constrained service as service at all, and has only volunteers in His army. He makes Himself one with the needy, and counts kindness to the least as done to Him. He binds Himself to repay and overpay all sacrifice in His service. He finds delight in His people's work. He asks them to prepare an abode for Him in their own hearts, and in souls opened by their agency for His entrance. He has gone to prepare a mansion for them, and He comes to receive account of their obedience and to crown their poor deeds. It is impossible to suppose that Paul's pleading for Philemon failed. How much less powerful is Christ's, even with those who love Him best!

IV. The parting greetings may be very briefly considered, for much that would have naturally been said about them has already presented itself in dealing with the similar salutations in the epistle to Colossæ. The same people send messages here as there; only Jesus called Justus being omitted, probably for no other reason than because he was not at hand at the moment. Epaphras is naturally mentioned singly, as being a Colossian, and therefore more closely connected with Philemon than were the

others. After him come the two Jews and the two Gentiles, as in Colossians.

The parting benediction ends the letter. At the beginning of the epistle Paul invoked grace upon the household "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Now he conceives of it as Christ's gift. In Him all the stooping, bestowing love of God is gathered, that from Him it may be poured on the world. That grace is not diffused like stellar light, through some nebulous heaven, but concentrated in the Sun of righteousness, who is the light of men. That fire is piled on a hearth that, from it, warmth may ray out to all that are in the house.

That grace has man's spirit for the field of its highest operation. Thither it can enter, and there it can abide, in union more close and communion more real and blessed than aught else can attain. The spirit which has the grace of Christ with it can never be utterly solitary or desolate.

The grace of Christ is the best bond of family life. Here it is prayed for on behalf of all the group, the husband, wife, child, and the friends in their home-Church. Like grains of sweet incense cast on an altar flame, and making fragrant what was already holy, that grace sprinkled on the household fire will give it an odour of a sweet smell, grateful to men and acceptable to God.

That wish is the purest expression of Christian friendship, of which the whole letter is so exquisite an example. Written as it is about a common, every-day matter, which could have been settled without a single religious reference, it is saturated with Christian thought and feeling. So it becomes an example of how to blend Christian sentiment with ordinary affairs, and to carry a Christian atmosphere everywhere. Friendship and social intercourse will be all the nobler and happier, if pervaded by such a tone. Such words as these closing ones would be a sad contrast to much of the intercourse of professedly Christian men.

But every Christian ought by his life to be, as it were, floating the grace of God to others sinking for want of it to lay hold of, and all his speech should be of a piece with this benediction.

A Christian's life should be "an epistle of Christ" written with His own hand, wherein dim eyes might read the transcript of His own gracious love, and through all his works and deeds should shine the image of his Master, even as it does through the delicate tendernesses and gracious pleadings of this pure pearl of a letter, which the slave, become a brother, bore to the responsive hearts in quiet Colossæ.

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

SISERA AND JAEL.

JUDGES iv. 17-23.

THE welcome ray of light that has been shed on the confessedly dark transaction of Sisera's tragical death, by Captain Conder's *Tent Work in Palestine*, seems scarcely to have attracted the attention it deserves, or the interest it is fitted to awaken, although it is also fully noticed in Mr. Neil's interesting book, *Palestine Explored* (p. 8). In the *Student's Commentary* the previous lines of explanation are given in these words: "Deborah speaks of Jael's deed in the light of her own age, which did not make manifest the evil of guile and bloodshed; the light of ours does." But what Dr. Chalmers justly termed "the progressive morality" of the Biblical history, whilst applicable to other instances, furnishes no explanation of this very peculiar case. It was always evident that for its elucidation, and for our understanding of Deborah's unqualified praise, there must have been some ancient Eastern clue that had been lost in modern times or unknown in the West; and the recent finding of this clue comes to us with equal surprise and satisfaction.