

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.

“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

which He does employ it a very deep interest. He uses it of Himself, "I must walk to-day and to-morrow; the third day I shall be perfect;" concerning that one and only perfection set before Him, the being perfected by sufferings. And as the echo: "He that is a perfect servant shall be as his Master." He speaks of His people as making their aim to be perfect in love to all men alike, "even as their Father in heaven is perfect." That was for the present life: He speaks of them as in the better state "perfected into one." But we have now before us the solitary, and therefore most impressive, instance of His addressing the individual. And it is an exhortation to begin with perfection.

As to the specific emphasis on the word in its present application, you will mark that it is twofold. First, it is the severe and rigorous answer to the ruler's question, "What lack I yet?" and must be viewed in relation to an imperfect beginning. Secondly, it is the gracious and invigorating response to the young man's deep desire, "What shall I do?" and encourages him and us to a perfect beginning. May the Spirit of the Great Teacher impress His words upon our minds this day!

I.

It seems hard to suppose the gentle Redeemer receiving sternly and coldly the advances, the impetuous advances, of this eminent young man. There was everything to recommend him. Not indeed his being a ruler in the synagogue: there was something in that to please the Lord; but all classes

were alike to Him. Nor that he was a young man ; for all that came to Jesus were, generally speaking, young. Nor that he was so eager, and came breathless, and cast himself down in the humblest attitude : for the value of all that depended on the heart. But it was the very fact that he came. " Him that cometh unto Me I will by no means cast out." Yet there is no denying, no mistaking, no explaining away that he was very severely dealt with ; and that, not only for his own sake, but because he was the representative of a very large class in all times. The reason of the Lord's severity was simply and solely that in this young man He would illustrate the importance of His everlasting principle : the renunciation of self in beginning the Christian discipleship. The present candidate seemed to lack that requisite.

This the all-searching eye of the Master detects in the temper, mind, and spirit with which he obviously comes : obviously, that is, to Christ : we should observe nothing wrong. According to our standard all is faultless. He comes humbly, earnestly ; and, as a Jewish teacher, asks exactly the right question, " What good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life ?" We know of course that the better question is, " What shall I do to be saved ?" But the time for that question was not yet. The question he asks was the legitimate expression of religious earnestness in a man of his class ; yes, and the right appeal from one who desired to become a disciple of the new Teacher sent from God. Indeed, it is an inquiry that never was nor ever could be superseded : it is the current, everlasting cry of every soul that begins

to feel the powers of the world to come. But this young member of the confraternity of rabbinical teachers had something in his spirit and temper which the Lord did not approve. This, again, we should not have detected. "Good Master, what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life!" seems devout and reverent and decorous enough. There is not much harm in "shall I do;" nor in his idea of "inheriting" life. The Lord adopts and confirms his language. There is an obedience to the commandments which shall "enter through the gates into the city." But it was the "Good Master" that our Lord did not approve of. That savoured of the Rabbi-worship and adulation of human teachers which was the bane of spiritual religion at that time. So the Lord checks him suddenly and at once. "Why called thou Me good? Thou knowest Me only as a Rabbi of the rabbies, and thy words are not good. Put all that away at once and for ever!" He did put it away, at once changing his style; and we may regard this evil and danger as perhaps peculiar to him, and without further application. Yet not altogether so. He who comes to Christ, with the thought of undertaking His service, must bring with him, or must obtain, a clear and perfect aim: an aim to give the Lord all His honour, and let Him absolutely dictate His own terms. He must not be approached as one among many "good masters," but as the absolute God manifest in the flesh. Time fails to show how supremely important this is. Let the general lesson suffice that the Lord requires at the very outset a perfect heart: perfect in this sense, that it must be entirely ceasing from

man and from self in the matter of salvation. Alas, how few there are who thus come !

Again, mark how this austere Receiver of sinners detects the self-righteousness which the ruler brings, and which must be utterly renounced, or there can be no good beginning of discipleship. The whole tenor of the catechising here on the Commandments—the only instance of His using them thus—shows that the Searcher of hearts is proving to this devout moralist that he has not “kept all these from his youth up :” that he has been very far indeed from that. The time had not come for the exposition of the evangelical method of salvation ; and the Saviour said, “Keep the commandments !” testing this young Pharisee, and knowing full well what he would say, and how He Himself would answer him. We did not see at once the offence of his “good Master !” But we do mark immediately the meaning of that hasty and confident “All these have I kept from my youth up !” There we detect at once what the Lord detected. And how does He repel this self-righteousness, which was, and is, and always will be, the diametrical opposite of His gospel ? Not by probing him with the commandments one by one ; not by applying each to him spiritually, as we do in our own minds while we read. He does not say : “What ! hast thou from thy very youth honoured thy parents with a perfect reverence ; hast thou never harboured angry and murderous thoughts ; hast thou never been unchaste even in imagination ; hast thou given their due rigorously to all ; hast thou never spoken as thou shouldst not of thy absent neighbour ?” He leaves all this for us to supply in our

own case. But mark how He sums it all in one stern, deep, soul-piercing rebuke. "Hast thou 'loved thy neighbour as thyself from thy youth up?' Then it will be easy for thee to give him his part in what is thine. Sell all thou hast; distribute unto the poor; I will make up the loss, put it to My account!" Then came the miserable detection, and the emphatic illustration of the words "One thing thou lackest!" "Thou needest, if thou wouldst be perfect, the profound abandonment of all thy self-righteousness." Let me say, brethren, in one word, that nothing better illustrates the introductory perfection the Lord demands than this. The first step in His discipleship cannot be taken until a man "forsaketh all that he hath" wherein to boast. Coming to the Lord all glorying must he put away, that we may, stript of self in intention, glory in Him alone.

But now we reach the nerve and pith of all. With infinite wisdom and skill the heavenly Prober and Physician of souls uses the same method to detect the self-righteousness and also the self-seeking, the self-service and the self-idolatry, that spoiled this young ruler's coming. That which tested whether he loved his neighbour as himself, and found him lacking, tested also the sincerity of his desire to abandon himself entirely to the will of Christ. That was what he apparently would do; that was what every one who joined the Lord's discipleship was supposed to do. Nothing was better known than the rigorous terms laid down by this Rabbi of the rabbies. "If any man will come after Me let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me." This triple rule was becoming perfectly

known in the land. If the ruler was not willing to do that, he "could not be the disciple" of Jesus of Nazareth. If the Lord had said, "Wilt thou be My disciple?" he would have answered readily enough, "This I will do from my youth upward!" Now mark once more the calm and almost judicial severity of the Lord: "Go and sell that thou hast, and distribute to the poor, and come and follow Me." And hear after that, on the one hand, "One thing thou lackest," and, on the other, "If thou wilt be perfect." It is as if the Saviour had said: "Go and leave thyself behind thee and then came back to Me, unselfed, stript and bare of all self-seeking: at least give that proof of thy willingness to renounce all for Me."

Fellow-sinners, there is no beginning of the service of Christ without this. You will perhaps be thinking that this entire self-renunciation is no less than the crown and perfection of religion: there is a sense in which that is true. But there is a sense also in which it is necessary at the very outset. The Lord does not count any man His, or a perfect convert, until this absolute self-resignation has taken place. Till then, the soul is only coming, it has not truly come. You need not again be reminded that the actual renunciation of this world's goods is a subordinate thing here. That was the test which brought out the deficiency of the young ruler: self-will in him took the form of mammon worship, and the Lord saw that he could not resign himself to the Ruler of the kingdom of heaven without giving up that. Examine your own hearts, you who are passing your judgment on the ruler. What would

the Saviour send you to give up, that you might then come back again to Him!

And now I have done with the severer aspect of the text, as it is illustrated by "one thing thou lackest." We have seen what mars the integrity of discipleship at the outset. Before we go on, let us fix our mind steadily on the fact that there is much discipleship and profession of Christianity that is thus imperfect. No one of the solemn words of our Lord more needs to be enforced than this: "One thing thou lackest!" Of a large part of our congregation it may be said that they have never perfectly begun their religion. They have never made the full surrender of themselves, nor the great renunciation of sin and the world; they are coming, always coming, to Christ, but they have not yet fully come. Meanwhile, they are not rejected; nor ought it to be said that their religion is empty and valueless. It is simply in the rudiments: imperfect, unworthy, unsatisfactory, and with this only value that it has the promise of better things.

II.

It is pleasant, Christian brethren, to turn now from the austere Lord to the gentle, from Jesus the rigid disciplinarian to Jesus meek and lowly of heart. It is the same Jesus, however. We never understand Him so well as when we combine the two: blending them in all our views of His character as a Master. The very same page that tells us He is meek and lowly in heart reminds us of this. Out of that same mouth from which proceeded the ever-

lasting blessing of those words came on the same day the awful denunciations of Capernaum. Necessarily we take the two aspects in their order ; though strictly speaking they are blended in the countenance which He turns upon the coming candidate, and blended in the tones of the two voices with which He addresses him. We have been trying to do justice to the severity and sternness of the rich young ruler's reception ; and to deduce from it the lesson for ourselves and for the present day. But while doing so we have felt the tenderness that could not be hid, and have been obliged to show that the Austere Man was really the Friend of publicans and sinners. But our candidate's example would not be satisfied without a little more specific reference to the strong encouragement which he and all like him receive.

Then observe how mighty was the stimulant of this word to the young ruler in his present state of mind. It might seem as if it was carefully and deliberately chosen to signify that the Lord, this supreme and only good Rabbi, recognized the good in him which only needed to be made perfect : you know that this word, which we shall dwell on now, always implies in man at least the finish of a process. Undoubtedly the Saviour put an emphasis into the word, and accompanied it with an inspiring glance, which we must put into the exposition. To the young man the saying was or ought to have been like the sound of a trumpet : like that "Come" to Simon Peter, which fired him to spring into the billows. It meant to say : " Though I have rebuked thy ' Good Master,' and find much self clinging to thee, yet I see thy ardour, and—If thou wilt be

perfect!" I do not know where but here to insert the comment of the evangelist, unique again, "Jesus beholding him loved him." There was an inexpressible tenderness in the look of longing compassion that went with the calm and strong suggestion: "If thou wilt be perfect!" We must not too readily say that it was the ingenuousness of youth that the Lord loved. Those young people here who would gladly think so may hold their opinion: there is no disproving it, and certain it is that if ever the desire to be perfectly His rejoices the heart of the Redeemer, it is when He sees that desire in a youthful soul. But what always seems to me to have thrown this glance of untold love into the blessed countenance of Jesus was His perfect knowledge of the immense difficulty the ruler had to encounter and His sympathy with the secret conflict through which he had passed and was passing still.

At any rate, I take the preacher's license and base my exhortation upon that. Most of those who are coming to Jesus in deep earnest, to give Him all their heart, are coming through many obstacles. There is a superficial, facile, easily accomplished and easily forgotten, presentation of self to the Lord which meets with but little opposition. But the crisis of which we now speak is one that never fails to stir up mighty enemies within and without. The soul, young or old, that has a generous enthusiasm to be entirely the Lord's, to undertake perfectly the conditions of His discipleship, and to give Him a perfect heart, will have a hard contest. If old, there is a whole life's habits against him; if young, there are all the hot passions and instability of youth. And when the

Lord witnesses the struggle, He delights in it, and He encourages it. Take this to yourself. He knows all the workings of your mind these many years. He has watched your efforts and your failures ; and looking upon you He so loves and so shows His love as almost to make you think you are pardoned, accepted and saved. But that is His method of stimulating you. He smiles and says : "With men this is impossible ! But not with God : With God all things are possible !" Hear Him now say with more than angel's voice : "Wilt thou be perfect ?" or again, "Wilt thou be perfect !"

And all this is confirmed when we observe how specifically the Redeemer encourages this young applicant to an instant and entire decision, with all its present fruits of perfect self-abandonment and consecration. Do you not feel that the Saviour here teaches the young ruler that he may if he will take this tremendous step at once, that very day, and carefully avoids putting him on an elaborate discipline for the commencement of discipleship ? Suppose how differently the words might have run. And to help you in doing so, call to mind the three candidates who are not very far from this history : "Go and ponder ; foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head !" The Austere Man might have said : "Go and put thyself under strict rules ; meditate much on the vanity of riches ; uncoil the ancient habits ; and gradually come to such an entire resolution to take lot with Me as I require." No ! such words would have been weighed down by "With men this is impossible." What the ruler heard and we hear is :

“Go, if thou wilt be perfect, at once, and come back to Me a perfect disciple : as thy Lord, bare of all things, giving thyself to Me as I gave Myself to thee! Let not the sun go down upon another imperfect unconsecrated day, and find thee forgetting God and serving self.” What the result in the case of the young ruler was, it is useless to inquire. There is nothing to help our decision about him. He might have found that “it was impossible ;” and forgetting that “with God all things are possible,” have lost the issues of that wonderful day. But what is to hinder our supposing it possible that he went his way sorrowful and came back rejoicing. If so, the Lord would have told us, you think ; but it may have been His will to leave it in its uncertainty to be an everlasting lesson of caution to us.

In any case, the candidate might have been perfect that day. We must hold to this. Whatever may be the case with that ulterior perfection which we all have to aspire to, this initial and introductory perfection we may have at once. As to that other, the Saviour never says much : the time had perhaps not come. But His disciples do ; and taught by them we must expect Christian perfection. We must aim at it on the one hand as the formation of a complete Christian character ; and on the other as the removal of all sin. This latter may be and will be like that we now speak of, accomplished at once. But we have to do with the perfection that begins. That to you is the more important. The other will come in due time. But never will that come unless this is first secured. Let me pray you to receive the encouragement of this history and these

words. Who among us feels the appropriateness of the lesson? Who will become perfect this day; before this evening; while I yet speak! Who will now suffer the Lord to seal and perfect his discipleship, and admit him into the elect number of those who have left self and the world behind them, and, like those in Paradise, already follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth! The Lord is willing and able. Of whom did He speak but of Himself when He said "With God all things are possible." Ask Him to help you. Remember the principle underlying the renunciation required. You may not be called to give up, perhaps you could not give up consistently, your substance this day. He seeks not yours, but you. By His grace you may surrender yourself, and thus virtually all, becoming at once in this sense perfect!

But there is here, as everywhere in our Saviour's dealings with candidates for His service, an endless encouragement in the prospect opened of following the Saviour even into another perfection, and of reaching the treasures and joys of another state hereafter. You will perhaps spare me the trouble of adjusting this promise of an ulterior perfection to the case of our halting and baffled and discomfited young ruler. He certainly goes away sorrowful; and as he goes we sigh over him, as the disciples did, though perhaps with a different feeling: they thought, "How hard a lesson has our Master taught here!" We think: "How glorious an opportunity has this young man lost!" But let us hope—there is no harm in hoping it—that our Lord's thoughts were unlike both; and that He foresaw that the ruler would be among the number of the

“not many rich” who were effectually called. Be that as it may, it is time for us to let our illustration drop out of the history, or at any rate out of our thoughts. For us, brethren in Christ, the lesson is that a perfect conversion leads to a perfect following of Christ in this life and everlasting recompense in the world to come!

Though it is certainly true that our Lord enjoins here a perfect beginning, it is true also that He sets another and a higher perfection before us as the end. The sentence is so ordered that it fulfils its design to the candidate and beginner, and then enlarges its horizon to infinity. The first perfection was the supply of the one thing that the young man lacked: that must never be forgotten. But that one thing supplied, and the conversion made perfect, the way is then open for the pursuit of another perfection, which is no other than the following of Christ. That command sums up all. To follow Christ is the way to perfection; and it is perfection itself. It is the way to the treasure in heaven; and it is already the treasure on earth, which heaven has nothing to surpass. We are, however, dwelling on the encouragement which our Lord gives to those who come to Him. And surely there is no stimulant more stimulating than the promise which is command or the command which is promise, “Come and follow Me.” But to what is this an encouragement? Simply and solely to the perfect conversion. And to this let us return in conclusion: it has been our one subject hitherto and must be to the end. We may not pursue the topics suggested by the following of Jesus and the rewards of heaven: they

would lead us away from the one point that, in order to following Christ and reaching everlasting happiness, there must be a perfect conversion. It is as if the Lord were urging us by that argument to a perfect and complete compliance with the hard terms which He sets before beginners. He fixes His eyes upon us individually and says, "Wilt thou be perfect? Then renounce all for Me: your reward shall be that a perfect religion shall follow." But His will is that we should close with that other word: "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible." From beginning to end the requirements of the Christian religion are absolutely beyond the power of mortal man. This is no less true of the first step than it is of the last. Therefore whosoever would enter on the Christian course must forsake and renounce himself, and put himself into the hands of his heavenly Master. Then will He find that with God all things are possible; and reach at once, with no effort of his own save that of abandoning himself to Divine power, the perfection which ends the coming to Christ and begins the following of Him: to Whom be glory for ever. Amen.