THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

III.

FORGIVENESS.

Two different men will take as different views of one of those picturesque fishing harbours which can be found along the north-east coast of Scotland and of England. An artist comes to the place in the glory of the summer, and to him the fishing village appeals on purely æsthetic grounds—on account of the little stream which has cut its way between the grey cliffs, and on whose banks the little village is built; the red tiles on the roofs of the weather-beaten cottages; the old-fashioned folk that gather upon the little quay; the boats, with their brown sails, coming home in the setting sun; and the sea of the colour of an emerald gently laving the feet of the iron cliffs. This is to him a fetching bit of scenery, and in the winter-time he transfers it to canvas; next spring it is hung upon the walls of the Academy, and is admired by city folk living in safety and at their ease. But neither he nor they understand. Should you wish to know the value of the break in the cliffs and the shelter of the harbour, you had better ask a fisherman, and ask him during the black winter months. This man has seen the storm coming when far out at sea, and lifted his nets without delay. He has run for home before the wind, and through the waves has made for the harbour lights. His wife and children have been watching on the quay, which is now swept with spray, and their hearts stand still as his boat comes near the entrance between two

jagged rocks. As the boat flashes through the water and comes out on the harbour side, the men lay down their oars and lie back upon their seats. As the boat comes up to the side of the quay, hands are stretched out to bid them welcome, and hearts are lifted in thankfulness to God because they have escaped from the perils of the sea. On such a night men and women understand the value of the harbour as no artist can, who paints it in its peace, and no crowd of inland people, who admire it for its red and blue. To the one it is a picturesque piece of scenery; to the other it is a hiding-place from the storm.

After the same fashion one can take two views of the Bible, and each of them has its own value. It is impossible that any cultured person should be indifferent to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as a noble literature, or fail to admire their unique grandeur of style, their magnificent imagery, the glowing spirit of their hope, and the elevation of their moral teaching. Among all the masterpieces of literature the Bible must take the first place, beside which the achievements of poets and philosophers pale and are put to shame. One, however, realizes that admiration for the literary qualities of the Bible is doing poor justice to the inherent power and the spiritual attraction of the Book. The best witness to the service of this Book is not a man of letters, but a sinner who has been saved. He who has been at sea and has been tossed to and fro in the darkness, who has seen the distant lights and rested not until he had passed into the shelter, alone can testify to the strength and comfort of the Bible. It is the forgiven penitent that can bear the clearest evidence to the Book, for among its chief messages is the promise of forgiveness.

There may be a few people who have never felt the want of forgiveness, and to whom the word itself has a strange sound, but the desire is surely indigenous in the human race, and any exception does not prove a stronger

or finer character. Should one have had the misfortune to offend a friend, and so to wound his heart that intercourse has ceased between the two, then it argues a low state of mind, or an incredible frivolity, that the offender should never miss his friend's company, and should never regret his friend's alienation. Any person with a trace of nobility will consider this quarrel to have been the chief misfortune of his life, and will ever entertain an earnest hope that the way be opened up for reconciliation. He will surely count it a chief day in his life when he has been assured that his friend forgives him, and they return to the relations of former years. Should this be true of human fellowship, how much more true must it be of the communion between the soul and God. And unless it be that a person is able to say that he has never sinned, and therefore has no need of forgiveness, he must be callous to the last degree who has not longed to be assured that his sins have been forgiven of God, and that there is no cloud between him and his Father.

It ought, however, to be said that the sense of sin, and therefore the desire for forgiveness, varies in different ages, since there is a fashion in religion as there is a fashion in books, and clothes, and manners, as there is also a fashion in science. As each age has its own particular sins, so each age has its own particular penitence. It has been unfortunate that in religious literature conviction of sin has been represented in a form so stereotyped, and that no one is supposed to be penitent unless he is penitent after the convention of the day. For instance, there are those who realize that in sinning against God they have broken the eternal law of righteousness which runs throughout their life in this world, and which will run throughout their life in the world which is to come. They realize themselves to be like a person who had broken the law of the Roman Empire, and who was liable at any moment to be arrested.

It mattered not whether he went to Rome, or to Corinth, or to Jerusalem, or to the ends of the civilized world, he was still within the reach of Rome, and from Rome could never escape. For him there was nothing but hiding and fleeing, but hide and flee as he pleased, some day he would be brought across sea and land to stand before Cæsar's judgment seat. Nothing can affect the imagination more powerfully than a sense of outlawry, the hopeless contest with almighty and omnipresent law, in whose hands we are utterly helpless, from which we have no appeal. This sense of outlawry reaches its highest degree when any one is convinced that he has sinned against the law which extends through all worlds, and which is absolutely unerring. Is it cowardice in him that he should be afraid, or that he should earnestly desire a settlement? and is that an unworthy form of religion that one should seek in every direction for some means by which this great quarrel be healed and peace be made between the soul and the eternal righteousness?

Another man may never have thought of his relation to law, but he may be much concerned with his relation to himself, being overwhelmed, not with the thought that he has broken God's commandments, but with the thought that he has stained his own soul. His soul, through sin, has become to him something loathsome and horrible, like unto the skin of a leper when his disease is white upon him, like unto pure snow upon which some loathsome black liquid has been poured. What he desires is not so much reconciliation with God as reconciliation with himself, not to be saved from the fear of punishment, but to be saved from the agony of self-humiliation. And still another man may have been affected not so much by the guilt of sin, or by its corruption, as by its outrageous disloyalty and ingratitude. From early days he has been accustomed to think of God as his heavenly Father, and has not been indifferent to the

innumerable mercies of God. He suddenly awakens to the fact that his return for this unwearied care and divine patience, wherein God has pitied him as a father pitieth his children, has been forgetfulness, and disobedience, and selfishness, and unspirituality. It is as if he had wounded his nearest and dearest, and had done so in wanton carelessness and without a feeling of penitence. What the first man desires is to be reconciled to law; what the second desires is to be reconciled to himself; what the third desires is to be reconciled to his Father; and in every case the heart is longing for forgiveness, and for every case provision is made in the forgiveness of God.

When one turns from the human to the divine side of forgiveness, one learns from Holy Scripture not only that God forgives sin, but that in forgiving sin He acts in a perfectly God-like fashion. Nowhere is it taught that He will make any bargain with the sinner and loose the burden of sin on condition of receiving a gift or compensation from the sinner. Although the human heart has been apt unconsciously to imagine conditions, and has vainly tried to offer some recompense to God, no man would so deal with his offending brother as he imagines God would deal with him. When one of us is prepared to forgive, he always forgives freely; when one of us asks another's forgiveness, he always expects a free forgiveness. It were little short of insult that one should approach a neighbour whom he had offended, and offer him this or that compensation in the hope that he would then forgive. It is enough that one should be penitent to earn forgiveness from any friend worthy of the name. It is worthy of that friend to grant the forgiveness without conditions. What may be rendered unto him by the forgiven offender in after years is another matter: it will be given freely, as forgiveness was granted freely. When the two debtors stood before their creditor in the parable, and

neither could pay, the one owing five hundred pence and the other fifty, their creditor forgave them, or, as it might read, graced them both, without money and without price.

When the hope is held out in Holy Scripture that God will not only forgive, but is also prepared to forget our sins, the promise takes us deeper into the heart of forgiveness. One can understand how a person should forgive; it is difficult to understand how he can forget. Forgiveness depends upon the will, but forgetfulness is beyond our power. If anything can be forgotten, it must be through being replaced. If an incident can be covered over by another incident, so that the one sinks and fades into the other, then the former is not only removed from sight, but it is removed also from the mind. So long as the son remained in the far country, his departure, with its insolence and ingratitude and foolishness, could not be forgotten. When he returned to his father, in penitence of temper and lowliness of faith, the return removed the departure from his father's mind, so that as often as his eyes fell upon his son he saw him not as he went out, he saw him as he came home. Is it not also the case that when God forgives our sins, He forgives us in Christ Jesus, beholding not the sinner that was, but the saint who is to be, so that when he thinks of the Apostle, He remembers not Saul the persecutor, but only sees Paul the prisoner of Jesus Christ.

One can never be satisfied with forgiveness unless it should be accompanied by forgetfulness, but there are times when one longs for a yet further but perhaps impossible blessing, that sin should not only be forgiven and forgotten, but that sin should be utterly removed and pass out of existence. Although sin be forgiven, and although God has cast it, to use Scripture imagery, behind His back and into the depths of the sea, it yet exists, and some day may appear. It requires not that our enemy should dredge the sea for it, and should bring it up against us through pure

malice, for sin has an unholy power of vitality, and might any day face us, if not in our lives, in the lives of others whom we have injured. Every word which we have spoken is immortal, as well as every deed which we have done, and in ages to come both may arise and call us cursed. Is there no power which shall not only loose sin from our conscience, but also bring it to an end in our life? Here we come upon that marvellous word that sin shall be blotted out, and enter still farther into the mystery of this grace. We cannot understand what may be included in the idea, nor can we understand fully the power which will carry it into effect, but we may believe that in the long processes of grace the ravages of sin will be so repaired that what was evil will turn to good, and out of immense wrongdoing blessing will be brought to ourselves and to our fellow-men. St. Paul's persecution of Stephen not only gave Stephen a quicker crown of martyrdom, but also taught St. Paul devotion and humility all the days of his life, so that it may be said that St. Stephen was the spiritual father of St. Paul, and through St. Paul St. Stephen wrought unto the salvation of the world. Mary Magdalene had not shown that spiritual devotion to the Lord which has secured her the affection of Christ's disciples in all ages had she not first wasted her passion, and been dragged in the mire. It was her grateful sense of the salvation of Jesus that kept her, not for a brief space, but for all her life, at the feet of her Lord. It is impossible to believe that sin can last for ever, for sin is negative and passing: good only is positive and lasting. The very crown of forgiveness will be the destruction of sin, when the worst sinner shall be able to look round the spiritual universe and see no trace of the evil which he has done, because it has been absorbed and changed into goodness.

We also gather from the Scriptures of the New Testament that the forgiveness of sins is connected in some way

with the life and death and resurrection and endless intercession of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a natural question to ask why our heavenly Father should not simply say, "I forgive," and why it was necessary, as it appears to have been, that His beloved Son should endure the humility of the incarnation, and offer that immense sacrifice of the Cross in order that the stream of forgiveness should run free and full, without barrier and without hindrance.

Any complete answer to this question would have to sound the deepest mysteries of the spiritual life, and could only be given by one who has understood the relation of God to the law of righteousness and the action of the law of righteousness upon the spiritual life of the soul. Some things, however, are within our vision and within our understanding, and they throw a very suggestive light upon the relation of the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins to the doctrine of the vicarious sacrifice of Christ. This is without doubt an ethical universe in which we live, and by that we mean not only that there is such a thing as good and such a thing as evil, but that good is bound to be blessed and evil is bound to be punished. No doubt the idea which some people have imagined of the eternal is virtually an extremely good-natured but very weakly father, who cannot find it in his heart to punish anybody and who is feared by nobody. This is not the Scriptural doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, and this is not the likeness of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Were it so, there had been no misery in the far country; and were it so, there had been no joy in the Father's House. Any earthly father who treats his family after this slack and unbecoming fashion will rear wastrels and prodigals, and the day will surely come when his sons will lift up their hands not to bless but to denounce him. One of the chief blessings in human experience is a father who has been not only loving and merciful, but also severe and

faithful. It were indeed a calamity if the Father of our souls were only a greater and more foolish Eli, who cannot distinguish between saints and sinners, and who treats the sinner exactly as he would treat the saint. This world would not be worth living in for a week if there were not a righteous God upon the throne of the universe. Sin then would obtain the upper hand and righteousness be put to everlasting confusion in the market place. The great judgments upon iniquity would come to an end, and when they ceased human life would be a synonym for injustice and corruption. These judgments have cleansed life and have filled the hearts of the righteous with hope. What a blessing were the fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose warning casts its wholesome shadow over Hebrew history! What a blessing the French Revolution was when the infamous tyranny and callousness of the rich and powerful were punished in blood! What a blessing the righteous judgments of God upon evil cities and decadent countries have been in all ages of human history! The progress of the human race has depended upon the severe action of the moral laws which have delivered righteous men and have been the enemies to all unrighteousness. Licence to sin and immunity from the punishment of sin are not God's government, and are not the illustration but the contradiction of love. When we see that terrible judgments are intended to cleanse the world and to save nations, when none of us is accustomed to condemn or would on any account reverse this action, we begin to understand that the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross of Calvary may fall in with the system of moral government. Were the sin of the soul loosed without pain and without cost, then God's dealings with the individual would be on another principle from His dealings with the race.

Again, when a man asks for forgiveness, his own con-

science comes into play, and he is not willing to be forgiven in a light and careless fashion. He desires to have his case settled according to the principles of righteousness; and if he is to be set free, to have the sanction of the eternal law. If I have a quarrel with a moral law, let that quarrel be fairly fought out and settled, so that I may look the law in the face, and have this law on my side for ever. Let me come in by the front door when I return to my Father's house, with all the servants to bid me welcome, and not creep in by some back entrance as a tolerated criminal. Were a criminal to be dismissed from a court simply because the judge was too sentimental to punish him, then the judge would be instantly removed from the bench, who had let loose guilty and impenitent criminals upon society; and the criminal himself, if there were any sense of rightness in him, would leave the court unsatisfied and ashamed. It is not in this easy way that the problem of sin can be settled and the relation of the sinner to the moral world adjusted. Conscience demands that law shall be honoured and vindicated even when the vindication must be at one's own cost, and conscience is a competent commentator upon the meaning of Christ's sufferings. When I see my Elder Brother leave the Father's house and all its peace and come into this life with all its sin in order to take on Him the burden of my guilt and the punishment of my sin, and when I see Him fulfilling the great law of righteousness and expiating upon the largest scale its penalty, then I also can see Him take the laws of the universe and write them in letters of gold upon the sky. If they were once broken, they have now been glorified; and if they demanded their just rights, they have now received them in His Cross and Passion, and as I behold this immense sacrifice, I can see dimly, no doubt, but quite certainly, that upon this ground the eternal Judge may lessen my liability not to righteousness but to punishment, and in

speaking forgiveness to me can give rest to the conscience within my heart.

Against this doctrine of forgiveness in its unrestrained freeness and its vicarious reference, it might be alleged that if forgiveness is to be given after this fashion to every man that asks it from a broken heart, the end will not be righteousness, but unrighteousness. If one be so lightly loosed from the penalty of his sins, and especially if this same penalty be laid upon another, then the forgiven person will argue, "I am forgiven, and I am free to sin, and however I sin I shall not be punished"; and so because grace has abounded sin will much more abound. This is in its own way logical, and sounds reasonable, but, fortunately for the dignity of human nature, life is not ruled by logic, and men are not always so bad as by logic they ought to be. If any one indeed does argue along this line, then it may fairly be presumed that he has never been forgiven. He is not in the state of mind upon which forgiveness depends, he is in the state of mind for which there is no forgiveness. He is not in the Christian state, "in Christ Jesus," he is in a state of unblushing and calculating selfishness. If any one imagines that he can so play fast and loose with the eternal law and ever run when he is in danger behind the Cross of Christ as to a city of refuge, then he will discover that the Cross will itself be the strictest of all laws and Christ the most merciless of all judges. If any man be certain of condemnation in this world and in the one to come, it is the man who proposes to make the sufferings of Christ the shelter of his own sins and to make the Son of God the servant of iniquity. With the vast majority of people forgiveness will not lead to a bad life, it will be the certain beginning of the best life, and that because we are men made in God's own image, however the image may have been defiled, and because we are not liars and not cowards. Out of a hundred men who have been forgiven by their fellow-men under circumstances

of great generosity there may be one who afterwards shall lift up his hand against his benefactor and shall trade upon his clemency, but we do not judge the race by one scoundrel out of a hundred, and it is fair to consider that man to be a slander upon human nature. Should you wish to make the other ninety and nine hate the sin wherewith they sinned and bind them to their benefactor in gratitude for all the years to come, then this has been accomplished by their forgiveness. Whatever sins afterwards they commit they will never again sin against the mercy which has been so ready and so unbounded. Within the lowest forms of human nature there remains an inherent nobility and susceptibility to gratitude, and to that the mercy of God has appealed and has not appealed in vain.

It is also to be remembered that the idea of free forgiveness leading to unholy living has been contradicted by history from end to end. The theology of Jesus' day was accustomed to deal out forgiveness in exchange for certain works, and the result was hypocrisy of life and hardness of heart. Jesus used to say, "Thy sins be forgiven, go in peace," to people who had sinned desperately, and the result was holiness. The Roman philosophers laid down laws of good living and severe conditions of life, and the end thereof was the astounding corruption of Roman society; St. Paul went everywhere preaching the grace of God, and the result thereof was the salvation of a decadent world. Tetzel at the Reformation beat his drum in the market place and sold the forgiveness of sins for money, and owing to the work of such men religious society had become rotten to the core and was nigh to destruction; Luther declared that faith obtained mercy without terms, and the Reformation was as much a reformation of morals as it was of doctrine. In our day there are two schools of preaching divided by a clear line. One says, Cultivate your character and repair your faults and discharge the charities

of life and aim at ideal ends. The other school says, You are a sinner, and have been beaten in the great spiritual conflict. God in Christ forgives the guilt of your sin and bids you go in peace. Live from that point forward not as the slave of the law, but as its servant for love's sake. Which school has been associated with the great revivals of religion, which school has fostered the deeper piety, which school has swept everything before it when its doctrine has been preached by a man of Christian compassion and stalwart faith?

Forgiveness has never been lightly bestowed, forgiveness is never bestowed alone. Before forgiveness repentance travels and ever afterwards repentance is the handmaid of mercy. With forgiveness comes holiness, and holiness is the only certain evidence of forgiveness. No man ever obtains forgiveness except at one place—before the cross of Christ—no man can ever verify forgiveness except in one place—within his own heart. No one is ready for forgiveness who has not repented, no one has received forgiveness who is not being sanctified.

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