

THE LAST LESSON OF SELF-SACRIFICE.*

Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone ; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

He that loveth his life shall lose it ; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

If any man serve Me, let him follow Me ; and where I am, there shall also My servant be : if any man serve Me, him will *my* Father honour.—JOHN xii. 24, 25, 26.

THIS is the last of many testimonies of our Lord to the absolute necessity of self-renunciation. All the old familiar sayings concerning it are here gathered into one ; and something is added to them which only the passion week and the nearness of the cross could supply. The hour had now come when the Redeemer could teach His doctrine perfectly and give it its perfect illustration. These words leave nothing out : their exhibition of the sacrifice of self presents it to us in its completeness, literally in its completeness. But the keynote of the whole is its necessity ; and that must guide our thoughts. We might dwell on the text as containing a true definition of self-sacrifice, as presenting it in its utmost beauty and grace, as showing the connection between its loss

*A Discourse delivered in the Methodist Chapel, Bowdon, on Monday, May 13th, 1884, on occasion of the Meeting of the District Committee.

and its gain, as giving us the noblest example of both, and as our Holy Master's final commendation of it to our hearts. All this might be done if we had as many hours as we have moments this evening. But we must be governed by the ruling word except or unless : one thing is needful. And if the Saviour teach us that by His Spirit, He will not fail to add all the rest. May His words sink into the ground of our hearts and bear their much fruit in our lives !

I.

Of that great law which was leading Him to the cross, and must make us follow Him thither, our Lord is about to speak in plain words. It was the deep secret of His heart ; and everything that was passing around gave occasion for its utterance. The question of the Greeks suggested to Him the innumerable souls which would be the fruit of His passion ; and that again suggested the necessity that He must first consummate His passion by death. But that necessity He intends to dwell upon as common to Him and His people ; so He finds an illustration which will first of all make the principle general. He takes up His parable from Nature. It was the paschal week, and therefore the spring season, when the profound mystery of the death and resurrection of the seed-corn was everywhere in full operation. And in the grain of wheat which must die if wheat is to live on earth and be the food of man, our Lord, the Heavenly Poet and Interpreter of Nature, found his most apt similitude, and one familiar to all minds. It was a

figure which, like the great reality, had been prepared from the foundation of the world.

The individual grain must die if wheat is to be continued on earth. There lies the pith of the necessity, which is the everlasting ordinance of God in Nature. Other reflections might arise and other lessons be taught. We who deeply ponder this most beautiful sentence—which has nothing to surpass it in all literature—find much else to meditate upon. But, whatever else may follow, our one and only leading thought is that in this case in order to life there must be death. To-morrow the Redeemer will use the vine as His similitude to teach that there is one life in stem and branches. Now He teaches that that life comes from death. The grain of wheat has in it a divine secret, a germ of life, which is the very omnipotence of God within it; but it must release that secret germ by being rent asunder, disintegrated, and opening its side that the living thing may issue. That it might do above the earth by accident or misdirection : when however there would be no fruit. Its perfect death must be in the earth, and its perfect resurrection must be a lifting up out of the earth. Until it return to the earth whence it came it abideth alone. It will retain its uncommunicated life for many days, indeed for long ages : in the granary, or in the dead hand of the mummy, where it was placed as a symbol of resurrection, for thousands of years waiting for its natural death, to touch the earth and die and rise again. “Except it die it abideth alone.” It may indeed with other grains form one loaf and feed the life of man. But

that is not here the question. To that aspect of the matter our Lord refers when He uses the figure of bread to denote Himself as the nourishment of our life. Here we have only to do with the law, stern but beautiful, that the seed must feed the life that springs from it with its own decaying substance. The little life takes root downwards and sends its shoots upwards; but both root and stem must be fed by the corrupting mass of the grain that thus spends itself utterly. It is to that one fact that our Heavenly Interpreter of Nature points our thought.

But it is only the other side of the same fact that this death is followed, one might almost say rewarded, by its own abundant resurrection. It is the same life that in death lives and through death rises again to large increase: the same life, and not another. Whatever may come from it was already its own. No human eye can see what God can see, what Christ saw when the grain lay in His hand, the life that is within. St. Paul indeed says that God giveth it a body as it pleaseth Him. But the illustration of man's rising is his subject, and that is not here in the Lord's thoughts or ours. The apostle refers to the one body rising again; the Lord is referring to many bodies rising from the one life that is released from the seed and rises out of the seed and is fed by it. Here is the strange mystery that no created mind can explain: that not simply what is lost is found again, but much more abundantly. This is the unfathomable wonder that should keep science and philosophy profoundly humble. But we must not leave our one point:

self-sacrifice and its reward are one. EXCEPT it die it abideth alone. If it die it beareth much fruit. Upon this let us fix our thought; let us learn the preliminary natural lesson before we learn the supernatural one. Here Nature is the forerunner of grace, and prepares as a teacher the way of the Lord. The grain of wheat is unconscious of the great secret it so beautifully teaches. But we can hardly help saying concerning it also that it must die and be raised up the third day.

II.

This, however, leads us at once to the Great Reality of which the seed-corn is here the figure; and that is by every token our Lord Himself and no other. He is the one supreme, solitary example of self-sacrifice in its absolute perfection: of such self-sacrifice as rises infinitely above both the analogies of Nature and the imitation of His saints.

Were we to dwell on all the points of difference here suggested we should be in danger of missing our one theme of the necessity of self-renunciation as common to Him and to us. But there are two things which it will be rather helpful than otherwise to mention. The grain of wheat loses its individual life as a grain: that is the ordinance of Nature in its case. But the Redeemer continues His own personality as distinct from the multitudes who live through Him. Again, the lives of those who live through His death are due entirely to His sacrifice of Himself. Now there the similitude of the seed

is perfect ; but the resemblance of His saints' self-sacrifice halts, as they do not give life to those whom they serve by self-renunciation. Hence, although there is a sense in which the beautiful figure suits both Him and us, in its profoundest significance it belongs only to Christ. He alone is the seed here, even as He alone was the sower in the earlier part of the history. And it may almost be said that the one point of absolute necessity, which is uppermost throughout, finds its supreme realization and perfect truth only in the Redeemer Himself.

Let us not shrink from saying how true it was that He who gave Himself for us must die if we should live ! There was never any necessity so necessary as that. If mankind was to be saved it must be by His uttermost self-sacrifice. Apart from that self-imposed law, we may indeed suppose Him "abiding alone," alone, whether as the eternal Son or as the Son incarnate. He might have counted His equality with God a thing to be held fast, and left the creature which had marred His image to perish ; but the mind that was in Him forbade that. He must die to atone for our sin ; and, having taken our nature, He went on His way toward the cross. His hour had now come ; and He speaks of it as of His glorification. He had been glorified before in the new dignity of His human estate, in the control given to Him over all Nature, in His victories over man's sicknesses and the terror of death. But had that been all He would still have continued "alone." He might have left the model of a human perfection unapproachable by us. He might have bequeathed

to us the traditions of the loftiest teaching ever heard on earth, but teaching that could lead only to despair. He would have remained "alone," even as the Godman : the memory of a Form and Presence for a few years manifest in the flesh only to leave us again doubly bereaved. If we were to be saved by Him He must die, and rise again in a new life to pour into our ruined nature. There might be no absolute eternal necessity that He should die ; but if man was to be saved there was but one way for Him to become a Saviour : the way of the cross.

Now this was in His thought as His hour drew nigh. And out of the abundance of His heart His mouth spake. It was His profound and most affecting soliloquy as He approached the end. And by expressing thus His sense of the need of His death He comforted His human heart in the prospect of the passion. "If it die it bringeth forth much fruit." This was "the joy set before Him, in the strength of which He endured the cross." He as purely and perfectly accepted His dread sufferings for our salvation as if the great offer had been now for the first time made to Him. We know that He came from heaven our predestined Saviour ; and yet we must hear these words as expressing His free acceptance of His own death for our life. We know not, we shall never know, how gratefully He looked out during this awful week on the prospect of the salvation of multitudes. When the Centurion and the Syrophœnician put their trust in Him at an earlier time He saw in them the earnest of a vast harvest : "They shall come from the east and the west !" But now these

Greeks open the very flood-gates of His desire and rejoicing. "I if I be lifted up out of the earth will draw all men unto Me." Thus He accepted the necessity of self-sacrifice for Himself and showed the profoundest meaning of His figure.

III.

I have made no application, scarcely any comment, on this sublimest of all illustrations of the necessity of self-sacrifice. We must adore it in reverent silence, as the mystery of love to which we owe our all. Yet there is an application to ourselves, which the Lord instructs us here to make. He suddenly diverts us, as it were, from His own voluntary passion, and fastens our thought on the absolute necessity of following Him in the same self-renouncing devotion with which He saved us. You hear the old tone here in St. John which you have marked in the three earlier evangelists. "If any man!" "If any man serve Me let him follow Me." Concerning Himself He spoke indirectly, and disguised Himself under the similitude of the seed-corn. But He fixes His eye, as He used to do, on every one of us now: "If any man will save himself, it must be by the same law under which I am his Saviour."

For this, brethren, is the deepest ground of the need of our self-sacrifice. We must offer up and renounce our own soul, our own life, as unworthy to exist: in the unity of the Lord's sacrifice of our sinful nature. This seems to be the profound meaning of those most solemn words: "He that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life

eternal." Christ's sacrifice for us not only condemned sin in the flesh, but also condemned us the sinners in our natural state. It was as if He said : "O Righteous Father, I offer up and renounce this man's impure soul that it may die ; and that My life may live and grow in him." If after that you "love yourself, or your soul, you lose it." You must, my fellow sinner in Adam and fellow redeemed in Christ, hate and renounce and put away your self : hate your soul as having been a sinning soul ; and renounce it as if it had never been and you had never known it. There is the beginning, continuance, and end of the Christian religion as it pertains to the individual. But I am now speaking chiefly, as the Lord is, of the beginning : "If thou wilt be perfect" He said to a young inquirer, ambitious to be a Christian, "go away, and bury thyself, and come back to Me with nothing, and take up My cross as the token that thou hast done with self, and follow Me!" You have never yet effectually learnt the lesson of the Lord's passion if you have not come to this total, perfect, and absolute abandonment and hatred of yourself. The Great Renunciation of the Master must in this sense be copied by the great renunciation of the disciple. Your poor, faltering, ineffectual religion, for ever vacillating between the world and Him who draws you to Himself, is a melancholy comment on the absolute necessity of this entire self-sacrifice. O what a life from Him you are losing until you lose your life for Him !

But these last words give another view of the same subject. The Christian religion is the deliber-

ate sacrifice of the old self on the altar which sanctifieth whatever toucheth it because it was itself first sanctified by the oblation of Christ. The words of our Lord recorded earlier by St. Matthew explain more fully what His meaning was here. "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it." "For My sake!" The Saviour was there as here speaking of the fundamental principle of His religion. It is not a hard, cold, calculating sacrifice of the worse for the better self, or surrendering the sinner to find the saint, or laying down the present life to find the life eternal. It is all this, rightly understood; but it is also the offering up all to Him who renounced all for us. This also is the beginning, continuance and end of personal religion; and it qualifies and softens the other of which we have heard. That seemed to make us care supremely and solely for self: this makes the devotion to Another supreme. We love Him because He first loved us. Self-sacrifice is not for the better self so much as for Christ. We offer love for love; and, constrained by the devotion to us shown by our Lord and revealed by His Spirit, we give up our all to Him. It is most certain that our religion halts over its elements and alphabet until it renounces self. But it is also certain that nothing will fully cure its halting but a perfect surrender of the soul to Jesus. The combination, however, is perfection. This, nothing less than this, is the true sacrifice of self: to offer it wholly to the Lord. It is the dethroning of self that the Lord may reign in its stead. It is the blessed experience that made the apostle cry:

"I live not I, but Christ liveth in me," and "For me to live is Christ." But we must not forget that our theme is the necessity of this surrender. And what else does the apostle mean by the word I have just used, "the love of Christ constraineth us." Our religion will give us no rest till we yield to the sweet compulsion. "I will draw Mine own to Myself." We must make the full surrender; and, until we do, are abiding alone: or, if not altogether alone, without those blessed tokens of His life in us which it is our privilege to enjoy.

"Our privilege to enjoy:" this speaks of our own interest and our own salvation; and beyond that we have not yet gone. But surely the sacrifice for self in the imitation of Christ has a meaning altogether beyond this; embracing the law that binds us to serve our Master in all the ministries of charity for others. Let me direct your attention to the order of the words. After our Lord has said that he who loveth his soul so wrongly as to keep it back from Him loseth it, and that he who hateth his life for Christ's sake shall find it, He goes on to say, "If any man serve Me, let him follow Me; let him engage in My work in My spirit of self-sacrifice." That is to say: with and in addition to and beyond his own salvation, he must be wholly the Lord's servant. The words "If any man" really mean, "Every man must serve Me;" and "Let him follow Me," means also that he must imitate Me. But if our hearts are right we know full well why the imperative is not used.

The very best definition of self-sacrifice or self-surrender is the making all of life a service of Christ

in His ministry to man. This gives it an inexpressible dignity. If you consider closely the connection of the words, you will see that the Lord's suggestion is that every man must make the work of his Master his own. The "follow" seems to signify nothing less than "If any man would serve Me, he must join Me in My work of redemption." He was, as it were, dedicating Himself to that great work afresh at the beginning of the passion week; and His will is that we should join Him in that dedication. At the end of all, when He again made, and for the last time, that perfect oblation of Himself, He said, "I sanctify Myself, that they may also be sanctified;" and we do no wrong to put the same interpretation on that saying. He is sanctified to redemption, and we must be sanctified to it also. But this word "serve" reminds us that, only the day before, the Saviour, already preparing for the passion, had hallowed this very term: "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve; and to give His life a ransom for many." It is the same beautiful word minister. And now He seems to say: "As I minister to men, ye must all minister to Me hereafter. Not yet; for I came not to be served in that sense until I have accomplished My own service. I came not to judge the world, but hereafter I shall judge the world. So I came not first of all to be ministered to, but I shall be ministered unto when My ministry is accomplished. And whatever ye shall do to the least of Mine ye shall do it unto Me." Every one of us, for the word is universal, must unite the work of his life with the Lord's. Some of us more closely and directly, and some of us at a

greater distance, and with a less obvious imitation ; but all must minister to Him as He ministered to man. There are some parts of our life that may seem to have very little to do with the work of Christ, but even they may be dignified by His name, and even in them His name may be glorified.

It is the "following Him" which brings out the full meaning. In all our life the mind of Christ must actuate us : the same thought must be "in us which was also in Him." St. Paul did not say "It must be ;" but "Let the same mind !" So St. Paul's Master says : "Let him follow Me !" And how but by always and in everything acting as He acted who "pleased not Himself." In Him supremely was exemplified St. Paul's ideal of charity which "seeketh not her own things." Now we may make bold to aspire to this : there is infinite promise in that calm "let him follow Me." If you will, my brother, you may have in you the Spirit of Him who never from the first moment of His appearing to mankind spent one thought upon Himself. Remember that it is precisely here, and I may say here only, that He makes Himself an example. The word in "learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart" prepared the way for the act of the feet-washing, which was the direct sequel of the precept of our text. After this act of unspeakable humility and self-abasement He said : "I have given you a pattern." In this, whether as God or man or Godman, He could be our example : but not in His securing of our salvation, not in the renouncing self and in finding self ! In this He could and He did go before us. Remember another

thing, however. It was concerning this that He gave us the remarkable warning : " If ye know these things happy are ye if ye do them ! " Nothing has been so much lauded and magnified among men as self-sacrifice : philosophers, poets, moralists, have vied with each other in extolling it as the secret of all greatness and the soul of all perfection. It is as if the Lord had this inconsistency in view. Alas how many there are who call Him Master and Lord, and " say well ; " who admit also that the crowning glory of the Gospel is in the sacrifice of Christ whole and entire for us, and the sacrifice of every Christian for others in imitation of Christ ; but who in all their lives show that they have scarcely begun that fundamental lesson. We must thoroughly learn it, for it deeply concerns our salvation.

IV.

We should be doing injustice to this final tribute to self-sacrifice if we forgot the solemn sanctions with which our Lord surrounds it. It might indeed seem inconsistent with the essence of self-renunciation to be under any compulsion, whether of fear or of hope. If we are utterly to renounce self, what have we to do with either the threatening of losing ourselves or the promise of finding ourselves ? All that can be said in reply to this is that no theory of self-annihilation which omits the great incentives to it has any place in the teaching of Jesus : I was going to add, in the example of Jesus, who kept in view the joy that was set before Him, and saw in these Greeks the prophecy and the promise

G

of His own exceeding great reward in the satisfaction of His soul. Let it suffice to refer you again to the beautiful parallel from Nature that here underlies all. The life that springs from the death of the grain is its own life continued ; and the many grains that grow from it are its own fruit and produce. We may not be able altogether to reconcile the two. But there is a reconciliation. Utter and most absolute unselfishness or self-annihilation is also the most self-regarding and thrifty care of self.

You see plainly that the emphasis falls on the reward, and especially the reward of eternity. But the necessity of self-renunciation is also urged by the threat of the eternal loss of self. The Saviour's words are very awful : there is no sarcasm in them, no satire ; but their tranquil solemnity is fearful. He shall "lose himself." There must be a total loss of self : either in Him and for Him, or without Him. But the dreadful and pathetic irony, if irony there is, lies in the word "alone." He may find himself : but alone and without a friend in the boundless universe. To be "alone" is a very indefinite thing : it may have many meanings. Undoubtedly the Lord would suggest to us the melancholy thought of isolated, selfish indifference to every one but self. But that loneliness in this world is only the precursor of another. Let me, fellow-sinner, impress it on you that you must come out of yourself if you are ever to be saved. In yourself you have no hope. Begin to renounce and hate and abandon yourself, and turn your whole soul to Another, even to Him who has come to seek and save you and all the lost !

But, as I said, the emphasis is on the reward or

rather the result of sacrifice. Reward is not the appropriate word. The soul in its purest self-renunciation does not think of that : here is the beautiful paradox and mystery of this grace. Nor does the Lord use language precisely of that kind. He rather speaks in soliloquy : " Where I am My servant shall be." " Him that serveth Me My Father will honour." Both sayings are indefinite : they point to futurity of course ; but they do not shut out the present. Those who enter into Jesus, empty themselves of self, and live only in their Lord, have a great reward in the time that now is. It is an immense gain that they have not a single care left that is not His. O the peace of a self-renouncing soul ! " A hundredfold in this present life!" Such devoted imitators of their Master already reap their harvest. While the Lord yet spake, and was uttering the words of entire self-sacrifice, there came a voice from heaven, giving Him a present unspeakable consolation. They thought that it thundered, or that an angel spake to Him ; but it was the Father comforting His Son, and for our sake that we might be comforted too. Like Him we hear voices and have food and receive consolation that the world knoweth not of. But after all, it is the other world that brings the great compensation. There we shall be with Him. There we shall be honoured of the Father who will eternally honour His Son ; and honoured because we served Him, the emphasis lying upon that. We must not too curiously ask what this means. Suffice that the Blessed Master of us all will not leave us without a bright prospect as we enter with Him the valley. Disinterested, perfectly

disinterested service, He will not ask. He approves and loves and smiles on the beautiful enthusiasts who will not say "What shall we have?" But still He Himself says, "Him will My Father honour who serves Me in the contempt of self."

Finally, brethren, all this does not take away the essence of self-sacrifice, which still remains in its strength and severity and loveliness. It is hard to reconcile these contradictories in theory : we can best reconcile them in practice. And practically we may regard our Saviour as teaching us to regard the present life as the time of loss, the life to come as the time of gain. There is a sense in which the dying of the seed-corn covers the whole of our present probation ; and the much fruit from its death covers the whole of eternity. Let us give to time the sacrifice of time ; and to eternity the fruit of eternity. Let us pledge ourselves once more this day to follow our Lord, in the Great Renunciation, with His cross on our shoulders and also in our hearts, our self being firmly nailed to it for ever. And to Him who exemplified the lesson He teaches us, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be the glory ! Amen.

THE SANCTUARY ABOVE AND THE ASSEMBLY BELOW.*

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus,

"By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh ;

"And *having* an high priest over the house of God ;

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

"Let us hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering ; (for he *is* faithful that promised ;))

"And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works :

"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some *is* ; but exhorting *one another* : and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."—HEBREWS x. 19-25.

WITHOUT doing the least violence to the text, we may represent the sacred writer as exhorting us here to the twofold worship which is both offered in heaven and offered on earth. In terms of the highest sublimity he bids us boldly to enter the holiest, through the High Priest over the invisible house, and present ourselves with confidence and joy before the face of God. And then he calmly descends to the lower courts, telling us with marked emphasis that we must enter into the visible assembly also. Whether it was the purpose of the Holy Ghost to impress upon us the necessity of combining

* Preached at the opening service of the Methodist Chapel, Matlock, Bath.