

## Outline Suggestions for the Study of Christian Ethics.

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IT has occurred to the writer of this article that there may be many readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES to whom the subject of Christian Ethics is little known, or apprehended with some vagueness, and to whom therefore a first aid to such a subject would be really welcome in the form of the following notes, which were prepared for delivery at two lectures given to the students of the College over which he has the honour to preside. Other readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES there will doubtless be who are entirely familiar with the topic. They will more readily excuse the imperfections and necessary limitations of the following outlines. Of these two types of readers, the former need have no fear that a little knowledge on the subject is a dangerous thing; and the latter may at least appreciate the effort to show that it may be worthily, if not adequately, comprehended by those who are neither technical scholars nor philosophers.

The following simpler works on the subject are suggested for further study and reference:—

*The Christian Ethic.* Professor Knight; quoted in these notes as K.

*The Light of the World.* Professor Wilkins; quoted as W.

*History of Ethics.* Professor Sidgwick; quoted as S.

*Lux Mundi,* Essay xiii. Mr. R. Ottery; quoted as O.

The first three named are inexpensive in price, while the last is easily accessible through public libraries. A very competent knowledge of the subject may be gained by a study of these books alone, but when these are read, the enthusiastic student may be led to explore the wide field of literature, German and English, upon which some of the highest intelligence of modern days has found delight to work. Of such works there is only space to mention two which have but to be read in order to be appreciated, namely, Luthardt's *Moral Truths of Christianity*, and two fine volumes of Dean Church, happily well known to the Christian public, his *Influence of Christianity* and his *Discipline of the Christian Character*. As the object of this article is to meet the needs of elementary students, it will not be out of place to suggest the method of study.

They will therefore do well to read K carefully

through once or twice; taking brief notes, if read a second time, so as to gain a general conception of the subject under the guidance of a sympathetic and graceful writer. A good dictionary will be needful wherever any term is strange, or not of ready comprehension. Later on this should be supplemented by the study of W or S, so that the subject may be pursued from the historical point of view. O, which regards Christian Ethics more particularly from its devotional aspect, will serve so far to complete the knowledge of the elementary student. Whatever books are read, students should carefully read and note, before and after, any indices or analyses supplied through the headings of chapters or elsewhere.

For an adequate definition of Ethics, a Greek lexicon must be studied, or the help of some competent scholar invited. The term originally included all matters falling within the province of inquiry into human character. Later it became employed with a wider application, covering all investigations into that which belongs to man's ultimate good. A still more modern conception of Ethics claims for it the whole province of the principles of Duty, or of Right Action for human life.<sup>1</sup>

Ethics being such by definition or description, it follows of necessity that the Christian faith has not only something to say upon the subject, but that it will inevitably illuminate and elevate it. It is of exceeding importance to observe that no real truth won by ancient moral philosophy was ever lost in the gospel. There is no parade of moral principles in the Pauline literature, but there they lie in term, in phrase, in insistence, but transfigured into a new life, and enriched by the wider hopes of the Incarnation.

But for Christian Ethics, specifically, there can be but one source, namely, the gospel as illustrating the life and teaching of the Master, supplemented as this will ever be by the witness of

<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to differentiate between the Greek 'Ethics' and the Latin 'Morals.' There is a shade of distinction in the meaning of the terms, but the elementary student should not dwell upon it.

apostolic writers who knew what He was upon earth, and whose one desire was to reflect in word and deed all that His great example inspired. For all virtues which may be seen in men in rudimentary germ are first to be observed, so Christians claim, in full development only in His unique Personality, and such virtues become in His disciples, not only the reflection of His character, but a leavening of the life of the whole human family (K, chap. 7). The source and strength of Christian Ethics being thus different in character and intensity, it will be seen to present distinctive and original features of its own. These will be best observed by contrast with precedent moral teaching. And first with Judaism.

The moral teaching of the Old Testament can only be rightly appreciated as part of a long providential discipline which culminated in the Incarnation. It differed from later Pagan Ethics in claiming to be based on a personal relationship between men and the One true God. The Decalogue, despite its negative character, is an announcement of this relation. It is a revelation of Jehovah's displeasure against moral evil. It differs from Christian Ethics inasmuch as it is provisional and incomplete, prohibitive rather than hortatory. But the moral teaching of the Old Testament would be improperly described as barely negative, for it points onward to what the Messiah would be and accomplish for his own, and that in some wider sphere than the polity of Israel. Further, in Christian Ethics the coming of the Christ into the world is regarded not only as implying a new capacity to fulfil the Law, but also as an assurance of the possibility of moral goodness in men (O).

The contrast between Christian Ethics and the highest type of moral philosophy in Greece or at Rome is no less striking. In the earliest and purest teachers in Greece—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, there was the common element of a strong enthusiasm for virtue, an enthusiasm so powerful that the death of Socrates offers a wonderful parallel to the Passion of the Lord.

With such teachers the main point of emphasis lay in the strenuous effort to teach a perfect life in conformity with universal law.

But the system was hampered by two capital defects. The morality inculcated was held to be only appropriate to a small privileged class, or

caste, *i.e.* to an intellectual aristocracy. As a movement it was doomed to failure because it began and ended with the upper strata of society. Secondly, no suggestion even of the faintest is anywhere made in surviving Greek literature as to a source whence strength may be drawn in order to attain to this moral life. Stoicism in its later development in Rome shows Pagan Ethics perhaps at its best. The most prominent feature of the Roman as contrasted with the Hellenic temper in the sphere of moral teaching was the desire to rest it upon a purely external order; but while Latin Ethics was thus saved from 'the curse of an aristocracy of intellect,' no sure foundation was laid for the fair building proposed to be raised. In Roman Stoicism the emotions were not merely to be controlled, but to be eliminated. Under its iron rule there was no place for the finer parts of a man's nature; much of the best in him was starved, and Stoicism, lacking life in itself, had no power of reproduction, as its after-history made manifest.

It will thus be seen that Christian Ethics has no antagonism to any true and pure moral teaching which preceded it, or appeared alongside with it (W, chap. 5). Rather it has a secret affinity with, and a characteristic faculty of, appropriating to itself all that was permanent in Judaism, all that is best in the moral philosophy of East and West.<sup>1</sup>

Students who have proceeded thus far will now be led to inquire into the scope and influence of Christian Ethics. How wide and potent these are may be seen by comparing the fertility and energy of the message of the Faith with the moral systems of the great religions of the East, which are largely sterile and mainly unprogressive. But mere contrasts are insufficient to indicate this scope and influence. Results are recognisable in national life. Christian moral teaching has had a strong determining effect upon national character. The religion of Mahomet has practically consecrated polygamy, despotism, slavery. But when the gospel has had free play, it has bequeathed to nations a conception of the Fatherhood of God, an impress of a new spirit of brotherhood in and through Christ, and a legacy of hope; it has brought to the nations strong and fresh lessons of obedience, sympathy, and aspiration. Christian Ethics, differing in its results according to the

<sup>1</sup> For illustrations under this head see Lightfoot's *Philippians*; *Essay on St. Paul and Seneca*.

mind and temper of the nation upon which it has acted, has in the Latin races changed the old Roman hardness (compare, if possible under a competent teacher, the poetry of Virgil and Dante), and given to those races a new and full play of the affections. Again, to the Teutonic peoples it has imparted fresh ideas of mercy, pity, and love, without loss of ancient strength or manliness, while it has taught all nations the progressive conception of oneness in blood, and of a kingdom of God upon earth.

But if the influence of Christian Ethics is observable in national life, it is still more strikingly noticeable in the sphere of social movements.

Here the student will mark its effects in relation to slavery, which Christianity, save in rarely surviving instances, has finally rendered impossible; in relation to war, which alas it has not yet stopped, but has, at least between races affected by Christianity, rendered less inhumane; in relation to philanthropic effort, of which it from the first initiated new departures by the institution of asylums, penitentiaries, and hospitals (K, chap 6).

The influence of Christian Ethics has also made itself felt in the sphere of the Family (W, chap 4). It gave new ideas as to the inherent dignity of womanhood. It has insisted upon the sacredness of the marriage bond. It has thrown its protection over human lives at the extreme points of their weakness, namely, infancy and old age. Nor has Christian Ethics been silent in these later days in regard to the vexed questions of Wealth and Poverty. Christian people have felt that it would be a false inference from New Testament teaching to advocate an impossible communism. They have learnt from the lips of the Master not to trust in such riches as they possess, but rather to put these in trust, to perceive the responsibility attaching to having and holding, to mark the claim of the poor and suffering for pity and relief.

The last illustration of the influence of Christian Ethics may be taken from its exhibition in individual life. The discipline of the Christian character is seen to be reached by the practical carrying out of the principles of Christ in personal conduct. This becomes in individuals not merely the exhibition of a moral system, but the humble patient imitation of His example (O). The Christian moralist, therefore, stands distinguished from others, not because he is indifferent to the

study of character, not because he is less obedient to rule, but because of his enthusiastic devotion to a living Person, whose law is within his heart (W, chap 4).

A yet further claim may be made and substantiated on behalf of Christian Ethics. If it is too much to say that Christian Ethics absolutely evolved new virtues, it certainly developed rudimentary ones. The old world reckoned but four cardinal virtues—Wisdom, Justice, Fortitude, Prudence—as being the best features in human character (O). By observing and aiming at these it was imagined that man (though his conditions must be favourable to the end) might reach the highest moral perfection. Ancient morality was thus mainly connected with these virtues, but Christian Ethics has ever suggested the unity of all virtues, and, on the other hand, has indicated the inadequacy of the fourfold division.

The charge of a want of originality against Christian Ethics breaks down the moment that students reflect upon the subordinate and subsidiary virtues which it has emphasized. Some of these seem non-existent before the gospel, while others were in germ so rudimentary as to require its new force for right development.

Thus Christianity not only threw open a fresh avenue for moral investigation, but facilitated the free passage along it of fresh or developed virtues by which the world has become the richer.

It has thus taught as a fundamental the virtue of Humility, or a lowly self-esteem arising out of the sense of imperfection (K, chap 8). How foreign such a conception is from the atmosphere in which Aristotle lived and taught, students of the Nicomachean Ethics will not need to be reminded. As another fundamental it has emphasized Love, boldly transferring the pagan term *ἀγάπη*, with its doubtful associations of the past, into the pure context of Christian usage, until it passes out to its proper climax of devotion and service for others. By this spirit of love, revenge is made impossible, and men are enabled not only to forgive, but to accept forgiveness (K, chap 11). As corollaries to these primary virtues Christian Ethics emphasizes Patience and Purity, giving shape and substance to what were merely phantoms before. Thus Patience is newly observed in a repudiation of the common methods of secular strife, substituting for these the endurance even of suffering for righteousness' sake, while

Purity has an original connotation, for Christian Ethics lays stress not only upon outward chastity, but inward cleanness of heart (S, chap 3).

Such virtues, original or developed, receive a special colouring from the Christian atmosphere in which they are found. Heaven lies about them; they catch its glow and warmth, as flowers draw their brightness from the influence of the sky. Hence the happy part played in Christian morals by Hope and Joy. Hope springs from the confidence of the new relation between mankind and God through Christ. Joy, which is the message of the Incarnation, and reaches its proper climax in the thought of the Resurrection, is, notwithstanding the sorrows and trials of life, a permanent note of Christian experience. As a fruit of Christian Ethics, Joy stands in striking contrast to that pessimistic spirit which is not absent even in Epicureanism (K, chap 13). This seems the more singular since Christians own as a Master a Man of Sorrows and One acquainted with grief. But their sorrow, like His, according to His own gracious figure, grows up into Joy, and this joy is inalienable, eternal.

Christ, therefore, is not only the supreme pattern in morals, but He is the source of its strength. This fact imparts to Christian Ethics an element of unquenchable aspiration, and of undying life. This makes its study not only a noble pursuit in itself, but fruitful, if rightly and reverently followed, in every good word and work.

It will remain for students to examine with care the chief passages in the New Testament in which the first principles of Christian Ethics are determined. The following list of such passages is by

no means to be regarded as exhaustive. The references rank from the merest hints to explicit directions for Christian conduct. In the Gospel narrative they appear patent in miracle, latent in parable, luminous in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Epistles they are mainly observable at the close or postscript resting upon the solid ground of doctrine. Sometimes they occur, as in the Pastoral letters, as describing the qualities which mark a vocation for ministerial offices. Often they are so subtle as to elude anything but the most careful attention. But this is always rewarded by the discovery of ever fresh instances by which the separation is seen to be impossible between doctrine and practice.<sup>1</sup>

- i. St. Matt 5, 6, 7; St. Luke 6<sup>20-48</sup>.—Beatitudes on distinctive features of the Christian character.
- ii. 1 Cor 13.—The panegyric of Love.
- ii. Gal 5<sup>14</sup> to 6<sup>9</sup>.—The fruit of the Spirit.
- iv. Eph 4<sup>26</sup> 5 and 6 to v.<sup>9</sup>.—The morals of the family.
- v. Phil 4.—Joy as a note of Christian experience.
- vi. Col 3.—The discipline of the character in social life.
- vii. Philemon.—The attitude of Christianity towards slavery.
- viii. Heb 13.—Christian Ethics and self-discipline.
- ix. The Epistle of St. James.—Christian Ethics in relation to religious belief.
- x. 1 St. Peter 5.—Christianity in relation to citizenship and to domestic and married life.
- xi. 2 St. Peter 1<sup>8</sup> to 3<sup>14</sup>.—Christian Ethics and Church discipline.

<sup>1</sup> Students must note the broad distinction between Christian Ethics and Dogmatics. The latter is concerned with the central facts of the Faith, with evidence and inferences. The former assumes these, presenting them in their practical application, regarding all such truths as teaching men what is morally good, and as moving the will to realize it.

## At the Literary Table.

### THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

THE LIFE OF JOSEPH. BY THE REV. THOMAS KIRK.  
(Edinburgh: Elliot. Crown 8vo, pp. 320. 3s. 6d.)

Mr. Kirk's way with the Patriarchs is well known, for this is the third volume of Old Testament biography he has published. He reads the writings of specialists in criticism and archæology (especially in archæology), but he is not anxious to be the first to publish a discovery or an

emendation of the text. He reads criticism and archæology, but he reads the Bible more. His aim is edification, not instruction. He chiefly tells us why the story of Joseph was written, not when or where. He is a preacher, and as the writer of the history of Joseph was a preacher also, he probably gets very near that writer's purpose, telling his story somewhat as he himself would have told it had he lived in our day.