

Sermonettes on the Golden Texts.

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I.

'A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.'—PROV. xv. 1.

WHAT an amount there is, in these days, of concentrated energy! Machines are so constructed, and natural forces so utilized, that, by a very little effort on man's part, tremendous results may be accomplished. You press a button and there may be an explosion miles away, you turn a handle, and a whole factory of machinery is set in motion. It was not so in olden times. Then great results were only produced in slow and laborious ways. Then, however, as well as now, the tongue of man was capable of doing mighty good or harm. Kingdoms have been divided by a slip of the tongue. How different the whole after-history of the Old Testament would have been had Rehoboam been wise enough to take the advice of the old counsellors! His own reign might have been even more of a golden age than that of his father. But Rehoboam spoke ill-advisedly, and the consequence was the larger part of his kingdom was lost to him. Kingdoms, too, have been won by a word fitly spoken. At the present time, a few words spoken recently by our Colonial Secretary bid fair to bring into alliance with our country that kingdom of the West which broke away, over a hundred years ago, because of grievous words that stirred up anger.

But we must not speak of kingdoms only just now. It is as true, and far more often true, in our individual lives, that a word is momentous for good or ill. A soft answer—what a power lies in it! It is always so in human life. The mightiest power is the gentlest. He who can storm, and rage, and answer vehemently, is far, far behind, in mere power, him who can give a soft answer in the face of wrath. It is easy enough to answer according to kind. Do not even the publicans so? But it means, for most of us, that we must live very close to the Saviour if we would find ourselves able to give the soft answer that turneth away wrath.

Of course, there are times when the soft answer will not do. There are times when the right

thing, if we have the right spirit within us, would be the stern rebuke. And even in the lives of boys and girls such times may occur, when some companion would do a mean or malicious thing. But it is not easy, either, to be angry and sin not. It needs great grace to take up that attitude. The ordinary angry word—the tit-for-tat sort of thing—comes easily and naturally to us all: but the soft answer and the righteous rebuke are alike hard to accomplish well and truly. It is not often, however, comparatively, that there is the call for righteous indignation. Far more frequently there comes to us the opportunity of speaking the soft word, and you will find how true the Scripture is which says that it turneth away wrath.

Try it. Try it to-day, if the chance is given you. I notice in some of the eating-houses they have, on the bill of fare, some one dish under the heading, 'To-day's specialty,' some dish about which, doubtless, they have been very particular in the cooking, and of which a considerable amount has been prepared. Might it not be very helpful and nourishing to have this in our spiritual diet for the day, to have it as to-day's specialty, if need be? Don't be afraid of it. You may be sure it is a dish that will agree with you.

II.

'And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord.'—1 KINGS xvii. 16.

THE barrel of meal and the cruse of oil. Bread and butter. Very good famine fare, and sure all the way along. She was a very fortunate widow that, to whom Elijah was sent. But she was not undeserving of her high privileges, for you will notice, in the first place, that she was *kind and obliging*. Elijah asked some water of her, and though it was very precious she went to fetch him some. Then when he ventured further to ask for bread, it is evident she regretted she was unable to give it him, being down to her last handful of meal. There is a way of putting things, and a refusal from some people may be more acceptable than a gift from others. It always pays to be

helpful and obliging so far as we can. And even should we get no returns, with interest, of such a kind as this widow got, even should we meet with ingratitude instead, still the spirit of helpfulness will always make more real to us the Saviour's love. Just as we need to have the forgiving spirit before we can hope to be forgiven, so do we need to have the giving spirit ere we can appreciate and possess, in large measure, the blessing of God's unspeakable Gift.

This widow was *trustful*, too. It would never do to trust everybody, but, no doubt, Elijah's looks would be in his favour: rough and stern, but with an honest look about him. Certainly he was testing her confidence in him very severely when he went the length of bidding her make a cake for him first, and afterwards for her and for her son. But you have noticed, perhaps, that when you really have the best intentions towards another, and have some good in store for him, it is a great pleasure to be met in a trustful instead of a suspicious and doubting way. She resolved to run the risk, if there was any risk about it. She seems to have felt pretty sure she was safe in taking the prophet at his word.

Spurgeon, in his autobiography, says that he had not, that he knew of, one grain of speculation in his nature. But I do not think Spurgeon was quite doing himself justice in saying that; for he *did* speculate. What were the charitable institutions he founded and maintained but a great speculation? But, you see, it was a speculation on God's promises; he trusted in God as the Hearer of prayer, and that made all the difference. And, indeed, was there not speculation in his whole Christian life, and in that of every Christian? It is a trusting in Christ, trusting that He hath brought life and immortality to light, and that He will bring us at length into the everlasting habitations. We sometimes say of a man, 'I'll trust him just as far as I see him,' but that does not hold good of our Saviour, and of His Father and ours.

Notice, lastly, *the widow's reward*. The barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail. It was a special experience in one way, and yet how true of all who live a life of faith in the Most High! We often fear, in unworthy ways, that things will fail. And yet the supply comes, time and again, for the need, and strength for the day. 'Even to your old age I am He, and even to hoar hairs will I carry you.'

III.

'And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God.'—1 KINGS xviii. 39.

TRULY they might have said, 'We have seen strange things to-day.' No wonder we read of them speaking as in the text, after such wonderful experiences. And yet, somehow, we cannot help having doubts about them, notwithstanding that strong and solemn assertion of theirs; for, as Kingsley says, 'it takes a good Jew to make a good Christian.' The man about whom you are in doubt, up to the last moment, as to whether he will be a Jew or a Christian, in doubt, to the last, on which side of the fence he will come down, is not likely to be one who has much conviction either way. We have less disrespect for Jezebel than for Ahab, just on that ground. Jezebel really believed in Baalism, and certainly acted up to her belief. And if she had come over to the other side, we should have believed much more readily in her sincerity than in Ahab's. She would have been a convert worth making. Ahab, on the other hand, was a mere time-server, a Captain Anything. We like to see a man to be out-and-out something, though we don't agree with him. Now, it seems, the people had till now been halting, as Elijah puts it, between two opinions; halting, or limping,—an expressive word, suggesting the pain and difficulty and ungracefulness of the situation. But the suspicion *will* creep in that that halting of theirs was more from policy than from principle, and that, notwithstanding their solemn declaration now, they were not just the stuff that martyrs are made of.

Remember, too, that it is not our opinion merely that God wants, but our *service*. Elijah said to the people, Decide the one way or the other, and then follow. He did not say, Choose the one opinion, or the other, and rest there, but Choose your opinion, and then follow accordingly, either the Lord or Baal. So Joshua said, 'Choose you this day whom ye will *serve*.' It is only a following and a serving, that means anything. God does not want your opinion merely, or your vote, so to speak; He wants your heart and life. It is true that 'as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he,' but there is such a thing as mere opinion which may affect, to little or no extent, the life; and especially in religion has the mistake been made at times of

supposing that a man was what he ought to be, if only he had right opinions, orthodox religious opinions. But what is an opinion worth if it be not put into practice? As has been said, 'We do not read of the Resolutions of the Apostles, but the Acts of the Apostles.' 'Not everyone that saith, "The Lord, He is the God," shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

Well, the people did not stop, however, in this case, at the mere expression of opinion. They went further, and entered upon service of a kind. They pursued and slew all the prophets of Baal. Let us not condemn them. The light they had was dim compared with ours; and often, even in Christian times, men have failed to rise to higher conceptions of service than that. 'The zeal that is ready to kill' has often been where there was little of 'the love that is ready to die.' Saul the Jew was a persecutor of the first water, 'breathing out threatenings and slaughter,' but Paul the Christian—never. It was a great deed, that sweeping off of four hundred and fifty prophets at a stroke, but, in the way of Divine service, the loving wish of the little maid, that led to the healing of Naaman, her master, was greater far.

IV.

'Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.'—Ps. xxxvii. 7.

THAT was just what Elijah needed to do, and what he failed to do, at the time to which the lesson refers, when he had fled from the wrath of Jezebel. Strong in faith at Carmel, weak and woeful now in the wilderness. Was it, as in the case of Baal's prophets, that there was 'neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded?' Elijah knew better; but, alas! we do not always live according to our knowledge. It was but a temporary breakdown on Elijah's part, however, and perhaps the bodily reaction, after the exciting time he had passed through, greatly accounted for it. 'The measure of our faith,' it has been well said, 'is the faith we have in the darkest hour.' And oh! how great the after-profit, if we come grandly through a trying time!

It may need to be a *quiet* waiting. The word 'rest' literally means that,—'Be silent to the Lord.' The best thing may be, at times, to wait quietly. There once was an alarm of fire arose in a crowded hall, and a general rush was made to the door. The alarm proved to be a false one, and by and by

the people got back to their seats. It was noticed, however, that one little girl had not moved, and on being asked why, it turned out that her father was a member of the fire brigade, and that he had often impressed upon her that if ever she found herself in a situation of that kind, she was to sit still. That is what God often told His servants of old, and what He tells us yet through His Word, with regard to trying experiences; but how hard to learn the lesson, and obey! 'Their strength is to sit still.'

But, assuredly, it should be a *hopeful* waiting. Let not the stillness be mere torpor. Let not the dumbness be numbness. 'Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,' says the Psalmist; and that word 'yet' is the keynote of the whole Psalm. Just last Sunday, as I write, a sparrow got into the hall where I was to have service in the evening. I happened to arrive a few minutes before the people, and tried to catch it, but failed. So I jotted down the word 'bird' on my list of hymns, to remind me of it after service; for the poor creature would have starved had it been locked in all the week. Frightened and exhausted by my pursuit of it, it remained in a corner during the service, and nobody was aware of its presence. Curiously enough, the text was 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee.' Now, if that bird was capable of thinking at all, it would be thinking, 'I wonder what is going to happen. How am I to get out of this? I am afraid it is all up with me.' What a pity the text could not have got home to the bird somehow! There was a sense in which the words were truly applicable to its case. There was still a trying experience before it that it was not aware of. It had yet to be pursued and caught. At length it *was* caught, and carried to the door; the hand was opened, and then—Liberty. And as it sat once more on its familiar housetop, it may have thought, with whatever gratitude and praise a sparrow is capable of, 'Well, well, I never expected to be here again.'

Perhaps the highest and most difficult thing of all, however, is that it be a *patient* waiting. Hope may be deferred, the dawn may seem never to be coming, and yet be patient—patient. I knew an old woman with a soft face, like Dr. Barrie's mother's. She had come through much tribulation, but, I think, the secret of her peace and beauty was explained by a remark I once heard

her make. 'I used,' she said, 'to bring my troubles to the Lord, and bring them away with me again; now I have learned to bring them to the Lord, and to leave them there.' She had learned to rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.

'All will come right,' are the words put on the tombstone of President Brand, a late President of the Orange Free State. It was a remark he was often in the habit of making in his lifetime. If our trust be in God, may we not take them up too? All will come right. 'The Lord reigneth.'

V.

'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house.'—EX. xx. 17.

WHAT constitutes coveting? Here, for instance, is a ragged urchin, a homeless wanderer, shivering in the cold street, and gazing in through a lighted window at the Christmas festivities within. It is a glimpse of Paradise to him, so near and yet so far. Could he help having a longing to share the happy ongoings? It would be natural, in the circumstances, and it would be far better than pretending to go away with feelings such as the fox pretended to have with regard to the grapes he could not reach. That fox, mind you, was really full of the covetous spirit, for all his disparagement of the unattainable. Some of ourselves, probably, must plead guilty to turning a wishful eye, in our time, upon some houses,—a house beautiful for situation, and with, perhaps, a room like that one in which Jesus and His disciples met of old—'a large upper room furnished,'—comfortable within, and commanding a splendid view without. Would not life be better and brighter, we think, with such a room to live and work in? Still, if we haven't it, it does not trouble us. We want to aim not in the coveting direction but in the content direction, which St. Paul had learned to do so well.

It was a very different thing with Ahab when he coveted Naboth's vineyard. First he took to his bed about it, and refused to eat, like a big baby. And then came the tragedy of Naboth's murder, and the joyous uprising of the king to go down and take possession. Not so joyous, however, after all, for there was a troublesome little thing, called conscience, that had to be counted with. Conscience within, and Elijah to be faced without, Ahab was not to be envied in his new possession.

But this commandment against coveting is a very far-reaching one. In some respects it might be said to be the highest string in what Augustine called the ten-stringed instrument of the commandments. The high notes are the most penetrating, and this, you remember, was the commandment that reached home to St. Paul's heart with condemning power. And it is not likely that, if St. Paul stood condemned by it, we, if we understand ourselves aright, shall be able to hear it, and count ourselves blameless. 'Take heed, and beware of covetousness.' It is very insidious in the ways in which it can find a lodgment in the human heart. There may be a certain longing, at times, that is natural, and can hardly be avoided; but it is a different thing to set the heart on what does not belong to us, in an envious and selfish way.

Still, there was never a man more covetous, in one sense, all his days than St. Paul was. 'Covet earnestly the best gifts' was his exhortation to others also. Ah, but what were they? Gifts such as faith, hope, and love. Get as much of these as you can, for nobody will suffer loss by your gain in these respects. Nay, rather, not only will you be blessed yourself, but all connected with you will be made partakers of the blessing.

Ezekiel's Temple.

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III.

THERE are some other peculiarities in Ezekiel's temple and its services which are closely connected, though perhaps not necessarily so, with this advance of the holy place to a position of equality or identity with the most holy place.

i. There is now no laver, such as stood beside the altar of burnt offering and the entrance to the tabernacle of Moses, that by washing their hands and feet in it the priests might not die when they approached the altar or entered the tabernacle.