

## FAITH AS A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED.



“If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place ; and it shall remove, and nothing shall be impossible unto you.”—MATT. xvii. 20.

“And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the roots, and be thou planted in the sea ; and it should obey thee.”—LUKE xvii. 5, 6.

“Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, if ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea, it shall be done.”—MATT. xxi. 21.

THESE words, as I have read them in our Bible, seem to speak of a faith of which the apostles were destitute ; and to describe what they might have done if they had possessed it. Yet there is another reading, and probably the more correct, that makes the Master simply tell them what will be the result of their having true faith, or of their using what they have : “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say !” There can be no doubt that the teaching of our text is best brought out by combining these meanings. Inverting the order, we must regard our Lord as taking occasion to declare emphatically for His apostles and for all ages the sublime prerogative of living faith generally :

that is, so to speak, the high ideal of it for every one to aspire to and to attain. But this He does in such a way as to set His servants upon inquiring why it is they have not such faith and to prompt them to seek what they lack.

It is our privilege, brethren, to take the place of the apostles : to put their question and to receive their answer for ourselves. By doing so we shall escape no little embarrassment ; for it may be said that the whole scene is more clearly understood in its reference to us than in its reference to them. There are many great difficulties about it in its original connection, to which I need not refer. But when we remember that the Saviour intends this lesson for all posterity, and for every believer to the end of time, these difficulties almost entirely vanish. It is in fact a text too great for interpretation before the Pentecost : only the strong light of that day brings out its hidden meaning. Let us then, asking for the aid of the Spirit, consider these words as responding to a universal need, and that by a twofold answer : first, teaching us what is the perfect strength of faith ; and, secondly, suggesting to us why our faith is not perfect.

### I.

Our Lord uses figurative language to set before us the ideal or perfect picture of faith : in its principle as the power of a divine life within ; in its action as exerted by ourselves ; and in its command of all things necessary for our salvation. His figures were familiar enough to His hearers ; but they are given to us that we may find in them a deeper significance

than the first disciples could discern. According to our faith is the meaning of this word concerning faith. We must ponder it much in the light of other passages in which the same figures are used ; remembering that we are permitted, both as preachers and hearers, to carry the application a little beyond the immediate text : provided only we do not carry it beyond the Lord's own sanction.

When the apostles ask the Master to "add to their faith," His answer seems first to be adapted to an altogether different request. As His manner is, He rebukes without rebuking them, and speaks of an internal principle of the whole life which is not to be increased from without but grows from within : the divine energy of life working in the regenerate soul as faith. Mark that in the figure the Lord says "if ye have faith," with the emphasis on "have," "like a grain of mustard seed." We may be told that this only means a very small faith : a small particle as opposed in our second text to a great mountain. But here trees are in question ; and surely if faith is small, it is only as a secret and imperceptible something put into the soil of the heart to grow with a divine energy. This same seed is in the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew the similitude of the kingdom in the world ; and of that kingdom which in our chapter of St. Luke is "within you : " whether in the earth at large or in the individual soul its similitude is the grain of mustard seed.

But the point in the reality of this figure is the energy of the divine life working steadily and mysteriously its issues, making our whole religion one perpetual expression of the divine will. What those

who heard did not perceive in the word, we must perceive in it: that faith is not itself the seed, but the energy of life in the seed; that in effect which makes the infinite difference between the mustard seed and the grain of sand. True faith, such as that of which our Saviour speaks, is never small. Moreover, we must in yet another sense enlarge the word that it may receive a sense which before Pentecost it could not bear: that this energy is Christ Himself within us. Apart from Him, we can do nothing; with Him or in Him, or with Him in us, we can do all things. "He that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit." The Holy Ghost who is Christ's is also ours: belongs to each of us and is within us the power of the indwelling Lord. Now Christ "dwelleth in our hearts through faith," as St. Paul's Ephesian prayer tells us. Be sure that this, whether it appear or not on the surface, is what our Lord had in His view when He uttered the sublime word for all futurity. In the power of this faith, which is never weak, Christ repeats all His wonders within us. He does not in our nature abolish physical evils, literally remove mountains, or root up trees; but He does within us, through our faith in His name, all those "greater works" that these things signify. And when He gives this answer to the prayer, "increase our faith," His meaning is that where this living faith exists it must increase itself. It will grow as the tree grows, not by addition from the branches downward to the root, but by development from the root upward into all the beauty and strength of a godly life. If the blessed seed—keeping the figure in view—has fair scope, and absorbs its appropriate

nutriment, it will become a great tree and suffer no other to grow near it. To drop the figure, the whole of life will be one continual command to sin, "be thou uprooted!" and it will obey.

But all this is not enough. The faith here spoken of is not simply a developing energy; it is expressly connected with our own act and deed. All development, whether in nature or grace, is according to the law of numberless interventions of the divine hand giving new directions and new vigour to existing power of life. In our personal religion the law of development has much to do with our own hand and our own voice hastening and invigorating the work of grace in our souls. We have to speak the word of faith as well as to exhibit the secret operation of faith without the word. The divine power is at our disposal to use it for overcoming of evil and removing of difficulties and obtaining all good. It is obvious that it is only the divine power that could accomplish all this. The Saviour uses these extraordinary similitudes purposely to express that: no other meaning could justify such unlimited hyperboles. But no one can fail to see with what marked emphasis He makes the act our own. We might have expected to hear Him say, "It shall obey Me;" or, "I will see that it be done;" or, "You shall find all things possible with God." But that is not the style: "It shall obey you." Your voice shall command the mountain to be removed; your voice shall bid the tree to be uprooted; and both shall obey you. By no method could the Heavenly Master have more effectually taught that our faith is the link between His power and ourselves. By

faith we make His voice, His might, His omnipotence our own: so far, that is, as we need them all. Precisely as we receive the benefit of His righteousness, we receive the benefit of His strength. His obedience is not reckoned to us; but its benefit becomes ours as believers. So His effectual power is not vicariously ours, but only as it is made our own. Hence the word is not, "The Lord is my righteousness and strength," but, "In the Lord I have righteousness and strength." But we must not diminish the prerogative. There stands the saying: an everlasting argument that "the disciple is to be perfected as his Lord;" that he shares the supremacy of the Second Adam even as he shares the debasement of the first; that he has in and with his Lord "all things put under him," and that even he also may "speak and it shall be done." "It shall obey YOU."

This leads at once to the high tribute our Lord pays to the completeness of the achievements of faith in every department of the religious life. As the grain of mustard seed was chosen to represent the secret strength of the divine power, so to represent the wonderful effects of that power figures are used which in human language would be called extravagant exaggeration. Our Lord uses them, however, with the most systematic purpose. The first occasion takes us to the mount of transfiguration. The disciples had utterly failed in part of the duty which not long before their Master had laid upon them. While He had all night been receiving honour and glory from the Father above, His representatives had been dishonouring Him below. This they deeply feel, and

ask "Why could not we cast him out?" The answer convicted them of unbelief; but in the form of a promise for the future: the promise, namely, that every kind of obstacle in the way of duty, though it might seem to block the way like a mountain, should be removed at the command of faith. Before faith in Christ, exerted in resolute personal effort, every difficulty should retire. The second instance finds the same disciples put to confusion by their inability to root out the strong uncharitableness of their nature. When they are told to forgive their offending brother seven times a day, they cry out for more faith, or rather they utter their feeling of despondency in deep consciousness of their impotence. Again the Lord reminds them of His grain of mustard seed, and promises His disciples that His power, put forth through their faith in Him, should avail to cast out every form of interior sin, though it were fixed in the heart by as many roots and radicles as the sycamine tree. Uniting the two, we have the Lord's assurance that no enemy without and no enemy within shall avail against the true faith of a Christian man. But these two are not complete without the exposition of both given at the end of the Saviour's teaching. When these same disciples marvelled at the withering of the fig tree, their Master a third time magnified before them the faith which they had not even yet: "If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also, if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, it shall be done. And all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." This completes the charter. In His name,

and through faith in His name, the believer in Jesus may have all things that he prays for, all things needful for the peace of his soul, the discharge of his duty, and the glory of God.

Such, brethren, is the ideal which our Lord again and again set before His disciples : in strong figurative language, indeed, but with a meaning that extends to and encompasses all the plain realities of life. I say His "disciples," not His "apostles;" for there is not the slightest reason to think that He spoke only to the Twelve, and words intended for them alone. When they complained of their want of perfect meekness of charity, and asked for faith to receive the command of unlimited forgiveness, surely they represented, if ever they did, all Christians. The question here is not of literal miracles : we know not what command over nature the Lord's servants have had and may yet have, in their fellowship with Him ; but we think now only of those wonderful spiritual achievements of faith in every poor Christian that shall rival in the sight of God the wonders of the great chapter of faith in the epistle to the Hebrews. The text is a very large charter indeed. It knows nothing of spiritual impossibilities. We must not interpret it by our own too low standard ; but according to the Lord's three memorable words concerning things possible and not possible. "With men this is impossible." "With God all things are possible." "All things are possible to him that believeth." Then why is it that we know so little of these triumphs of faith ? Why are many of us so much like the apostles in their state before Pentecost, and so little like them in their state after that day ? The Lord



here sets us upon asking that question too, by the very manner of His reply: "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed!"

## II.

And the same narratives which figuratively set up the high standard suggest the reasons why we sink so much below it. Studying the words carefully we shall see that they present the following tests of faith, the application of which may detect the reasons of its weakness in us. Either it falls short of being the faith which can be exercised only by the regenerate; or it is not nourished and strengthened by its appropriate aliment; or the evils which faith has to contend against are not felt as they ought to be; or the faith itself depends too much on the Lord and forgets its own co-operation; or lastly, and generally, the standard of possible attainment through faith is too low. We shall see that each of these sources of weakness is illustrated in the evangelical narrative.

The first and most obvious reason of our failure is in reality a fundamental one: we have perhaps no such faith as this because it can be exercised only by the regenerate, and we have not the life that is in the Son of God, or that is the Son of God in us. The operation of faith is twofold in the Christian religion. It is, on the one hand, a trust that literally as such does nothing but confess its impotence: asking and receiving mercy and a new heart as free gifts. That faith is indeed vigorous enough in the life of penitence; but it can "perform no mighty works," none of the mighty works at least of which we have been speaking, until it becomes, instead of

the trust of a penitent seeking renewal, the strength of the same penitent made a new creature in Christ Jesus. Until then, though it may do much in outward amendment, it cannot go to the root of the matter. Now many of us, brethren, are wondering at the poverty of our religious life; and we shall go on wondering still unless we learn the essential lesson that the strength of the faith that overcomes the world within and without is the indwelling Son of God made ours by our regeneration. The strong man will keep his goods in peace—alas, a troubled peace—until the Stronger than he enters. Until we have that life which is “more abundant” than our own we are only saying weak words to a mocking enemy: taking a few grains from the mountain we want to remove, a few branches from the tree we want to uproot. The life we have under the influence of the convincing Spirit is good; and in the strength of it we must do all that its imperfection can do. We must not undervalue it; but we must not marvel at its ineffectual energy. If we carry it to our Lord, and ask Him the reason of our impotence, He will tell us, “Because of your weak faith;” but He will also add that it can never be strong until a new nature puts it forth. And He will still say: “Separate from Me ye can do nothing.” Let us then use what faith we have to come to our Saviour and ask Him for that higher life which He came that we might have. Let us pray that our present life may be raised to the life of regeneration. Then, but not till then, shall we have the strength of the sons of God. Raised from the dead, mighty works will be shown forth in us.

Supposing, however, that the Spirit of power from on high is in us, we may be keeping our faith weak by neglecting the means that strengthen it. "This kind," said our Lord to the dejected disciples, "goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." We must be careful how we explain these words: not to overvalue them as the discipline of faith, but certainly not to undervalue them. It is not that prayer and fasting are "added" to faith, as agents in the work that faith has to do: faith in all things has the pre-eminence. Prayer and fasting are devotion and holy discipline, which are the humble ministers of faith; as abstinence from sin and self and appeal to the divine strength, they are essential; and never was a high religion reached or a great work done without them. If we are not "asking in the prayer of faith" we receive not; if we are not constantly denying our sensual lusts, our faith must be weak, for the old man and the new cannot be strong at once. No law is more absolute than this. But abstinence or fasting does not refer to carnal desires only. On the occasion of our second text the Lord gave another illustration of the same truth. In an indirect but very solemn manner He rebukes in the disciples the self-righteousness which equally with carnal passions saps the strength of piety and paralyzes its voice. Mark the whole context which ends with "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all, say, We are unprofitable servants." And take the double "say" together, placing the latter first. They who before God say nothing but the language of profound self-abasement may say to every enemy of their souls the words of irresistible authority. But they will continue unforgiving and

selfish towards their brethren, who are not deeply humble before the common Father : not "submitting under God," to quote St. James, they are impotent to "resist the devil." But we may safely return to generalities here. Strong faith in God, which is the mighty energy of the Christian life, absolutely depends on rigorous holiness. A single permitted sin unnerves the arm and takes the pith out of all prayer. "If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me." What, on the other hand, the neglect of prayer and godly discipline has prevented our acquiring we can never know. But by beginning at once we may know, and soon know, what marvels are within our reach : the test of a word like this is the holy experiment of a season of abstinence and prayer for the good of our souls. That experiment was never yet made in vain.

But this assumes one thing, the absence of which may be reckoned among the most common reasons of our weakness. We may not be anxious enough to get rid of the evils that faith has to overcome. Observe carefully that one particular evil which the Lord was condemning ; and His manner of rebuking it, which was such as to be a strong incentive to seek the increase of faith. How awful is His description of the malignity of self, in its deadly carelessness of others. "It were better," our Lord says, in the same strong figurative language, "that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of the Lord's little ones and have his brother's endangered soul hanging about him for ever." This gives us a most solemn and a most startling view of the exceeding

sinfulness of what commonly passes as a comparatively little sin. It is one of the greatest hindrances to an earnest piety that those who seek it tolerate the evil that hinders it. Our besetments cease to distress and alarm us by reason of our guilty familiarity with them. The faith in us that lies dormant will never be stirred up until we feel the sin remaining in us, and every particular manifestation of it, to be intolerable. The disciples did not know the uncharitableness of their hearts, and their secret pride, and their rooted selfishness, until their Master gave them this special revelation. Then they cried aloud for increase of faith; and then the very sense of danger began to strengthen their faith by strengthening their earnestness in seeking its increase. And this is evermore the method of the "Spirit of faith" in His discipline of our souls. He first makes the regenerate soul impatient of the sin that remains; then excites that impatience to hatred; stimulates that hatred to passionate desire for deliverance; and then cometh the end of the mighty prayer of irresistible faith. Let us not expect to achieve any great work, or win any great blessing, or rejoice over any great deliverance, until we see in the light of our Lord's countenance the sinfulness of our sin and fly from it with abhorrence; until we see also in the light of His countenance the greatness of the blessing He would give and seek it with all our heart.

Once more, we cannot weigh these words attentively without coming to the conclusion that the Lord is here warning us against relying too much upon Him, and forgetting our own responsibility for the use of faith. The Searcher of hearts detected a

touch of error in His disciples' "add faith unto us." The end of their training was now drawing near, and here they are with the same old tree of self rooted in their hearts: we know what fruit it bore even on the eve of the Passion. If only their Master would show His lordship over their perverse hearts by giving them at once the power and the deliverance! But no, that is not His way. "It shall obey you!" "It shall obey Me" was of course what He meant; just as "thy faith hath saved thee!" means "I have saved thee: My power through thy faith. Not thy faith without Me; not I without thy faith." Let us find further illustration of this in that final lesson of faith, the last before the Resurrection. The Lord seems to have combined in our third text the two illustrations, the Tree and the Mountain, in one. As He passed by He saw a fig tree, and used it for His purpose. He spoke to it one quiet word. The tree heard Him, and obeyed; its glossy leaves grew dim, its beauty faded, death went down its branches, and it perished to the root before His eyes. And why? As a type of Jerusalem? Yes; but also as an illustration of His old subject. "If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this matter of the fig tree," so it runs, "but if ye bid the Mount of Olives remove it shall obey you!" Observe how to the last the Lord keeps before His disciples the thought of their own co-operation with Himself. Is it not as if He had said: "You see what I have done: how the tree obeyed Me in a moment. Whatever you have to do for Me, or for your own salvation, you may command in the same way." Alas, brethren, how strong is our disposition to forget

this, and to look up to the Lord as if He must do all. He will do nothing for us without our own concurrence. Perhaps we, for I will not say any more about the apostles, are at this moment forgetting what a responsibility we have, and how much depends upon ourselves. We think: "If Jesus would only pass by and speak that word to my deadly sin; if He would say to this tree, to that tree, to the other, 'Wither and die!'" It is well that we really mean this; to mean it will count for much; but such a one-sided prayer He will never answer. He without us will never make us perfect. We shall wait for ever if we wait for that. Let us at once apply this to ourselves. Let us one by one think of the enemy that keeps us dwarfish, poisons our peace, and makes us a sorrow both to God and man. Let us look to the Lord: not asking Him to abolish our sin for us, but asking Him to help us, and then determining to get the victory. Bring before Him and before yourself that ancient, inveterate enemy of your religion: as if it must be out of the way before another step can be taken. Come to hand-to-hand encounter with this sin. "It shall obey you." But you must be in earnest, and act as one who will know no more of the vice that is ruining you. Ask Him to blight your lust, your avarice, your selfishness, your uncharity, to the roots; but remember that He will speak through your lips and your hands, used in discipline and in prayer, the command that they die.

Finally, who does not feel, after all that has been said, as if the secret of the want of this strong faith among sincere people is their low standard of thought as to the privilege and possibility of the

religious life. Our Lord has said, as the common superscription of all His promises, "according to your faith be it unto you:" a wonderful maxim, which is really a boundless charter. According to our idea of what we may have, will be our faith in asking. Hence we hear in the closing lesson, "If ye believe and doubt not:" this meaning, "If ye do not dispute with yourselves about the possibilities of religion and the measure heaven will mete to you." Here we must all more or less come under the condemnation of estimating too unworthily what our religion might do for us and make us. That is the real explanation of the commonplace piety of the day. Men have not high attainments because their conception of possible attainment is a low one. Alas, it is the tendency of Christianity to lower its eyes and sink towards the world. Every now and then the Spirit comes and quickens the general aspiration; and thus what we call a revival of religion always begins with the raising of the standard of expectation among its professors.

Brethren, we are assembled on the eve of what we hope will be such a general awakening. But we are gathered around our Lord as the disciples were on the several occasions of these texts: deeply conscious of our impotence, mourning over the causes of it which we only too surely know to be in ourselves, and trusting that He will encourage us as He encouraged the desponding men who teach us here by their examples. Be sure that it is His will to breathe into us the spirit of courage and good hope; and to animate our whole company to the encounter with all forms of evil around us. We are in His



presence, and about to approach His table ; where our Lord, entertaining us at His own feast, will rejoice to grant us every petition we make to Him. We cannot do better than adopt the prayer which the apostles urged on this the only occasion of their preferring a common request. But we must remember the last words of their Master and ours on the subject, and doubt not in our hearts but steadfastly believe that He will send us down from His table with our faith increased. Moreover, we must individually believe ; and act on that firm persuasion. Then in the spirit of strong faith in our indwelling Lord, we must each one of us bring the Self that hinders our devotion and sacrifice it on the altar. Freed from that internal enemy we shall then be able to command out of our path every mountain that shadows it. And the congregation that is made up of individuals thus “strong in faith, giving glory to God,” will surely find the pleasure of their Master prospering in their hands : to Whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be all honour for ever. Amen.

## PERFECTING CONVERSION.

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“Yet lackest thou one thing.”—LUKE xviii. 22.

“If thou wilt be perfect.”—MATT. xix. 21.

THE one thing which stamps our narrative with special importance is this: that it gives, if not the only account, at least the fullest account, of our Lord's method of dealing with a candidate for His service. The proof of this will appear in due course. The reason of it was simply that there was a great difficulty here to be overcome: a very great difficulty indeed, so great that we know not whether this convert was won or lost. Our Lord's treatment of that difficulty is the pith of the record; undoubtedly the reason why it is given to us so fully, so elaborately, and by no less than three witnesses. It is the standing testimony of our Saviour's rigorous enforcement of His terms of discipleship. The whole hangs on the word Perfect, as applied to the commencement of religion; and to the tone and emphasis with which that word was uttered.

I must at the outset point your attention to the fact that this is the only instance in which the Great Master of all discipleship ever used the term Perfect with a personal application. He does not often employ the word; and that gives the few instances in