

REPENTANCE*THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

"Now after that John was put into prison Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." Mark 1:14-15.

What is repentance? What is the kingdom of God? "Repent ye." These are two very small words, but they have a very large meaning. There are lots of things called repentance that have but little meaning. But to acknowledge a wrong and truly repent of it is one of the biggest things a man or woman can do. Repentance is always the first step towards a better life. We can not conceive of any improvement of human life that does not begin with repentance. Repentance is the foundation pillar, the corner stone of a life of righteousness.

The spirit of repentance is one of the distinguishing marks of a good man. A man who has truly repented of a wrong course ever afterwards bears the marks of this great work on his spirit. The better a man is the quicker and easier he sees his own wrong. The more wicked a man is the more stubbornly will he justify his own life. A good man will break his heart over a wrong that was accidental or unintentional if he finds it has hurt some innocent person. But thieves, murderers, and yellow cut-throats will justify their black deeds even on the gallows.

Repentance has but little, if any, connection with the

enormity of a man's sins. The depth of a man's repentance is not gauged by the greatness of his sin, but by the goodness and honesty of his heart. Jesus said that a man who had much forgiven would love much. Many people think He meant by this, that a man must sin deeply, and then repent, in order to love much. He did not mean that at all. A man who has much forgiven is one who has deeply repented. A man can repent so deeply over one wrong act that his heart will overflow with love and gratitude. And he can repent so lightly over a whole life of wickedness that he loves but little.

One day Dr. Samuel Johnson was seen standing uncovered in a storm in front of a little book-stall in London, with the tears pouring down his cheeks. It was a great shock to his friends to see the greatest man of English letters of his day standing there bareheaded with the storm beating in fury on his gray hairs. They tried to get him to go inside but he only shook his head sadly and continued standing there. When they asked him the reason for his strange behavior he said: "My Father once owned this little book-stall. He worked here from early morning till late at night for the money to send me to school and college. One day, after I had returned from Oxford, he said, 'Samuel, I am not feeling very well today. Will you keep the little shop for me today?' I refused. I was afraid some of my rich young friends from Oxford would see me at this lowly task. I am standing here today in this storm trying, in some way to make amends."

Do you think Dr. Johnson was a greater sinner than thousands of other sons? There are not many sons who, at some time, have not wounded a kind father as deeply as he did. Many a boy has treated his father worse than that and laughed about it afterwards. The depth of Dr. Johnson's repentance shows, not how much he had wronged his father, but how much he loved him, and the sorrow he felt at wounding him. Repentance makes a man sensible of his wrong, and that is the only thing that will turn him away from it.

The divinest thing a person can do is to forgive a great wrong. It takes more genuine love to forgive a great wrong than anything I know of. The man or woman who can freely forgive a great wrong is most like God. It is always the person who has deeply repented who can forgive others.

What is the kingdom of God? There is a wide difference of opinion on this subject. But because men have disagreed on the meaning of the kingdom is no reason why we should pass it by indifferently. One thing we know, the kingdom of God was something of vast import to Jesus Christ. H.G. Wells says, "The kingdom of God on earth is the greatest hope that ever challenged the thought of man." It was something that lay very close to the heart of Jesus Christ. One of the bishops of the Methodist Church said of Stanley Jones, rather disparagingly, "He seems obsessed with the idea of the kingdom of God on earth." Stanley Jones cries passionately, "Would to God I were." We know that Jesus Christ was obsessed with this hope. It was an obsession that swallowed his heart and soul. In fact, everything else in

creation looked small to Him in comparison to it. A thing that could occupy such a large place in the thinking of Jesus is certainly worthy of the most serious thought of all men.

Let us examine some of the theories men have advanced to explain the meaning of God's kingdom on earth. One is millennial theory. This theory accepts the present world as a place hopelessly evil-- so evil that it must be totally destroyed before any reign of righteousness can be realized. Some think it will be destroyed by fire, some by war, some by the impact of heavenly bodies falling on the earth, and some by the force of all these combined.

The millennial theory has occupied a very large place in the theology of some sects. But the great lights of the church Luther, Calvin, Knox, Bunyan, and Wesley have had but little to say about it. These great men bent all their efforts towards bringing God's kingdom to men while they lived and left the mysteries of prophecy to take care of themselves. If God were to destroy the material world would He not still have the same problem He now has? Evil is not in the rocks, hills, sands, and seas. There is no evil in any material substance. The only evil in this world is in the hearts of men and women. I cannot see how God could end this by any violent means except to destroy the whole race and begin with a better one. He certainly says nothing anywhere about doing that.

Every scheme of destructive violence on any less scale would certainly leave some evil in the world. When Jesus

speaks of the kingdom of God He speaks of something that comes on earth as silently and with as little violence as the dew falls on a still night. He is speaking of something that comes as gently as the rain on thirsty ground. He said so Himself many times. He likens the kingdom of God to a gentle breath of wind, to the sprouting of a seed, to the leaven of yeast in bread. But nowhere does He liken it to the tumult and shouting of war or to the gaunt skeleton of famine and disease. He rejected every offer of violence to bring His kingdom on earth. When James and John offered to bring fire down from heaven to destroy a city that had rejected Him He was greatly shocked. He said, "Ye know not what spirit ye are of. The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

When war and violence are prophesied they are not part of His kingdom. They represent the forces that oppose it. They hinder more than they help. When did war ever cleanse and purify human society? In the last great war we killed eight million men. Would any man living today dare say that these eight million that died were worse than we that escaped? If there was any difference I think the advantage was with the dead. The worst sinners in any age are the old ones. In spite of their wild foolish capers the young people are, on the whole, kinder, more merciful, and more charitable than the older ones, if we except a few who have ordered their lives after Christ. Men who have lived all their lives in sin grow worse as they grow older. But war always kills

the young, the healthiest, the bravest, and the best. Then what hope is there for men in war?

Did our last war make men better? Are we any more secure in life, any more religious, any more temperate, than we were before 1912? If we are we have made all the gain since the close of the World War. That bloody struggle was the most demoralizing, the most destructive of all hope and righteousness that has come in my lifetime. I can easily see how a great war might finally overthrow God's whole plan of righteousness. But I cannot see how it can add one thing to it.

Some have prophesied a war between the forces of wickedness, in which the righteous will have no part, called the battle of Armageddon. I confess that I do not know what this struggle in Revelations points to. But such a theory as has been built around this strange prophecy in late years is too fantastic for serious consideration. As long as there are good and wicked men on earth they will live together. The Bible certainly teaches this and all human experience confirms it. There has never been a war yet in which the righteous did not suffer with the wicked.

Another theory of the kingdom of God is a little more orthodox. It is the explanation the church, for the most part, has offered to men for the last seventeen centuries. This theology, too, accepts the present world as a place hopelessly evil. It places the kingdom of God wholly in another world. It has made religion purely a personal affair, one

that can have no bearing on society as a whole. When confronted with cruel wrongs it has washed its hands like Pilate, or answered like Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" It has accepted the status quo of every age as the best that could be hoped for on earth. Instead of leading in great social reforms it has often fought them. Many times in the last seventeen centuries the church has fought to perpetuate such monster evils as war, poverty, slavery, and tyranny. When men groaned under bitter wrongs the only consolation it had to offer was that these things would end with death. It has gone further than this. It has told men that such monster evils as hunger, cold, and disease promoted piety and religion. It was generally men who were free from these evils that did the preaching. If men groaned too loudly under any of these evils the church often joined the oppressor in silencing him or putting him to death. They said to men groaning under harsh bitter wrongs, "Be patient, brother, these things are good for you." If it was so good for men to die in hovels, to freeze, and to starve, why did they not try a little of it themselves? As an orthodox Christian they might believe such monster evils promoted piety among the poor but they were very careful that they and their children would have no part in it. How inconsistent--how brutally inconsistent our theology has been!

We know that extreme poverty, hunger, and disease do not promote piety and righteous living. On the contrary, they promote theft, irreligion, atheism. How long

will the church be satisfied to let these evils stand in the way of God's kingdom on earth. For they do stand in its way. I know such evils are hard to correct. But Jesus did not flinch from them. When men cried to him under bitter sorrows He did not console them with the poor comfort that death would end it all. He dared to challenge every evil the hurt men and women. If He had not He would not have been crucified. They crucified Him because He dared to say the evils of human society can be corrected. That is the only kind of religion that ever meets with opposition. As long as religion only promises men riches and ease after death no one cares to oppose it. What do the forces of greed and oppression care what becomes of a man's soul? All they care for is what they can get out of his body. But the minute religion promises men something they can enjoy now it threatens every evil force among men. Then they rise up to destroy it.

This laises-fare religion has brought us face to face with two of the most threatening evils that has confronted Christianity in a thousand years. I refer to facism and communism. The way these two religions are spreading is one of the most alarming things that has happened since the days of Constantine the Great. Why have communism and facism gained such a holt on the popular imagination? It is because they have dared to say that the evils of this life can be corrected. While Christianity was cowardly hiding its head--making pious excuses for cruel wrongs, these two great forces of atheism have dared to say that

man's wrongs can be righted. They have promised men what Christianity said God had denied them.

I do not believe there is any hope for men in either of these movements. Both have rejected the meek and lowly way of Christ. Both have rejected the great principles of mercy and justice that must form the ground work of any movement for the uplift of man. Both have rejected love of God and love of our neighbor, and substituted brute force in its stead. In the end such great fires must burn themselves out. But this will not make the task of Christianity any easier. They make it a great deal harder. When the poor men and women who have pinned their hopes to these movements find they are empty and desolate of all good, as, in the end they surely must, will they be any easier to convince of Christ's promise of a better world? We would certainly hope they would. But we may find it otherwise. We may find them completely resigned to despair and cynical of every good promise. Such a people will be harder to win to the truth than they would had they never been lead astray.