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THE GRACE OF DISCERNMENT: A STUDY IN THE EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS.

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A FEW years ago a greatly respected bishop distributed the prizes on Speech-day at a certain Grammar School. At the close of an admirable address to the boys he quoted St. Paul's words: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things"; and then made the comment: "Modern psychology, of which we hear so much, has nothing to add to these words." This is doubtless true, in the sense in which the words are generally understood. The verse is almost always interpreted as meaning, Give your mind to whatever is morally good and clean, and whatever is worthy of praise; "if 'virtue,' if 'honour' have a real meaning for you, on these things meditate."[1] Bishop Lightfoot, for instance, speaks of it as enumerating "the proper subjects of meditation."[2] This, of course, is excellent advice, and "Modern psychology stresses the value of it. The breeding-place of good habits is within the mind."[3] "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he." Our Lord Himself has taught us, "Out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications," etc. In another epistle, written about the same time as that to the Philippians, St. Paul gives even higher advice of this kind: "Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth." And indeed no more helpful advice for guiding in the spiritual life could be given to recent converts to the Faith and immature disciples, such as composed the Church addressed. St. Paul would have endorsed the words of Marcus Aurelius: "Such as are thy habitual thoughts, such also will be the character of thy mind; for the soul is dyed by the thoughts"; and of John Ruskin: "Do you know what fairy palaces you may build of beautiful thoughts, proof against all adversity?", and of George Tyrrell, "It is what we think about and what we love that matters most, and that makes us what we really are in God's eyes." He would have cordially approved of the advice of Bishop Steere, "Do not think that what

[1] *Farrar, Life and Work of St. Paul*, in loc.
[2] *Lightfoot* on the Epistle to the Philippians, in loc.
[3] *Gore's Commentary*, in loc.

your thoughts dwell upon is of no matter. Your thoughts are making you"; and of John Henry Newman,

> "Prune thou thy words, thy thoughts control
> That o'er thee swell and throng;
> They will condense within thy soul,
> And change to purpose strong."

But excellent as the advice undoubtedly is, it does not upon closer examination appear to be the real meaning of this oft-quoted verse. The lesson is good, but, like the moral of many a sermon, it does not come out of the text. When St. Paul wishes to encourage believers to "set their mind on" particular objects, or to cultivate particular habits of mind, he or his amanuensis uses the verb *φρονεῖτε*, as in Colossians iii. 2, and in this epistle in Ch. ii. 5, "have this mind in you"; cf. iii. 15, "let us be thus minded" (*τοῦτο φρονῶμεν*); and iii. 19, "who mind earthly things" (*τὰ ἐπίγεια φρονοῦντες*). (With the last sentence we may compare Our Lord's rebuke to St. Peter in St. Matthew xvi. 23, "thou mindest (*φρονεῖς*) not the things of God, but the things of men.") But *λογίζεσθε*, which we find in the verse now under consideration, denotes rather to "take into account, to consider"; and, indeed, the R.V. margin notes, "Gr., take account of." This word is used, among other passages, in 1 Corinthians xiii. 5, "Charity *taketh not account of* evil"; and 2 Corinthians v. 19, "*Not reckoning* unto them their trespasses"; and in St. John xi. 50, "Nor do ye *take account* that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people." In other respects the language of this verse is unusual, and appears to be carefully chosen for a set purpose. The list of good qualities commended "is unique in St. Paul's writings, resembling the catalogues of Greek moralists."[1] "He selects words more often found in the classics to designate Pagan excellences."[2] One word —that translated "virtue"—is found here only in the Pauline writings, though it occurs three times in the Petrine epistles, "in all which passages," Bishop Lightfoot observes, "it seems to have some special sense." It is "a common heathen term for moral excellence." At this point, one commentator states, "St. Paul passes into the region of natural ethics, and uses terms common in Greek philosophy."[3] He is, another remarks, "seeking common ethical ground as between the Church and Gentile society."[1] His meaning is that "the Christian man must prize every fragment of human worth, claiming it for God."[1] We may translate the verse, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are real, whatsoever things are aweful, whatsoever things are just, pure, amiable, winning (or 'gracious,' R.V.), . . . *take account of these things*."

What we gather from the epistle of the character of the Church at Philippi makes more apparent the force of this advice, when understood in the sense indicated. It was a small and young Christian community in "a Roman colony," which was naturally a

[1] *Dummelow's Commentary*, in loc.
[2] *Peake's Commentary*, in loc. [3] *Gore's Commentary*, in loc.

centre of Roman influence, to which St. Paul sent from his prison at Rome, about A.D. 60, a letter which conveyed to its members praise, instruction, and exhortation. Though there is scarcely a word of blame, still two faults are noticed. (1) The lack of Unity among them leads the Apostle to exhort two influential ladies, Euodia and Syntache, "to be of the same mind in the Lord," and to express the hope that all the disciples will "stand fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel." (2) The Church was "intellectually narrow," and this defect was probably aggravated by persecution, for we do not, as a rule, see much good in those who are treating us badly. Experience of their unkindness excites in us a rankling sense of injustice, and warps our judgment concerning them, and perhaps concerning others also. And so St. Paul prays for the Philippians that "their love may abound yet more and more in knowledge *and all discernment* (' *Πάσῃ αἰσθήσει* '); so that they may prove the things that differ; that they may be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ." (It makes little difference to the present argument if the old translation be preferred —" that ye may approve the things that are excellent ".) This grace of "Discernment," the capacity to "prove the things that differ," is a comparatively rare gift, and perhaps that is the reason why the word *αἰσθησις* occurs here only in the New Testament, though *αἰσθητήρια* "is used similarly to denote the organs of moral sense" [1] in Hebrews v. 14—" those who by reason of use have *their senses* exercised to discern good and evil"; and a cognate verb is employed by St. Luke to tell of the inability of Our Lord's disciples to "perceive" one of His "hard sayings" (St. Luke ix. 45). The phrase *δοκιμάζειν τὰ διαφέροντα* occurs also in Romans ii. 18, where the American Committee of Revisers suggest the marginal rendering, "*dost distinguish* the things that differ." St. Paul employs the same verb in his advice to the Thessalonians, "Prove all things," and St. John, when he says, "Prove the spirits, whether they are of God." As the gift of Discernment is rare, so it is of great value, and one which the Christian disciple should "desire earnestly." It is "the mark of moral and spiritual maturity in a man, as its absence is characteristic of the child (Deut. i. 39; Isa. vii. 16); its presence qualifies him to be an ideal ruler and judge (1 Kings iii. 9), and likens him to the angels (2 Sam. xiv. 17), and indeed to God Himself (Gen. iii. 22)." [2] Many good persons, endowed with other "spiritual gifts," are without this. Accordingly the Apostle prays at the beginning of his letter that it may be given to the Philippian Christians, and at the end, using the word "Finally," he charges them to exercise it, as who should say: Your lot is a difficult one; many temptations beset you; you are called to a separated life; the great majority around you have no sympathy with your aims and aspirations; nay, they are actively hostile to them. All this you must expect. "It is the way the Master went." Nevertheless do not make the mistake of imagining that everything that

[1] *Lightfoot* on the Epistle to the Philippians, in loc.
[2] *Gore's Commentary*, note on Hebrews v. 14.

is not according to your own ideas is necessarily wrong. You have no monopoly of goodness. Even in that common sink of all uncleanness which the heathen world appears to be there is much that is admirable and worthy of imitation. Many who are not Christians have before them high ideals of Purity and Self-control; many are groping after the Truth, "seeking God, if haply they may feel after Him and find Him"; and many too "touch God's right hand in that darkness." Athens has had its Socrates; Rome, its Cato; yea, even "in my bonds" my heart has been refreshed by hearing from my guards, and from the saints in the imperial household, of the influence for good which has been exercised upon some of the wise and noble by one called Seneca. Do not forget these things; and in your relations with "them that are without" "take into account" whatever of Goodness and Truth may be manifest to your observant gaze. That St. Paul's "righteous soul," like Lot in Sodom, was "tormented by the lascivious life of the wicked," and that he saw much to call down "the wrath of God" in the heathen world of his day, his scathing language in Romans i. shows; but in the passage before us, writing not to but from Rome, he strikes a different note, which he sounds elsewhere in a minor key. In his speech at Athens he quotes with approval Aratus and Cleanthes, and in his other epistles twice quotes other heathen poets, not pedantically, but seeking common ground with his audience and readers, and also as being ready to acknowledge "whatsoever things were true" in "that hard Pagan world." In the generations that followed his day two opposing lines of thought were apparent on this subject in the Church. Most Christians, no doubt, thought of "the World," from which they had been mercifully "delivered," as "lying in wickedness," but there were a few, like Clement of Alexandria, who tried to "distil out some soul of goodness" from classical literature, and who perceived that "the heathen in his blindness" was not without strong glimmers of light. The Apostle's point is of perennial interest. Not all is evil that upon a superficial view appears so; at least (to transpose the Article), "the good is ever mingled with the evil." Our "estrangéd faces" miss much of the "many splendour'd" spiritual beauty that is close to us, and our preconceived ideas often lead us to judge men and things by imperfect standards. Everything that is strange to us, or even at first startling, is not necessarily wholly bad; sometimes indeed it may be good. We need the grace of Discernment, the capacity to "prove the things that differ." The Mission Field affords an obvious illustration. When our brethren and sisters go from guarded Christian homes to the dark quarters of the earth, where "Satan's throne" and "the habitations of cruelty" are, they are often sickened by the foulness and bestiality around them. The air they breathe seems thick with miasmic germs. They are conscious, as many have testified, of diabolical powers working mightily where the rays of "the Sun of Righteousness" have not penetrated. At times (and this we too often forget), they are in danger of being swept away by the unclean "Floods of Hades." For all that, the

man of " a wise and an understanding heart," who has the grace of Discernment, not seldom sees, upon reflection, in the lives of " the sullen, helpless peoples " among whom his lot is cast, not a little that is " honourable, just, pure, and lovely," and in the heathen religions (especially in the East), much that is " true " and worthy of " praise." This is encouraging to him, for he knows that all that is good and true has come through " the Spirit of Truth " from " the true Light which lighteth every man." Matthew Arnold has been, with good cause, styled the " free-thinking poet," but to some the mind of Christ finds utterance in the words,

> " Children of men ! the unseen Power whose eye
> For ever doth accompany mankind,
> Hath look'd on no religion scornfully
> That men did ever find.
> Which has not taught weak wills how much they can ?
> Which has not fall'n on the dry heart like rain ?
> Which has not cried to sunk, self-weary man
> *Thou must be born again ?* "

Some distinguished writers in the present day teach much the same lesson. The author [1] of *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* remarks :

" A Christian need not abate his claim for the supreme position of Christianity because he treats with respect the other great religions of mankind, or because he acknowledges the glimpses of truth, the rudimentary endeavours after a better life, which may accompany the practice of an otherwise barbaric creed and ritual, and which gave that creed its vitality while it lived. . . . As a Christian missionary recently expressed himself in an address to students : —' They had realized that the missionary must make a sympathetic study of the religions of the people among whom he laboured. The mere iconoclast would not reach their hearts and convince their minds. They must realize what their religions meant to them, *find points of contact*, and lead them on to the religion in which their deepest needs would be perfectly satisfied.' Such an utterance is as satisfactory from an intellectual point of view as it is full of promise for the future progress of missionary effort. And, it may be added, those who take this wise advice are themselves likely, in the process, to recognize more clearly what is essential and non-essential in the Christian faith."

In other words, it will help them to " prove the things that differ."

The Archbishop of Armagh writes in *The Christian Outlook in the Modern World*,

" It is confessed now at the great conferences where missionaries of various Christian Churches assemble for consultation, that it is altogether wrong to regard the beliefs of the great peoples of the East as altogether evil. In the Middle Ages every religion but Christianity was held to be the work of demons. Now the Christian missionary looks for the elements of good, and finds many of them. Even the African animist, low in the scale though his ideas are, yet possesses that first essential element of a true faith, belief in unseen spiritual powers, which, when purified and elevated, enables him to rise to the glorious Faith in One Supreme Good and Holy God, which scatters, like the rising of the sun, the dark and terrible shadows of his hereditary creed."

A simple story may clench these quotations. We are told that two Christian Ministers of Religion, one a Roman Catholic and the

[1] *A. Seth Pringle-Pattison.*

other a Protestant, once stood within a Mahometan Mosque listening to the impressive prayers from the Koran, and that the Roman Catholic said to the Protestant, " Men who pray like this cannot be far from the Kingdom of God."

But let us try to bring St. Paul's advice (if in this essay it be correctly interpreted), closer to ourselves. It is an overworked commonplace to observe that we are living in difficult times. Old-established standards of conduct are widely disregarded, and beliefs and conventions long unquestioned are set at naught in all classes of society, especially by " Modern Youth." What we of the elder generation have always looked upon as axiomatic laws of Christian living are not now taken for granted. It is not, we know, open to question that it is the plain duty of Christ's disciple to fight and protest against Vice and Error, under whatever guise they appear, and those who have the grace of true Discernment are not quickly " led away with the error of the wicked," even when " Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light." The point now insisted on is simply that we should try to have correct standards before our minds. " Right is Right, since God is God," but it is only Ignorance or Prejudice which leads us hastily to condemn opinions or ways of life merely because they are unusual, or hitherto to us unknown. " Omne ignotum " need not always be taken " pro horrifico." Moreover, in those who, as we think, order their lives according to false standards, and perhaps " follow wandering fires," we sometimes see, upon closer examination, much that is " true, honourable, just, pure, and attractive." Some whom we sadly miss from the Church Services, who sit loose to " Institutional Religion," may be walking in the fear of God, and not entirely without the love of Christ in their hearts. There is " faith in honest doubt," and many professed " Free-thinkers " or " Agnostics " are living lives of the straitest morality, and are " true and just in all their dealing." Many too who appear to be among the most careless and unbalanced of " Modern Youth " are not destitute of a serious thoughtfulness, often unsuspected, which may yet by the breath of the Spirit of God be fanned into a bright flame of personal religion. As evidence of this one may point to the great success which is said to have attended the Archbishop of York's recent Mission to the undergraduates at Oxford, where, if reports be true, there have been marked signs of decadence in the post-war years.

And if we take a wider view, and compare existing ideas and standards of conduct with the sentiments and habits which prevailed only a hundred years or so ago, we note an immense improvement in some matters which affect deeply the national life. A few quotations are adduced to substantiate this statement.

(1) The first is from a recent number of *The Spectator*, which has for some time been giving interesting extracts from its columns of " A hundred years ago." Under the date May 28, 1831, it reproduces these sentences:

" Two men were hanged on Wednesday; one for sheep-stealing, the other for stealing in a dwelling-house. It was alleged, in aggravation of the

crime of the former, that his character was bad—he was what the French call a *mauvais sujet*; it does not appear that he had ever been tried before; the thefts of the latter had been numerous and extensive."

(2) The second is from a leading article in *The Irish Times* a little more than a year and a half ago:

"In its issue of October 26, 1829, *The Times* quoted an advertisement from an American newspaper. The advertisement was for a runaway slave; it requested that he might be 'delivered at Liberty Hall'; and it added: 'Will may be known by the incisions of the whip on his back, and I suppose he has taken the road to Coosahatchie, where he has a wife, and five children whom I sold last week to Mr. Gellispir.' The abominations which these few lines compress were to continue for thirty years. Only one hundred years ago in England young boys were hanged for sheep-stealing, and men were alive who had seen witches burned at the stake."

To extend our backward view over a considerably wider space of time, Mr. Bernard Shaw has stated that a woman was burnt on St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, for coining only a hundred years before he was born; and an extract, lately published in *The Church of Ireland Gazette*, from the Vestry Records of a parish in the North of Ireland, under date December 26, 1699, speaks for itself:

"It is agreed that all High and Petty Constables shall . . . make a private search every fortnight, or oftener if need require, in houses, barns, out-houses, and suspected places in ye night-time for ye finding out and apprehending of rogues, vagabonds, wandering persons, and to secure all such; also all sole persons who shall travel with forged or counterfeited papers. All such whom they shall find begging or wandering out of their limits, ye said Constable with ye assistance of ye Parish shall cause to be striped naked from ye middle upward, and to be openly whipt till their bodys shall be bloody, or to be put in ye stocks two days and two nights, and to have only bread and water."

And is it much more than a century since the young "bucks" of London Society used to form parties to enjoy the spectacle of a public execution, like "the multitudes that," on the day of the World's Supreme Tragedy, "came together to this sight"? We thank God that such a form of amusement is now inconceivable, and we cry with a shudder, "O tempora! Omores!" It is not here claimed that there is in these signs of improvement in thought and manners any ground of boasting or self-gratulation. It may be that, as *The Irish Times* suggests,

"to our great-grandchildren we may appear as callous as now our great-grandfathers appear to us. The future, for instance, will proclaim the rights of children and animals; . . . Newspapers of 2,029, quoting century-old descriptions of Dublin's one-room tenements, will excite the same wondering anger which the story of the Charleston slave excites to-day."

But it is submitted that he who attempts to form a just estimate of the days in which we live, manifold as are the powers of Evil abroad in the world at present, must "take account of these things." We may not easily recapture the early faith of the great Victorian poet:

"Yet I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widen'd with the process of the suns."

We may agree with Dean Inge in his criticism of the sentiment expressed by another poet of that day, that there is no good in saying, "All's right with the world," when there is manifestly a great deal wrong with it; but it will hardly be denied that in some important respects the times that are going over us are not worse, even from the standpoint of Religion, but better than those of the generations past. And we should "take account of these things." The words which follow this verse are worthy of a moment's notice. To counsel concerning the disciples' mental attitude to the World is added a word of advice touching their "proper line of action," and a promise: "The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do: and the God of peace shall be with you." "Of peace!" The epithet is not an otiose one. The grace of Discernment helps us to cultivate a truly charitable spirit; and he who possesses "that most excellent gift of Charity," and is loyal to the best he knows, "dwells in God's peace amid all storms." He "proves the things that differ." He learns to "distinguish" between what is essential to what the Biblical writers call Righteousness and what does not greatly matter. "He sees life steadily, and sees it whole"; and so he is "not quickly shaken from his mind, nor yet troubled," amid whatever conflict of ideals and clash of opinions he moves. To him the promise is fulfilled, "Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues."