

Masters and Servants

THE sentiments, exhortations, and recommendations of the apostles are as applicable to modern circumstances and as beneficial to those whose ears have been opened to hear them, as to those to whom they were immediately addressed. Our wisdom lies in appropriating them and working them out as the practical rule of our lives. Any other course will be repented with the bitterness of death at last.

But some of these exhortations sometimes seem more applicable than others. Peculiarly suitable to our case are the words of Paul to the Corinthians, in which, in view of the shortness of the time, he recommends uncarefulness with respect to temporal matters. He applies this first to position in life: "*Art thou called being a servant (strictly translated, a slave), care not for it, but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather, for he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's free man; likewise he that is called being free, is Christ's servant.*" This, of course, related to the slavery practised among the Romans, but the principle applies to the social relations of the present day. There is nothing comes home with greater force than anything affecting a man's position in this respect. All other things and considerations are outside of him, so to speak. He can consider and decide them without feeling that he is deciding anything of supreme importance; but when he is called to consider whether he will be servant or master—poor or well-to-do—it is something that comes home. It affects the centre of the circle of his individuality. In the world it is the guiding star and the mainspring. The truth shows its power nowhere more strikingly than when it governs this: when it can make a man indifferent on the subject of his social position. It contains this power, though all men feel it not. Industriously courted and distinctly realised, in the daily reading of the word, and in that communion with the Father, through the Son, in prayer, which it engenders, it is able to induce the uncarefulness prescribed by Paul.

He had evidently been asked how a knowledge of the truth affected a man's relations as master and servant. Must a believer cease to be a master? Or if a slave, must his brethren buy him off? The answer to both questions is, No, not of necessity. If a man called by the Gospel be a slave, let him continue in that position, unless he can command his freedom, and then, of course, he is at liberty to choose it "rather." If he be unable to deliver himself, he is to "abide" in his position with resignation, not, however, as a matter of iron-handed duty, but in recollection of the fact that though a slave, he is Christ's freeman, and, therefore, will obtain his liberty in due time.

There is great power and consolation in this thought, which may be applied to every lowliness that is incident to the believer in this present probation. In Christ we are made free. This is true in a very real sense. We may not at all times realise it; we may be like the Israelites in Egypt, who, for anguish of spirit at their burdens, hearkened not unto Moses, who had come to deliver them; but it is nevertheless a fact that fully justifies the practical application that Paul gives it. A man being Christ's free man is a great reason why he should patiently endure the humiliation and bondage that belong to this life. Our present probation is only for a season, and that a short one. It will assuredly come to an end. The toil, and the monotony, and the weariness of body and mind, as we grapple with the duties of our position, are each day lessening in their duration. The days hurry by, and hasten us to the freedom that awaits us in Christ; and any day the change may burst upon us like a lightning flash; whether we think of the coming of Christ or of that dissolution in death that awaits us all in the ordinary course. And when it comes, each happy heir of the liberty that belongs to Christ's free men will experience how real a thing it is. First, they will be delivered from the burdens that press immediately on them burdens as pertaining to the affairs of this life: burden of anxiety, burden of toil, burden of vexation from various causes, burden of family affairs, burden of business, burden of submission to evil and misrepresentation, burden of obligations this way and that in this present evil world. The whole burden will roll off like Christian's pack at the foot of the cross. With tears (perhaps) of joy, Christ's free men, after long waiting and watching, will hail the glorious freedom. But this will be but a beginning. Christ can do, and will at that time do, for them what no doctor can do, and no training or treatment in any number of "institutions" can do for them; he will radically change their poor mortal

nature so that it shall be no longer mortal or weak, or failing. With a touch or a word, he will transmute their substance into that which shall be incorruptible, undecaying, ever-enduring, powerful, and energetic, so that they shall feel lightsome, clear, and joyous for evermore, as light of the morning sun.

From before this change of body, every burden of weakness will fly for ever away; strong, glad, and grateful, they will stand gloriously in this liberty of Christ, giving praise with the wonderful and unwearying ardour of the spirit-body; and with it, there will come the grace, and the symmetry, and the beauty that always come with strength, wisdom, and joy; so that each will be able to say to his fellow, "I never saw you look so well: blessed be God." And then to each accepted servant, he will introduce a large assembly of similarly ennobled sons of suffering. There will be many to rejoice together and sing praise to the Lamb. Resurrection-glory in solitude would be a joy, but how much more glorious when thousands of Jehovah's righteous will share it together. And then comes the interesting work of allotting to each one in the company a place in the mighty framework of the Messiah's universal dominion. How high will be the lowest place in that house of greatness! for the lowest place means immortality, and honour, and blessedness. Truly "*he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist*" (was). In his allotted place of dominion, each saint will be the loved and honoured representative of the government of the Highest enthroned at Jerusalem. He will be the highest dignitary, the richest land-owner, the happiest man, the most beautiful person among his people, exalted above the fear of death, his place and his pleasure to bless those entrusted to his care, to lead, and guide, and rule them in the name and for the glory of God, and the rejoicing of men, and the gladness of the assisting angels. He will be CHRIST'S FREE MAN.

Let a believer of the truth realise this, and he will be enabled to stoop easily to, present servitude. It is but a short time at the longest. Let him remember, on the other hand, that other truth expressed by Paul, that "*the fashion of this world passeth away*": that is, all things and ways to which we stand related in this present time are transient: ephemeral essentially. This is a twin lesson of true wisdom with that we have been considering. It is equally difficult to learn. The things around us make the impression on the imagination that they are enduring that the things of God are maybe's; possible phantoms—not more than probabilities, scarcely that—while the affairs about us are the bird in hand—real, valuable, and abiding. Few would own to the thought in this naked form, and yet this is the story that all things tend to whisper in the ear of a natural man. That it is an untrue story requires but a moment's thought to see. At any given moment, things seem stable enough; but let there be time enough for taking observations, and the truth appears. All things are on the move, and the "move" is steadily towards the grave.

You see it best, perhaps, after an absence from a place for ten or twenty years. You enquire for this one and that, and they are gone! Strangers are in their places. "Dear me; what changes!" Each year brings new stones to the cemetery. The grim scythe-bearer goes quietly round, and takes first one and then another. He misses nobody. He may be a long time in calling at a particular house, but give him time, he will be there at last as sure as there is a living man in it. Everyone knows this and sees it, yet they fail to take in the full force of the lesson. Probably, because, although they see friend after friend carried to the grave, they see the world go on as well, and take a little comfort, as if the world said, "All right, it is only your friend that is gone; I am still here; keep comfortable." It is when it comes to a man's own flesh, that he feels the full force of the lesson. The situation looks wonderfully different when it is himself that the King of Terrors looks in the face. The world goes on after other people die, but when it comes to a man's own turn, the world stops. There is no more business for him; no more friends for him; no more reading for him; no more meetings for him. The whole scene suddenly cuts short, the world passeth away, never, never to return. Only one thing remains, and that comes quickly, immediately, as soon as the breath is out of his body, as it seems. Christ remains for him—a dread meeting for weal or woe. In this sense, Christ is very near to every one of us, though he were ten thousand years away in time. In this sense, all things to us are so transient and fragile, that they may in a moment twinkle out like a bubble.

Therefore, if a man is a servant (and cannot be otherwise), let him care not for it. It is but for a short time, and then freedom will come in a form that no one could attain by the highest effort and the highest success in this world. If he can be other than a servant, let him accept the liberty as an opportunity for greater good; but this will need discretion. A man in striving to liberate himself from one set of difficulties, may lead himself into others great enough to kill him, in a spiritual sense. I have known cases where men have aimed high in business, under the plea of acquiring more power to serve the truth and, in the process of acquiring the power, their hearts have been overcome by the fascinations of wealth, and the original intentions clean forgotten. Contentment with moderate things is well. "*The little that a righteous man hath is more than the riches of many wicked.*" It is better to serve God with what you have, than putting Him off to a larger opportunity that may never come, and if it come, may destroy you. The Master can be served in a hundred ways by a poor man. The poor man's little may be of a higher amount in the Master's estimation than the rich man's gold. See the case of the widow's mite. Nevertheless, "*if thou mayest be free, use it rather.*"

The other side of the picture is this: "*He that is called, being free, is Christ's servant.*" No rich man professing the truth is rich for himself. He may act as if he was; but he will find his mistake at last. He is Christ's *slave*, for this is the word used by Paul. To put it in another apostolic way, he is Christ's steward: what he has belongs to Christ, and although the use of them is at his absolute discretion, no man having the least right to dictate, he will be called to account for the use he has made of the Lord's property. Does he use it for his own gratification and honour, or for the doing of the Lord's commands? The verdict of the day of Christ will be according to the fact; and in that day there will be no respect of persons. Every man shall reap as he sows. Some men sow to the flesh in pot-houses and among lewd fellows. Some sow to the flesh in gilded parlours, and conservatories, and croquet grounds in polite society. The judgment will place them both in the same rank at last. Some men sow to the Spirit in shabby clothes, mean houses and meagre half-pence; and a few do the same work among fine furniture, and lawns, and five-pound notes. Both will reap life everlasting. The lesson for the saint, be he high or low, is that conveyed by Paul in the words, "*None of us liveth to himself, and no man (in Christ) dieth to himself; for whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's*" (Rom. xiv. 8).

It is wise to take this fact home now, and let it have full effect in our lives. A life based upon it is considered "extreme" and fanatical; but who considers it so? Not the Lord's people, and certainly not the Lord, for he commended Mary over Martha, in having chosen the good part that should not be taken away, and he has said that no man can be his disciple who does not discern him sufficiently to prefer him above every folly and every interest in this life. Why should we defer to the opinion of those who, with all their refinements, are not the Lord's friends? They are of the world; and can we expect the world to approve of consecration to God? The world called the Lord mad for his devotion in this direction, and "*if they call the Master of the House Beelzebub,*" what can the servants expect? It is sufficient for the disciple that he be as his Master? The Master was disowned and discarded as an impractical dreamer—a fiery enthusiast—an extreme preacher. Let us not aim to be otherwise estimated by the corresponding class in our own day. But approve or not approve, commend or condemn—esteem or scorn, as the world or worldly friends and professors may, THE DAY will reveal that the Lord is our proprietor, that we are not our own, and that all the matters are in our hands on trust, of which an account will be called for, and will have to be given in very open court, to our shame or honour, according as we are foolish or wise in our present procedure, in the several spheres, high or low, in which we may be called.

There is, therefore, every reason for Paul's remark: "*I would have you without carefulness,*" that is, carefulness in the sense of worldly anxiety. Peter tells us to "*Cast all our care upon God, for He careth for us.*" Faith will confide and good sense will abandon useless fret. We have the authority of Jesus for saying that "*the Father knoweth what things we have need of before we ask Him*"; and that the benevolence spontaneously exercised towards the birds of the air and the grass of the field will not be invoked in vain by those who fear Him.

Marriage, comfort, worldly possessions, are all very well in their place; that place is at the footstool of the truth. "*But this I say, brethren, that the time is short; it remaineth that both they that have wives be as though they had none, and they that weep as though they wept not, and they that rejoiced as though they rejoiced not, and they that buy as though they possessed not, and they that use this world as not abusing it.*" This is Paul's indication of a wise attitude in his day. If appropriate in his day, how much more for us who are on the very verge of the advent? We have a double contingency hanging over everything we do. The disciples in Paul's day had death: we have that and the Lord's re-appearance. Either of these will terminate in a moment and for ever our connection with present things. How lightly then should we hold to them, and how high a place should we give to the things of the Lord! It may trouble some to think, of husbands and wives "as though they had them not," but the trouble will give way before enlightened apprehension. Wives and husbands in the Lord will not be separated though their relation will be changed. They will be mutually dearer than ever, only a thousand others will be just as dear. The circle of select friendship will be widened out to take in a great many. These being approved of the Lord and glorified, will be as true and beloved as the clearest friend we ever clasped to our bosom. We can, therefore, take in Paul's thought easily, and treasure it too, that the present time, being a short time, and a provisional time, it is wise and needful that we hold loosely all its relations and institutions, in prospect of the day when the Perfect Being comes, that which is in part will be done away with—swallowed up in the "*exceeding and eternal weight of glory*" that shall be revealed for all such as hunger and thirst after righteousness, and walk in the narrow way that leadeth unto life.

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