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HEALTHY MORBIDITY

My earliest religious recollections were of a puritanically-minded company of people, many of whom seemed to make a religion of morbidity. They believed, one might almost say delighted, in the doctrine of the utter depravity of the human heart. They considered that the preservation of a deep sense of sin was one of the essentials of a life of grace, so much so that any expression of assurance of salvation, or joy in salvation, was frowned upon as a sign of frothy presumption.

I remember well a preacher among these folk, a pastor of forty years' standing and an editor of one of the magazines circulating among the small sect, saying from the pulpit with a deep sigh: "I sometimes wonder if I shall ever see the gates of bliss myself." I also recollect hearing a revered minister report that he had been to the bedside of a dying saint who whispered a verse of a hymn expressive of the utmost gloom and doubt. Said the pastor: "When a soul gets there, then there is some slight hope of heaven."

In the course of time, I rather turned away from this experimental and theological interpretation. Contact with the Y.M.C.A. and the Keswick Convention and evangelistic efforts of various kinds rather made me feel that there was something seriously wrong with this spiritual gloom and morbidity.

It is surprising, however, how life teaches the value of discarded treasures. In the course of the years I have come to realise that there is such a thing as a healthy morbidity; that my old friends were not so wrong as I thought; that there is a real spiritual value in a deep realisation of one's natural depravity.

I was brought up against this with a jerk by coming into contact with a set of people who went to the other extreme. I had always mistrusted theories of perfectionism; but coming into contact with a set of folk who delighted in their spiritual perfection, their entire sanctification, their utter elimination of the Old Man, revealed to me the necessity of a continual

realisation of one's natural depravity and perpetual sinfulness. The exultant joy based upon the delusion of perfection, appeared to me less attractive than the deep gloom which comes of a true evaluation of one's moral and spiritual state before God.

"Hearken unto me," says Isaiah, "ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord; look unto the rock whence ye are hewn and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged."

Splendid advice that! It preserves balance. It keeps the soul humble. It prevents harmful delusions concerning the state of one's heart.

So I came to think that my old friends were realists. They looked into their own hearts and, horrible though it was, they were meticulously honest as to what they saw there. They covered no stains, glossed over no facts, hid no warts, as Cromwell would say. They put their inner thoughts, their secret desires and feelings on spiritual record and judged them against the white light of the Word of God and the life of the Lord and they moaned at the blackness of the contrast. "The hole of the pit" was not, to them, their public morality; it was not even an appraisal of their moral actions, it was a realisation of what they were in fundamental nature and being. They knew by what they saw and felt on the surface of life that they were wrong in their deepest roots.

"Son of man," said Jehovah to Ezekiel, "cause Jerusalem to know her abominations. And say, Thus saith the Lord God unto Jerusalem: Thy birth and thy nativity is of the land of Canaan: thy father was an Amorite and thy mother a Hittite. And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee, thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all."

There is fundamental value in a continual realisation of our natural abominations. To forget these has basic dangers. D. R. Davies, the modern prophet of original sin, declares: "Christians who have ceased to be aware of the operations of the Old Adam are in a perilous condition. They are dangerously near the delusive state of assuming that the Holy Ghost is always in perfect agreement with them. And that is the very devil."

The point demands strong language. Sometimes one meets

a spiritual monstrosity who demonstrates the fact. Uriah Heep and Mr. Pecksniff are to be found even in the most holy of circles.

I

A healthy morbidity is the guarantee of a genuine humility. Few Christians realise the vital quality of this grace. "Evangelical humility is by far the most becoming, as it is the most Christ-like, of all our evangelical and spiritual graces," says Alexander Whyte. "Humility is the germ seed which grows into the Tree of Life, on which every Christian virtue will flower," says another writer. "Humility is the life and soul of piety, the foundation and support of every virtue and good work, the best guard and security of all holy affections," confirms William Law, and in explanation he writes: "Humility does not consist in having a worse opinion of ourselves than we deserve, or in abasing ourselves lower than we really are, but as all virtue is founded in truth, so humility is founded in a true and just sense of our weakness, misery and sin. He that rightly feels and lives in this sense of his condition lives in humility."

Conviction of sin, contrition and repentance for sin, an ever green memory of the "hole of the pit" from whence we were digged—these are just those feelings which minister to humility. Can humility be experienced apart from these feelings? Which, I wonder, does God know to be the most genuine experience of the soul, the deep feeling of repentance or the exultant shout of victory? When I think of the ease and speed with which I am inclined to rejoice in a superficial and passing triumph, and the slow reluctance with which I am willing to admit failure and defeat, I am inclined to think God is not in any way deluded as to which is the real state of soul. D. R. Davies says on this score: "The great souls at the top have no illusions. It is the fussy darlings lower down that suffer self-intoxication."

Hence the vital need to keep fresh in the mind and heart a realisation of our sin, both our past and present sin. John Bunyan speaking of his own feelings in the words of Mr. Weteyes, says: "I see impurity in my own tears and great stains in the bottom of my prayers." In his *Grace Abounding*

he writes : " I was more loathsome in my own eyes than a toad. Sin and corruption would as naturally bubble out of my heart as water bubbles out of its fountain . . . I thought that none but the devil himself could equalise me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind."

Let us ask ourselves—Is true humility of heart before God possible if we entertain for a moment that we are sinless or have reached perfection, by whatever process it may have been achieved? Surely not! Can we ever approach an holy God without penitence, without consciousness of natural unholiness? The sacrifice which most pleases God is always an ever-broken and ever-contrite heart. D. R. Davies testifies: " The morbidity which may develop from a sense of sin is a jovial sanity compared to the morbidity which most certainly does develop from an absence of it."

II

A healthy morbidity preserves a true and scriptural realisation of the soul's condition and position in the world.

The story is told of a young divinity student who returned from a holiness convention to tell, in glowing language, of the wonders of the holy life. With rapture of heart he tried to explain it all to that old saint, Dr. Alexander Whyte. " Ah," said the old preacher, " it's a sore fight, a sore fight."

By the way some folk talk in holiness conventions one would think that we were freed from that trinity of evil powers, the world, the flesh and the devil. In point of fact, they are not only all around us, but they are in us, and deep in us. The devil is not the only one of our spiritual enemies which parades as an angel of light. The world deceives us and our own evil hearts laugh to scorn our evaluation of right and wrong, our distinctions of holy and profane.

Luther used to say that since he was always sinning, so he was always confessing sin, and was always praying for its pardon. Can any saved sinner say otherwise?

Every effort towards victory over sin only exposes us to a fresh and more insidious temptation to sin. William Law says: " It is not only the beauty of our persons, the gifts of fortune, our natural talents, and the distinctions of life; but

even our devotions and alms, our fastings and humiliations, expose us to fresh and strong temptations."

One of the elements which militates against the pursuit of knowledge is the fact that the greater one's knowledge, the greater is one's realisation of ignorance. The more one gets to know the vaster becomes the areas of what one does not know. The attainment of knowledge, therefore, seems to recede, the more attention given to its acquisition.

The same principle operates in the pursuit of holiness. To quote D. R. Davies again: "The great souls at the top have no illusions." Just so, the nearer they get to the top, the farther off the top appears. The most holy souls are the most conscious of imperfection because holiness is only attained by a growing sensitiveness to sin.

Jeremy Taylor, whose *Holy Living and Holy Dying* shows how near he lived to the heart of God, mourned: "I am a burden to myself in that I cannot sorrow more. . . . Woe is me, for the sinfulness of my life and for the hardness of my heart, and the dryness of my eyes. Give tears; give a fountain of tears; give the grace of tears."

Every fresh vision of the holiness of God only revealed more of the black spots in his own heart which he had not seen before. He was appalled that he could exist with those clearer evidences of his sinfulness and yet be so unconcerned about them. Such a condition demanded a deeper penitence than he could find operative in his soul, and he cried for more tears. Blessed morbidity! Let it make itself felt more and more in our cold hearts.

III

A healthy morbidity keeps open the door to a deeper holiness of life.

R. E. D. Clark, in his book, *Conscious and Unconscious Sin*, deals with this question very clearly. He points out how some interpretations of scriptural holiness defeat the very object they have in view. The appeal is often made to earnest Christian folk desirous of living the holy life, that any feeling of uneasiness, any lack of peace in the heart is a sign of some lack of surrender, some unyielded thing in the life. When that is dealt with peace will come and holiness will be realised.

So, erroneously, the attainment of holiness is vitally linked with peace in the heart.

This acts dangerously on the soul in two ways. It allows unconscious sin to be undisturbed and it leads to a static condition of spiritual imperfection.

We all have come into contact with good Christian folk who are living in a constant state of sin but are quite unconscious of it. How did they come to be in that state? Have they never been conscious of their wrong?

Let me cite a case. Two sisters were left in possession of their parents' home. The elder sister was obviously the stronger character, and gradually she ground down the younger girl until she was nothing less than a slave, with hardly a soul of her own. They both attended church, the older woman was a sincere, earnest church worker. One day a friend stayed with the couple for a brief holiday and caught the younger sister, then a grown woman, tending her two dolls, the only companionship she could enjoy!

When the friend gently chided with the older sister for this condition, she proved herself totally unconscious of any wrong, *but she had not always been unconscious of wrong*. The neglect and oppression she exercised had grown on her gradually until the unconsciousness of sin was due to a seared conscience. She was perfectly at peace but she was most certainly not holy in life. Because she felt at peace she remained undisturbed concerning her state of sin.

Secondly, such teaching tends to establish a static spiritual condition. If peace of soul is an evidence of holiness nothing must be allowed to disturb that peace. Holiness, however, is not and cannot be a static condition, not in this life. All the while we grow older, we should grow more holy and we only do this by feeling a sense of our ever present imperfection.

“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Do we ever do anything else but “come short of the glory of God” while we are in this body of flesh? As we realise that we come short here and come short there, and endeavour, by His grace, to make up the deficiency, we do so only by penitence and confession and renewed surrender.

Such spiritual shame and pain and guilt is a healthy morbidity which leads to true growth in grace. These are the growing pains essential to progress towards spiritual maturity.

Such realisation of sin leads to an evangelical grief; the shedding of Divine tears; that "godly sorrow that worketh repentance unto salvation not to be repented of".

God preserve in us all this healthy morbidity; this sane realisation of our natural depravity; this most essential key to growth in grace and holiness.

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NEWMAN WATTS.