

I. JESUS' ESSENTIAL TEACHING

God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul

To our modern way of thinking and feeling, Christ's message appears in the clearest and most direct light when grasped in connexion with the idea of God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul. Here the elements which I would describe as the restful and rest-giving in Jesus' message, and which are comprehended in the idea of our being children of God, find expression. I call them *restful* in contrast with the impulsive and stirring elements; although it is just they that are informed with a special strength. But the fact that the whole of Jesus' message may be reduced to these two heads—God as the Father, and the human soul so ennobled that it can and does unite with him—shows us that the Gospel is in no-wise a positive religion like the rest; that it contains no statutory or particularistic elements; *that it is, therefore, religion itself*. It is superior to all antithesis and tension between this world and a world to come, between reason and ecstasy, between work and isolation from the world, between Judaism and Hellenism. It can dominate them all, and there is no factor of earthly life to which it is confined or necessarily tied down. Let us, however, get a clearer idea of what being children of God, in Jesus' sense, means, by briefly considering four groups containing sayings of his, or, as the case may be, a single saying, viz.: (1) The Lord's Prayer; (2) that utterance, 'Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven'; (3) the saying, 'Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered'; (4) the utterance, 'What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'

Let us take the Lord's Prayer first. It was communicated by Jesus to his disciples at a particularly solemn moment. They had asked him to teach them how to pray, as John the Baptist had taught his disciples. Thereupon he uttered the Lord's Prayer. It is by their prayers that the character of the higher religions is determined. But this prayer was spoken—as every one must feel who has ever given it a thought in his soul—by one who has overcome all inner unrest, or overcomes it the moment that he goes before God. The very apostrophe of the prayer, 'Our Father', exhibits the steady faith of the man who knows that he

is safe in God, and it tells us that he is certain of being heard. Not to hurl violent desires at heaven or to obtain this or that earthly blessing does he pray, but to preserve the power which he already possesses and strengthen the union with God in which he lives. No one, then, can utter this prayer unless his heart is in profound peace and his mind wholly concentrated on the inner relation of the soul with God. All other prayers are of a lower order, for they contain particularistic elements, or are so framed that in some way or other they stir the imagination in regard to the things of sense as well; whilst this prayer leads us away from everything to the height where the soul is alone with its God. And yet the earthly element is not absent. The whole of the second half of the prayer deals with earthly relations, but they are placed in the light of the Eternal. In vain will you look for any request for particular gifts of grace, or special blessings, even of a spiritual kind. 'All else shall be added unto you.' The name of God, His will, and His kingdom—these elements of rest and permanence are poured out over the earthly relations as well. Everything that is small and selfish melts away, and only four things are left with regard to which it is worth while to pray—the daily bread, the daily trespass, the daily temptations, and the evil in life. There is nothing in the Gospels that tells us more certainly what the Gospel is, and what sort of disposition and temper it produces, than the Lord's Prayer. With this prayer we ought also to confront all those who disparage the Gospel by representing it as an ascetic or ecstatic or sociological pronouncement. It shows the Gospel to be the Fatherhood of God applied to the whole of life; to be an inner union with God's will and God's kingdom, and a joyous certainty of the possession of eternal blessings and protection from evil.

As to the second utterance: when Jesus says 'Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you; but rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven', it is another way of laying special emphasis on the idea that the all-important element in this religion is the consciousness of being safe in God. The greatest achievements, nay the very works which are done in the strength of this religion, fall below the assurance, at once humble and proud, of resting for time and eternity under the fatherly care of God. Moreover, the genuineness, nay the actual existence, of religious experience is to be measured, not by any transcendence of feeling nor by great deeds that all men can see, but by the joy and the peace which are diffused through the soul that can say 'My Father'.

How far did Christ carry this idea of the fatherly providence of God? Here we come to the third saying: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.' The assurance that God rules is to go as far as our fears go, nay, as far as life itself—life down even to its smallest manifestations in the order of nature. It was to disabuse his disciples of the fear of evil and the terrors of death that he gave them the sayings about the sparrows and the flowers of the field; they are to learn how to see the hand of the living God everywhere in life, and in death too.

Finally, in asking—and after what has gone before the question will not sound surprising—'What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' he put a man's value as high as it can be put. The man who can say 'My Father' to the Being who rules heaven and earth, is thereby raised above heaven and earth, and himself has a value which is higher than all the fabric of this world. But this great saying took the stern tone of a warning. He offered them a gift and with it set them a task. How different was the Greek doctrine! Plato, it is true, had already sung the great hymn of the mind; he had distinguished it from the whole world of appearance and maintained its eternal origin. But the mind which he meant was the knowing mind; he contrasted it with blind, insensible matter; his message made its appeal to the wise. Jesus Christ calls to every poor soul; he calls to every one who bears a human face: You are children of the living God, and not only better than many sparrows but of more value than the whole world. The value of a truly great man, as I saw it put lately, consists in his increasing the value of all mankind. It is here, truly, that the highest significance of great men lies: to have enhanced, that is, to have progressively given effect to human value, to the value of that race of men which has risen up out of the dull ground of Nature. But Jesus Christ was the first to bring the value of every human soul to light, and what he did no one can any more undo. We may take up what relation to him we will: in the history of the past no one can refuse to recognize that it was he who raised humanity to this level.

This highest estimate of a man's value is based on a transvaluation of all values. To the man who boasts of his possessions he says: 'Thou fool.' He confronts everyone with the thought: 'Whosoever will lose his life shall save it.' He can even say: 'He that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.' This is the transvaluation of values

of which many before him had a dim idea; of which they perceived the truth as through a veil; the redeeming power of which—that blessed mystery—they felt in advance. He was the first to give it calm, simple, and fearless expression, as though it were a truth which grew on every tree. It was just this that stamped his peculiar genius, that he gave perfectly simple expression to profound and all-important truths, as though they could not be otherwise; as though he were uttering something that was self-evident; as though he were only reminding men of what they all know already, because it lives in the innermost part of their souls.

In the combination of these ideas—God the Father, Providence, the position of men as God's children, the infinite value of the human soul—the whole Gospel is expressed. But we must recognize what a paradox it all is; nay, that the paradox of religion here for the first time finds its full expression. Measured by the experience of the senses and by exact knowledge, not only are the different religions a paradox, but so are all religious phenomena. They introduce an element, and pronounce it to be the most important of all, which is not cognizable by the senses and flies in the face of things as they are actually constituted. But all religions other than Christianity are in some way or other so bound up with the things of the world that they involve an element of earthly advantage, or, as the case may be, are akin in their substance to the intellectual and spiritual condition of a definite epoch. But what can be less obvious than the statement: the hairs of your head are all numbered; you have a supernatural value; you can put yourselves into the hands of a power which no one has seen? Either that is nonsense, or else it is the utmost development of which religion is capable; no longer a mere phenomenon accompanying the life of the senses, a coefficient, a transfiguration of certain parts of that life, but something which sets up a paramount title to be the first and the only fact that reveals the fundamental basis and meaning of life. Religion subordinates to itself the whole motley world of phenomena, and defies that world if it claims to be the only real one. Religion gives us only a single experience, but one which presents the world in a new light: the Eternal appears; time becomes means to an end; man is seen to be on the side of the Eternal. This was certainly Jesus' meaning, and to take anything from it is to destroy it. In applying the idea of Providence to the whole of humanity and the world without any exception; in showing that humanity is rooted in the Eternal; in proclaiming the

fact that we are God's children as at once a gift and a task, he took a firm grip of all fumbling and stammering attempts at religion and brought them to their issue. Once more let it be said: we may assume what position we will in regard to him and his message, certain it is that thence onward the value of our race is enhanced; human lives, nay, we ourselves, have become dearer to one another. A man may know it or not, but a real reverence for humanity follows from the practical recognition of God as the Father of us all.

The higher righteousness and the commandment of love

This is the third head, and the whole of the Gospel is embraced under it. To represent the Gospel as an ethical message is no depreciation of its value. The ethical system which Jesus found prevailing in his nation was both ample and profound. To judge the moral ideas of the Pharisees solely by their childish and casuistical aspects is not fair. By being bound up with religious worship and petrified in ritual observance, the morality of holiness had, indeed, been transformed into something that was the clean opposite of it. But all was not yet hard and dead; there was some life still left in the deeper parts of the system. To those who questioned him Jesus could still answer: 'You have the law, keep it; you know best yourselves what you have to do; the sum of the law is, as you yourselves say, to love God and your neighbour.' Nevertheless, there is a sphere of ethical thought which is peculiarly expressive of Jesus' Gospel. Let us make this clear by citing four points.

First: Jesus severed the connexion existing in his day between ethics and the external forms of religious worship and technical observance. He would have absolutely nothing to do with the purposeful and self-seeking pursuit of 'good works' in combination with the ritual of worship. He exhibited an indignant contempt for those who allow their neighbours, nay, even their parents, to starve, and on the other hand send gifts to the temple. He will have no compromise in the matter. Love and mercy are ends in themselves; they lose all value and are put to shame by having to be anything else than the service of one's neighbour.

Secondly: in all questions of morality he goes straight to the root, that is, to the disposition and the intention. It is only thus that what he calls the 'higher righteousness' can be understood. The 'higher righteousness' is the righteousness that will stand when the depths of the

heart are probed. Here, again, we have something that is seemingly very simple and self-evident. Yet the truth, as he uttered it, took the severe form: 'It was said of old . . . but I say unto you.' After all, then, the truth was something new; he was aware that it had never yet been expressed in such a consistent form and with such claims to supremacy. A large portion of the so-called Sermon on the Mount is occupied with what he says when he goes in detail through the several departments of human relationships and human failings so as to bring the disposition and intention to light in each case, to judge a man's works by them, and on them to hang heaven and hell.

Thirdly: what he freed from its connexion with self-seeking and ritual elements, and recognized as the moral principle, he reduces to *one* root and to *one* motive—love. He knows of no other, and love itself, whether it takes the form of love of one's neighbour or of one's enemy, or the love of the Samaritan, is of one kind only. It must completely fill the soul; it is what remains when the soul dies to itself. In this sense love is the new life already begun. But it is always the love which *serves*, and only in this function does it exist and live.

Fourthly: we saw that Jesus freed the moral element from all alien connexions, even from its alliance with the public religion. Therefore to say that the Gospel is a matter of ordinary morality is not to misunderstand him. And yet there is one all-important point where he combines religion and morality. It is a point which must be felt; it is not easy to define. In view of the Beatitudes it may, perhaps, best be described as *humility*. Jesus made love and humility one. Humility is not a virtue by itself; but it is pure receptivity, the expression of inner need, the prayer for God's grace and forgiveness, in a word, the opening up of the heart to God. In Jesus' view, this humility, which is the love of God of which we are capable—take, for instance, the parable of the Pharisee and the publican—is an abiding disposition towards the good, and that out of which everything that is good springs and grows. 'Forgive us our trespasses even as we forgive them that trespass against us' is the prayer at once of humility and of love. This, then, is the source and origin of the love of one's neighbour; the poor in spirit and those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are also the peacemakers and the merciful.

It was in this sense that Jesus combined religion and morality, and in this sense religion may be called the soul of morality, and morality the body of religion. We can thus understand how it was that Jesus

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could place the love of God and the love of one's neighbour side by side; the love of one's neighbour is the only practical proof on earth of that love of God which is strong in humility.

In thus expressing his message of the higher righteousness and the new commandment of love in these four leading thoughts, Jesus defined the sphere of the ethical in a way in which no one before him had ever defined it. But should we be threatened with doubts as to what he meant, we must steep ourselves again and again in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. They contain his ethics and his religion, united at the root, and freed from all external and particularistic elements.

What is Christianity? (1900) (trans. E. B. Saunders)