

Contributions and Comments.

The Atonement and the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

IN the current number of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES reference is made to a volume of 'Essays and Addresses,' by the late J. W. Rowntree, and to his remarks on the bearing of the Parable of the Prodigal Son upon the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. As the editorial comment says well, in these remarks there is nothing new; we are only hearing again for the hundredth time, that since, in that parable, 'there is no talk of a ransom, of an account balanced between love and justice, of the need of punishment, or of a substitute on whom the punishment may fall,' these doctrines cannot be of the essence of the Gospel, and only obscure its simplicity as an exhibition or proclamation of Divine Love.

It is curious that defenders of the Atonement so constantly imagine themselves compelled to answer the question how the entire absence from this parable of any allusion to the need of propitiation can be reconciled with the clear statements elsewhere of the imperative need of a Mediator and an Atoning Death. The answers usually given amount virtually to this, that 'the parable is theologically incomplete,' and that 'a parable is not meant to tell us everything.'

But what if such a question does not need to be raised at all? What if the whole apparent inconsistency is due to a false reading of the parable itself? It is always taken for granted, not only by the assailants of the doctrine of Atonement, but by its defenders as well, that the 'father' in the parable is *God*, and that it was meant to show *the terms on which God can forgive* and welcome back a sinner. If these two assumptions are right, it is certainly very difficult to harmonise the parable with the idea of the need of a sacrificial atonement before sin can be forgiven. It has, however, for long years been my conviction that the 'father' in the parable is just *Christ Himself*, the Son of Man in His capacity of a Seeker of the lost, and rejoicing when the faintest indication is given that the lost are feeling their need of Him. The opening verses of the chapter in Luke seem to make this clear. The three parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son were manifestly, on the face

of them, Christ's apologia as against the sneers of the Pharisees and Scribes expressed in the taunt, 'This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.' They were meant to justify Himself for doing the very thing they scorned Him for. They were not an exposition of doctrine, but rather a vindication of procedure. They did not profess to be a statement of the terms on which God pardons sinful men. They simply state and justify the rule that guided Himself, *as the Son of Man*, in seeking the lost. For all that the actual record says, He may have been talking or have meant to talk, to that crowd of 'publicans and sinners' about His own position as the God-sent Redeemer of the lost. He may have already spoken to them, or, but for this interruption, would have gone on to speak to them, as He did to Nicodemus, about the Father's love in the gift of His Son, and about that Son's atoning death. There is nothing unreasonable in this supposition—rather the reverse. But then, that was not the point of these parables, which were addressed, not to the crowd of eager listeners, but to the supercilious Pharisees who so rudely interrupted Him, and ridiculed His speaking to the crowd at all.

Now, the 'shepherd' in the first parable, seeking the lost sheep, was undoubtedly meant to be *Himself*. The 'woman' in the second parable, seeking the lost coin, was also assuredly *Himself*. Why should not the 'father' in the third parable, welcoming the lost son, also be *Himself*? If so, there was not only no necessity for introducing the idea of an atonement, but the introduction of it would have been going wide of the one point He had in view, which was not to explain God, but to *justify Himself*. And further, if it be thought strange that the Atonement is not mentioned in the third of the three connected parables, why does the objector not say that it is equally strange that it is omitted from the first and the second? In the cases of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin there was obviously no place whatever for atonement before recovery and in order to it. To have introduced it there would have been altogether bizarre, quite as much so as Melancthon's finding the Atonement in the 'fatted calf' of the third parable. Why, then, should its absence from the third be thought strange, seeing that the purpose of all the parables was one and the same, namely, to vindicate Himself as the Son of Man for going as He did with a heart of love to draw to Himself the very worst of sinners? They were not a theological exposition so much as an apologetic defence.

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