

PERSONALITY AND GRACE.

VIII. REPENTANCE.

FAITH, as we have seen, is God's gift in the sense that God manifests Himself to us as worthy of trust, and thus enables us to believe for the only proper reason, which is that we discern it to be true. We have also seen that we disbelieve because we break the impress of the truth upon us by the manifold hypocrisies which, in the nature of the case, issue from all sin. In that case it might appear that our first task must be to consider the moral goodness of our lives. Can we be wrong in supposing that God will make plain His gracious relation to us according to our moral attainment ?

Our faith in the love of God manifestly rests on a belief in God's goodness in the moral sense. To believe that God is love means also to believe that love is God. But that means love as interpreted by conscience, not love as sentimental kindness. To believe in God means to see love behind conscience and power behind love. When we start at the other end and try to interpret conscience by love and not love by conscience, we are sure to end in the mere idea of benignity which manifestly has no relation to life's actual facts.

A gracious relationship of God to us is wholly further concerned with promoting moral goodness in us. If we choose to call its aim our salvation, we should not understand anything else by salvation than moral attainment. We are saved when sin has no right over us, and when it can neither drive us nor tempt us.

Moral goodness, moreover, is as much the outcome of faith as the ground of it. The proof that we believe in anything is our willingness to venture upon what we believe.

Faith in the love of God is faith in all we can discern of His holiness. Wherefore, willingness to follow the demands of God's holiness is one with faith in His love. It is not a consequence of faith only. It is the very essence of faith to trust our life to what we believe.

That situation is in no way altered by the succour of our faith through Jesus Christ. We must believe in Him because of what He stood for, and it is a mockery to say we believe in that, while we would not stand for it ourselves, but seek to safeguard our lives by every other possession and device. Wherefore, to call Jesus Saviour is in the same breath to call Him Lord.

But here we meet another of the antinomies of grace. Though grace is wholly concerned with moral goodness, it does not depend on how moral a man is. That is the antinomy which Phariseeism in all ages has failed to grasp. What a gracious relationship to God requires is moral sincerity not moral attainment. Though moral attainment is its sole object, to make it its condition is its supreme hindrance.

To have in any degree a right relation to God is to see how utterly vain it would be to make our own goodness the ground of it, or even any part of the ground.

Yet, we are not to conclude, as is too common, that we ought forthwith to work up a sense of being miserable sinners. That is one of the corners around which spiritual pride plays hide and seek with us. Our self-acquired moral abasement presents itself to us as one of our greatest and most meritorious moral attainments.

To deprecate any hold we have on truth, to make light of any self-discipline we have won, to undervalue any capacity we have for moral tasks is false humility. Jesus did not repudiate any standard He had set up when, looking upon the young ruler who had kept the command-

ments from his youth, He loved him. The requirement of grace is moral sincerity, and towards that we cannot advance by trying to persuade ourselves to think ourselves other than we see we are.

What is required for moral sincerity is not a different estimate of our moral attainments, but a different estimate of ourselves in respect of them. That also must be the estimate of simple truth. And truth makes but one demand. We must take off the spectacles of hypocrisy by which we see our privileges as if they were our merit. Truth reminds us that on the contrary privilege has its exact equivalent in responsibility, and in the eyes of God who gave it is, except the responsibility be exactly discharged, demerit.

That truth is obvious, yet the moment we genuinely accept it, all our conventional moral judgments are overthrown and, above everything else, our judgment of ourselves. What we took to be our virtue turns out to be the goodness and longsuffering of God which has had to shield us from ourselves and to hedge us in with what has been for the most part ill-used blessings. Instead of being our moral attainments, the moral attainments they have made possible have nearly all gone astray under our care, so that the very idea of merit in connexion with them is a vast self-delusion. Nor do we merely fail to use these gifts. They are always sooner or later positively misused. Instead of employing the goodness of God for its proper end of making us more sensitive to God's judgment upon us, we use our privileges to create for ourselves an armour of self-esteem which will ward it off.

The language about being poor and miserable and blind and naked may still not come naturally to our lips, but it will not appear much of an exaggeration when we see how our good opinion of ourselves has been formed in a world of quite perverted moral issues in which we have turned the

very privileges which are our chief condemnation into our merit. It is an unreal world in which our own consciousness of truth, our own conscience of right and our own sense of responsibility have had no chance of any straight speech with us, and in which we divert attention from our true character which constantly resists the truth in unrighteousness, to the outward respectabilities which we can only esteem through the reflected opinions of others who cannot see our hearts.

Outside of that unreal world there is no need to exaggerate our sins and shortcomings in order to realise the vanity and folly of producing our own goodness as the basis of our relation to God, and to discover that there never can be any good news of God which is not preached to the poor, preached simply to man's need. Hence to repent is nothing less than to lay ourselves open to the whole judgment of reality upon us and so to see ourselves as we really are. It is to see ourselves apart from the medium of that hypocrisy which so refracts our vision that we esteem our privileges, which are merely responsibilities and the misuse of which is our demerit, as in themselves making us worthy of moral approval.

Without that repentance, faith cannot be belief in face of all reality, especially moral reality. Yet to speak of repentance merely as the necessary condition of faith would mislead. It is not a preliminary to faith but an integral part of it. A gracious relation to God is as necessary for true penitence, as true penitence is for a gracious relation to God. "Repent and believe" does not mean repent first and then believe. In the real movements of the moral personality there is no such before and after. They are necessary, each to each. No man can lay himself open to reality without faith and no one can have faith without laying himself open to reality.

It is that living union of repentance and faith which finds itself succoured in Jesus Christ.

Whether He was without sin is a universal negative only omniscience could prove beyond cavil. Whether He had no limitation in His moral interest, no lack of devotion to tasks which vitally concern other ages than His own, is also a universal negative which will always be at the mercy of private judgment. But this positive effect of His life is not dubious, and, moreover, it is not past. Wheresoever men meet Him, in scripture or in His true followers, moral judgments have to be revised. Conventional moral judgments fail, and our responsibilities rise clearly out of our privileges. Moral compromises also fail, and our amazing moral baseness is only equalled by our amazing moral possibilities. As when the prophet saw God in His temple, men realise that they are of unclean lips and dwell amid a people of unclean lips. Nor does He merely demand it as moral effort preparatory for entering the temple. It comes to them precisely because He is the temple of God's presence, so that penitence and the vision of God are one inseparable experience. With whatsoever critical question of text or narrative, that effect abides, and not always least with those who most realise intellectual difficulties. Nor is it least with those whose relation to Him has no formal, ecclesiastical expression. Nothing is more certain in history than His influence throughout the ages in making men estimate themselves with true humility by the simple process of bringing them up against heart-searching moral realities. Where that effect fails, they have not laid themselves open to His influence, even though, according to all the orthodoxies, they may have believed in Him, and, according to all the traditions, been counted His followers and called by His name.

JOHN OMAN.