

The Teaching of CHRIST

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PART II

THE TEACHING OF CHRIST CONCERNING SIN AND SALVATION

CHAPTER TEN

CONCERNING HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

"From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).

"Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (John 6:29).

"If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17)

OUR subject presupposes those of the two previous chapters and completes their teaching. We now proceed to enquire what JESUS taught as to human responsibility in view of His Saviourhood.

There are certain preliminary matters which it is well we should bear in mind.

The first is that of the general methods of CHRIST's teaching. As we read these Gospel stories, and listen to Him, sometimes speaking to vast multitudes who were gathered about Him, sometimes speaking to smaller companies of critical and hostile men who were challenging Him, sometimes speaking to companies yet smaller, companies of loyal souls, instructing them in the things of the Kingdom of GOD; we find under all these different circumstances a consistent method. We may describe that method briefly as being threefold, that of annunciation, application, and appeal. His teaching was always that of the annunciation of truth.

In the midst of the final hours, when challenged by the Roman procurator as to His Kingship, He made a significant claim: **"To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice"** (John 18:37).

He never announced a truth, however, merely that men might apprehend it intellectually. He always applied truth to immediate circumstances, and to actual needs. Moreover He never rested content with an annunciation and an application. There always rang through His teaching the note of appeal, as He called men to obey the things that He said. All of which may be stated in another way by declaring that through all the teaching of CHRIST there is discoverable an ethical purpose.

He taught men, in order that they might be obedient to truth; and that by their obedience to it, they might be conformed to the will and the purpose of GOD. Consequently it is also noticeable in the teaching of JESUS that His objective was the will. His avenues of approach were those of the emotion and the intellect.

He made a clear statement of truth that might be apprehended of the intellect, and employed such methods of statement as would make their appeal to the emotional nature, sometimes in the thunder of awful denunciations, and sometimes in the wooing winsomeness of infinite tenderness. But He never attempted merely to satisfy the questioning of the intellect, or merely to move the emotion.

These were but avenues of approach, and He was forevermore storming the central citadel of human personality, the will; calling men by thunder and by tears, by clear intellectual statement and emotional appeal, to obedience; claiming that there must be the submission of the will to the truths declared.

From the mass of His teaching I select three outstanding and familiar statements which reveal the nature of His appeal, and enable us to understand His teaching concerning human responsibility. It must be remembered that our Lord's ministry was exercised, not in the midst of men and women who, knowing truth, and being obedient to it, were like the truth, and of the truth.

His ministry was exercised in the midst of men unlike the truth, disobedient to the revelation, and His appeal was made to those who had failed. That appeal is focused in the three passages selected.

The first is recorded by Matthew and Mark, as constituting the key-note of His more public ministry. "**From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matthew 4:17).

The second was spoken in Jerusalem in the midst of hostile criticism, when crowds were following Him, as He Himself said, because He had fed them with material bread. He rebuked them for the motive of their following, sought to lift them on to higher levels of consideration, and consequently of conduct; charged them not to work for the bread that perishes, but to work for the bread of life. They answered His charge by the question, "**What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?**" and to that enquiry, in the midst of that critical atmosphere, He replied, "**This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent**" (John 6:28, 29).

The third of the three passages is found, as to its place in the Gospel, in the chapter immediately following, but as to its chronological place in the ministry of CHRIST, at a later period. When He had come up to Jerusalem for that memorable feast of tabernacles, and they were charging Him with bearing testimony to Himself, challenging Him as to the truth of the Divine authority of His mission, He uttered these very significant words: "**If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, *whether it be of God***" (John 7:17) and I emphasize in that way because I know no passage in the New Testament that has been made the basis of more interesting, and yet unwarranted application than this.

Many things are said in exposition of these words which in themselves are quite true, but which are not in the meaning of the words. JESUS did not say, If you do the will you shall know the doctrine, all interpreters and expositors notwithstanding. He said, "**If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, *whether it be of God.***"

In these three statements, taken out of the midst of our Lord's ministry, we have a revelation of human responsibility in the presence of Himself as the Revealer of the will of GOD, and as the Saviour of men.

In the First we find a revelation of the fundamental necessity, repentance towards the Kingdom of GOD; in the second, a revelation of responsibility created by Himself as the mediating opportunity, faith in Himself; in the third, His most luminous and wonderful statement as to the responsibility of experimental proof; that men are to prove the Divinity of His teaching, the Divine authority of Himself and His mission, by putting Him to the test by obedience.

Let us examine these declarations a little more particularly.

First we have His statement of fundamental necessity in the words, "**Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**"

With these words the herald John had commenced his ministry; and when he was arrested and imprisoned, and his voice was silenced, then began JESUS to preach, and to say, **Repent**. That in itself is suggestive. Men may silence a voice by imprisoning a prophet, but they cannot end the ministry of truth. Another voice will take up the same word and now no longer the voice of a herald, but the voice of the King.

The implications of this great word are two, those of the fights of GOD, and the rebellion of man. There was a clear indication, both in the first word of John and in the first word of JESUS, of the direction of repentance; it must be repentance towards the Kingdom of GOD. Thus at the commencement of His ministry, our Lord insisted upon the rights of GOD.

The deepest passion of His heart was a passion for the doing of GOD's will in His own life, and the establishment of GOD's Kingdom throughout the world; He insisted upon the rights of GOD over individual life in its entirety, over social life in all its inter-relationships, over national life in its purposes and its policies. The vision ever flaming before His eyes was that of the Kingship of GOD, the rights of GOD over all the affairs of men.

The second implication of this key word of the Master's preaching is that man is not living within that kingdom consciously, obediently; that he is out of harmony with the will of GOD. Our Lord charged the men of His own age with having wrong conceptions, which issued in wrong conduct, which resulted in wrong character. He stood in the midst of the men of His own age, and He said to them in effect: The fundamental necessity, if I am to exercise My power as Saviour, and to accomplish My mission in the world, is that men shall turn to the Kingdom of GOD. His call essentially was and is, that men shall enthrone the exiled GOD.

That is the First note of human responsibility.

- It is revolutionary, calling for upheaval and change in all the departments of human life.
- It is radical in that it deals with the inspirational sources of action, rather than with the external activities.
- It is restorative in that it calls man to return to the true order of his own life and of his own being.

It is the key-note.

There is no Gospel in this.

John had no Gospel to preach; he preached repentance. But no man is ready for the Gospel until he has heard this; and no man can receive the benefit which the Gospel provides until he has obeyed this fundamental word.

If there has been a lack in the evangelistic preaching of recent years, it has been that this note has been forgotten, that in bringing men face to face with their responsibility to JESUS CHRIST, we have not commenced where He commenced, where the apostles commenced after Pentecost, where every great revival of religion has commenced, with the need of repentance, the need that is founded upon the rights of GOD in individual, social, and national human life.

This, then, is the first note of human responsibility, repentance towards the Kingdom of GOD.

Repentance is the change of the mind, the thinking over again; and the thinking in this definite direction.

In this particular word that our Lord made use of, there is no suggestion of sorrow, of tears, or of penitence.

There was long controversy between the Protestant and the Roman theologians as to the difference between *resipiscentia* and *panitentia*;

- Catholic theologians insisting that what is necessary is sorrow for the past;
- Protestant theologians asserting that the essential thing is the change of mind towards the Kingdom of GOD.

There can be no doubt in the light of the New Testament that the latter were right. There will be sorrow for sin, but it is not necessary to initial repentance; and there are men and women who for twenty, thirty, and forty years, have been Christians, whose sorrow for sin to-day is deeper than it was at the beginning of their Christian life. Moreover there may be sorrow for sin without repentance. People may mourn and wail over sin, who never definitely change the mind, and set the life towards the Kingdom of GOD by making that Kingdom the master conception in everything.

That a man must enthrone at the center of his life the GOD Who has been exiled therefrom is the first note in CHRIST's teaching concerning human responsibility in the presence of Himself and His mission as Saviour.

Then we turn to the next. Men asked Him, "**What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?**" and His reply was definite, "**This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.**"

We are immediately impressed by the superlative nature of that claim. JESUS CHRIST stood confronting the men of light and learning of His own age, and He said that the work of GOD was that they should believe on Him. He had rebuked them for the materialism of their thinking, and their passion, and their motive, declaring that they had followed Him, not even because they saw the sign, but because they had been fed. He charged them to lift their life on to the higher and the spiritual plane, and to work for spiritual food, and they had said, What is the work of GOD? Having called them to such high altitude and conception of life, He immediately said, This is the work of GOD that you believe on Me.

Thus He stands before men as between them and GOD; He calls men to the Kingdom, to repent towards the Kingdom; and when they come with enquiry as to how they are to do this, He answers, This is the work of GOD that you believe in Me.

He claims in that word relation to the fundamental purpose of the Kingdom; that the King is revealed in Himself, that the Kingdom is revealed in Himself; and that He is not merely the revelation of the King and the Kingdom, but the Administrator of the Kingdom.

He was sent from GOD, not merely to show the glory of GOD, but to deal with the rebels, the sinners, the men who had forgotten the Kingdom, and insulted the Throne, and to deal with them for reconciliation and restoration. His call is to belief in Himself; not to belief about Him, not to belief of any doctrine or theory of His Person. Not only is it true that men are not saved by holding a theory; it is equally true that He never on any single occasion made it necessary that a man should hold any theory concerning Him; but that men should believe in Him.

That Greek preposition *eis*, with the accusative, always signifies *motion into*; so that perhaps we should be nearer the word of CHRIST if we read, That you should believe into Him Whom He hath sent that lifts belief far higher than the intellectual realm, making it a volitional act by which a man abandons himself to the truth of which he is convinced.

There are men who question as to whether it is possible to choose their beliefs. There are senses

in which it is not.

No man can choose a conviction. He can choose whether he will act upon a conviction. Conviction is necessary to faith; but faith is more than conviction; it is conviction followed.

I recommend a very careful study of Professor James's essay on "*The Will to Believe*," in its bearing on the fact perpetually insisted upon in the Bible that belief is more than conviction, it is the activity that proceeds out of conviction, and harmonizes with conviction.

The unbelief which robs a man of peace, and power, and prevents him coming into a living association with CHRIST is not intellectual doubt or intellectual difficulty. The unbelief that shuts a man away from CHRIST is that man's refusal to act upon the conviction that has gripped his soul.

And consequently the belief that saves is an action of the will, a decision to act upon a conclusion reached.

That is the work of GOD. It is the initial work of GOD, because CHRIST was the Sent of GOD. GOD's new point of departure in human history; and as men accept that fact and yield to Him, they are working the work of GOD. The Kingdom of GOD is revealed in CHRIST, as to its King, and as to its laws; and is administered by CHRIST through the mystery of His work for saving men; and as men believe into Him and yield to Him, they work the work of GOD.

That is the action that brings men into touch with all the redemptive forces which He has provided for their remaking.

The final words meet a difficulty which is often presented, and our Lord was perfectly clear about it. It has to do with the question of proof. JESUS was in Jerusalem, and the men of light and leading, who in this were quite sincere, had listened to Him, and had said, Whence hath this man the letters, the *grammata*, never having learned?

They recognized the note of the schools of learning, and they said, How did He obtain it? They were questioning His authority, and found themselves face to face with a scholastic problem. To that enquiry He replied: "**My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself**" (John 7:16-17).

If with all reverence I may change the words of CHRIST, in an attempt to interpret the spirit of them, He said: You men who are trying to solve the mystery of the *grammata* which you have detected in My teaching, hear this; you have been listening, not to human wisdom, but to eternal truth, which GOD has given Me to speak to men. If you are face to face with difficulty about Me, then put what I say to the test of doing it; and if you will thus obey the thing I say, even though you are in intellectual difficulty about Me, you will find that the thing I say is of GOD, and not of Myself.

This is a supreme word.

This is CHRIST's challenge to all men, men of scholarly attainments, men of intellectual difficulties, men who are holding aloof from the Christian fact because they cannot place the Christian Saviour. To all such He says, Postpone your discussion concerning My Person; do what I tell you; and in the doing you will discover whether what I say is Divine or human. In effect CHRIST says, I am content to abide by that proof in the case of the human soul.

No man has ever accepted that challenge of JESUS CHRIST honestly, and yielded himself to it completely, without the issue being that presently, - not immediately perhaps, for the specters of the mind are not laid immediately - but presently, the man so obeying has to come back to the CHRIST, saying with Thomas, "**My Lord and my God**" (John 20:28).

Only there must be no trifling with the condition. There must be obedience to the things He says.

What is the first? Repent towards the Kingdom of GOD. And I will content myself with that. CHRIST stands confronting men and He says, Your conceptions are wrong. They are self-centered, materialized, earthly, mean. Change your mind. Put GOD upon the throne, believe in Him, seek His will, conform your life volitionally to His holiness; repent towards His government. And then He, representing GOD, calls men to trust Him, to let Him lead them step by step, to let Him interpret to them the meaning of the will of GOD; He asks them to receive from Him, with the humility of children, grace that will enable them to obey.

Do you say

“Dim tracts of time divide?”

Then I ask you,

“Can time undo what once was true?”

In this very hour, face CHRIST, and say, I cannot make up my mind about Thee, O Christ. I am not certain whether these theologians and school men and expositors are right; but I am coming after Thee, to put Thy teaching to the test of obedience. If you will do so, then I shall meet you on some fair morning in this world or the next, and you will say, I proved Him by my obedience, and at last I crowned Him my Lord and my GOD.

Repentance towards GOD; faith towards the Lord JESUS CHRIST; and that obedience which is the issue of repentance towards GOD, and faith towards our Lord JESUS CHRIST; are, according to the teaching of CHRIST, the conditions upon fulfillment of which men may appropriate the perfect salvation of the perfect Saviour.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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