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PERSONALITY AND GRACE.

X. Reconciliation.

But if grace solves the problem of the forgiveness of sins by taking us out of the circle of a legal morality, what is its practical result? A justification which assured us of escape from the punishment of sin on some future day when God comes to judge us, after all did something. That day might seem a long way off and we might not be very sure of what it would mean, but sin has a way of springing its consequences upon us at unexpected places and unexpected moments. A day, therefore, when it will spring all its consequences upon us may not be an unreasonable expectation. At least, if there is absolute justice, while a day of judgment may only be a metaphor, the final equivalence of sin and suffering must be a reality. To have a well-grounded assurance that all such consequences were provided against would be a genuine comfort to an anxious person, and, indeed, without it, what could he understand by peace? Nor ought we to blame his anxiety and dispose of it by calling it self-regard, for even self-regard has its due place. And if anything could justify grave concern about oneself, would it not be this danger looming so vast and threatening through the haze of eternity?

Manifestly we have no right to peace unless the consequences of sin no longer remain as they were. But that ought to apply to all its consequences, in this life as well as in the next, in the present as well as in the future. Nay, our more urgent need is the present, for a succour wholly postponed to some remote unknown day of judgment would be an ill-tested security even against that day; whereas, if we could only live down our past now, we might be con-

fident of not finding it an enemy in our path at any later time.

Once again the Divine method is an antinomy of grace. Grace deals with all consequences of sin—the whole form of grace as we know it being determined by its task of dealing with our whole sinful state—yet it does not deal with the consequences of sin directly. It only deals with them indirectly by reconciling us to God. To understand that truth is to solve for ourselves, practically as well as theoretically, the problem of the right relations of morality and religion.

But what is the actual working significance of being reconciled to God? Are we not doing the very thing we have pretended to avoid? Are we not setting God on one side and reality on the other, so that, while we pretend to be reconciled to some shadow, the substance of life remains precisely as it was? What in plain untheological language does being reconciled to God mean for our working lives? If that cannot be answered, religion may still be a desirable luxury but it is not part of life's immediate business.

We may better understand what is meant by being reconciled to God, if we begin by asking what practical significance we attach to being at enmity against God.

The very suggestion that a practical situation is involved may seem strange. To most people the expression "enmity against God" conveys a vague idea of a quarrel with some Person so utterly unconnected with all our doings that it is difficult to see how we ever could come into conflict with Him, unless somehow we have offended Him by a merely abstract independence. For that the only remedy seems to be some kind of abstract submission. What it includes or how it is to mollify Him is hard to tell, unless perhaps comprehensive confessions and submissions in our prayers

may touch Him. Hence the acknowledgment of being at enmity with God usually issues in those spacious superlatives about a guilty and sinful state which deal with no reality that would be admitted if clothed in concrete language and illustrated by examples.

But reality is not one thing and God another. God is reality, and reality is God, and what we are at enmity with is reality. To be at enmity against God is neither more nor less than the bitter feeling that reality is against us. We think reality should go one way and it goes in fact another. The result is not merely that reality appears to be our enemy, but in the rebellion and hostility of our hearts it is our enemy. Moreover, it is an enmity which cannot but cause fierce antagonism, for in a quarrel between us and reality the strife is unequal, and we cannot help feeling ourselves, to use a vulgar expression, the under dog.

The resentment is not always merely personal. In addition to one's own grievance, it may include a generous wrath against a life which outrages all mankind. The world is denounced as the work of a tyrant, not for ourselves alone but for every creature that can feel its cruelty. Manifestly our feeling is all the more enmity against God, that we regard our own experience as universal.

Nor need enmity against God be impious, hurling defiance at heaven, offering to curse God and die. It is possible to be quite piously at enmity with God. Men have even professed loudly to be reconciled to God and yet, in the concrete facts of life, have bitterly resented everything He appointed for them. But, in that case, the God of their profession was one thing and the God of their life was another, and it is our relation to the God of our life, not to the God of our profession, that counts.

Here, however, it is necessary to distinguish between being burdened by life and being embittered by it. The

deepest sense of the difficulty and stress of life is not enmity against God. If that sense of burden spring from a sense of life's overwhelming significance, it would be the sincerest of all recognitions of God. Even faith in the Divine succour of our lives as well as the Divine purpose with them, while it would keep us from complaining, would not necessarily keep us from being burdened. Not the feeling that life has so large a purpose that we are forced to stagger under its load, but only the feeling that life has no purpose except to crush us, is enmity against God.

To be at enmity with God, therefore, has the practical meaning of being at enmity with the lives He appoints for us. It means carrying life's burden, simply because we do not know how to make it lighter, and without being sustained by a sense of its purpose. In practice, it is just the spirit which resents trial and evades duty. Even if it is angry with the world on account of others, the reason is the same as makes it angry on its own account. Life, it insists, should serve self-love and self-will, and on that interpretation life refuses to yield up any blessed meaning. On that interpretation, it not only appears to be, but is, as much against us as we can possibly be against it.

As enmity against God is enmity against our lives, so to be reconciled to God is to be reconciled to our lives. Reconciliation is a new relation to this life, not, in the first instance at least, to another. It is not the promise of sitting in a remote heaven in a passionless eternity, but of sitting in the heavenly places amid the tumult of the present hour. In short, it is reconciliation to the discipline God appoints and the duty He demands. A spirit reconciled to God is one which resents no trial and evades no duty. In that the whole issue of reconciliation is comprehended.

But that issue is only made possible by putting into our hands the right key to life's meaning. Nothing can deliver

us from the desire to soften our discipline or get out of the way of our duty, except to see that there never is a trial love has not appointed nor a duty love has not demanded. Then and then only, we can lay ourselves open to the whole impact of reality precisely as God appoints it.

This blessedness of the acceptance of God's will of love in all our life is the essential teaching of the Beatitudes. God's kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit. Upon that everything else depends. To be poor in spirit is to accept life's discipline and duty as God's rule of love. From that all true blessedness springs. That rule of love, however, we can only discover by hungering and thirsting after righteousness and by seeing God in a pure heart, and we can only retain it as an abiding reality by pursuing peace at all costs and against all opponents.

There is the true practical issue of being reconciled to God. It means being called according to God's purpose; it means the reflection of that purpose in our hearts so that there cannot but be some response to God's love in them; it means finding that purpose the key to life so that, to be in accord with it, is to find all things work together for good.

In one sense all the change is in ourselves. It is we who are besought to be reconciled to God and not God who is besought to be reconciled to us. And it is God who beseeches. The very sternest things in life, suffering and death and corruption, are only to be understood as God's pleading. But God is reality, and reality is against every one who would interpret life by self-love and self-will. To deny that is vapid sentimentality. To attempt to get out of life what God has not put there for us is to enter on a hopeless and calamitous warfare in which the blows are not light and the falls not soft. Everything, however prosperous it may seem, works for our harm, not our good.

That is the experience which makes men feel that God as much needs to be reconciled to them as they to God. Yet it is only the shadow of their own misunderstanding as if, flying from a friend in the dark, they met disaster as much as if it had been an enemy. But as we only need our friend truly to show his face, so we only need that God should truly show His to enable us to meet all evil, moral as well as natural, in the confidence of final victory over it and in the blessed assurance that every appointment of our life is the Divine succour to that end.

But how does this help us to understand the place of the forgiveness of sins? If faith has any glimpse of the might of love, it may well believe that all God appoints even of service and suffering works for good. But our sins are not appointed by God, and were not designed by us or any one else to work in God's wise plan. Wherefore, we might, through accepting God's purpose, be reconciled to what God Himself appoints for us, without being able to include in that reconciliation any of the consequences of our own ill-doing.

In one sense no kind of forgiveness ever can make the past as if it had never been. Even if the past never would remind us of its existence again, we could not be true to our own moral personality and take advantage of the oblivion to rid ourselves of responsibility for it.

For two reasons our responsibility must remain bound up with our past. The first is the obvious one that so long as our evil is working harm in the lives of others, it has no right to cease to trouble our lives. The second is almost equally obvious. As long as habit is the means whereby character is fixed, it must mean persistence in evil as well as good. Wherefore, we may not, so long as any moral sensitiveness or any sense of our moral continuity remains, wash our hands of the consequences of evil we have done

as it works either without us or within. Nor can we suppose that a deeper sense of God will make us see less clearly the evil we have wrought or make us suffer less at the sight.

Penitence, in the deepest sense of the word, is only possible in that new world, where, bearing with Christ the sins of others, we are laid by Christ's sacrifice on the bosom of a love which bears our own. The immediate effect of a true forgiveness, therefore, is certain to be a new sensitiveness to the evil we have done in the world and to the might of evil in our own hearts. To expect to escape the moral distress accompanying an evil past, is no proof that God's pardon has touched our hearts, but the opposite. Is it the consequences of our sins working still in the world that we expect to be able to ignore? Then we have merely in a legal and selfish spirit accepted legal condonation for a Father's pardon. Is it the consequences of sins working still in ourselves we would overlook? Then we have merely put the succour of power which ignores our personality in place of the succour of love which considers nothing else.

In that case the heritage of sin cannot be obliterated forthwith either by God's pardon or by any other succour of love our highest faith might assure to us, not even if the sense of pardon stirred every chord in the soul and the faith sprang from the holiest vision of life's blessedness.

Nevertheless, the practical effect of being justified by grace is precisely that God takes up these evil doings of ours and all their evil consequences and puts them also among the things which work together for our good. Instead of making the heart bitter, as if we ought to have been allowed to sin and not suffer, so that we cannot see His love in any discipline He appoints for us or any duty He demands from us, our sorrow for sin speaks to us of God's holiest, wisest, tenderest care for our good.

The sorrow may be deeper, but it is to another purpose.

To come back from a watery grave is more painful than to perish in it. The difference is in its issue and in the spirit in which in consequence it can be borne. And so with the distress which follows sin. When the sin is forgiven, the distress is no longer resented as punishment. With all else that belongs to us, it is taken up into the love of God, which alone endures and prevails and in the end triumphs over all evil.

We are now in a position to see the vital connexion between the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God. So long as sin is unacknowledged and unpardoned, it is the most formidable of all the causes which determine both our discipline and our duty, yet it is the last explanation of them we would admit. Wherefore, we cannot but err in all our attempts to understand our life, and cannot avoid being at enmity with it. But when sin and all its consequences are taken up into a world where love suffers and atones, we see that our life is what it is just because the consequences of sin both without us and within us must be overcome. The discipline and duty of life are, we see, the way in which God overcomes them for us, the only way in which, having regard to the moral personality, they ever can be overcome. Precisely because sin and its consequences must be transmuted, not ignored, our discipline and duty are what they are. All life is thereby turned into a sacrament of pardoning and redeeming love, the one supreme Divine sacrament, of which all other sacraments are only symbols to help us to interpret.

Why the sacrament of all sacraments, the crown of all God's interpretation of all life's trials and life's tasks is found in the symbols of the broken body and shed blood of One who was meek and lowly in heart is not hard to see. The crucifixion is the utmost shame and suffering life can bring and the utmost obedience and service life can demand,

and it was met in no stoic spirit of resignation but in simple surrender to the will of God. In it love made its highest claim and also accomplished its highest triumph. To believe in the cross, therefore, is truly to believe that love is power, and that there cannot be anything in the life it demands which does not share in its power and so work for good to those who, in the practical moral sense of accepting His will of love, love God.

Here is the inmost sanctuary of pardon and reconciliation where we can take up all our discipline and all our duty, assured that they are the way of victory because we know the mind and heart of Him who appoints them and because we also would be partakers in the sacrifice and service by which sin must be overcome. To require us to be fellow-workers with Him in that task will then be the crowning evidence that God is true to our moral personality and never deals with us on any lower platform than as His children. Our discipline and duty will at once be changed from being trials and tasks into the most gracious of all manifestations of His wise and holy love.

To be justified, therefore, is not to know that the consequences of sin are obliterated or even condoned, but that, in spite of sin, we are so reconciled to God that we can face all evil, assured of final victory over it, whether the evil be natural or moral, the direct appointment of God's love or the direct outcome of our own sins.

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