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KATHARINE E. COMAN

THE EXCELLENCE OF GOODNESS.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN

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BY THEODORE PARKER,

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S E R M O N .

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“AND THE KING SAID, HE IS A GOOD MAN.”

AT the bottom of all things there is a Law. Things are made to act in a certain manner, and not otherwise. Thus the rock is made to be solid and the water to be fluid, under certain conditions, and not the reverse. This Law, here and everywhere, is perfect. It is the work of God. All Law is the will of God ; it is God in action, for God is not a mere abstraction, but is concreted in part, so to say, in the world we look upon. He is not only the other side of the universe, but here ; here and now ; as much here as anywhere. He is immanent in creation, and yet transcends creation. Suppose all created worlds were struck out of existence, God does not cease to be ; does not cease to be *here*, for He transcends all the created worlds. But they cannot exist without God. You cannot, without a contradiction, conceive of them devoid of God, for he is immanent therein. Without his continual presence to preserve, as well as his transient presence to create, they would cease to be. Indeed the existence of these things is, as it were, but a continual creation.

This being so ; God being in all, in essence no less than in power, active in each — smallest and greatest — and active too with no let nor hindrance of his Infinity, the World becomes a Revelation of God, so far as these material things

can disclose and reveal the Infinite One. But these are to us only a revelation of something kindred to qualities that are awakened in ourselves. Hence all men do not see the same things revealed therein. The World, or any the smallest particle thereof, reveals God's Power, his Wisdom and his Goodness. It reveals these attributes in 'just that order to mankind. In the history of our consciousness we come, in the order of time, to understand Force sooner than Wisdom, and that before Goodness. The natural man is before the spiritual man. Mankind represents in its large process the same things which you and I represent in our smaller story. In a few years of our early life we must climb through all the stages which the human race has passed by in its sixty centuries; else we are not up to the level that Mankind has reached in our day.

Watching the progress of ideas in history, we see that Mankind began as we do, and goes on as we have gone, and first became conscious of God's Power; next of his Wisdom; of his Goodness last of all. We see out of us only what we are internally prepared to see; for seeing depends on the harmony between the object without and your own condition within. Hence no two of us see the same things in the sun, and moon and stars; hence some men see only God's Power in the world, others his Wisdom also, and others still his Goodness crowning all the rest.

Had we some active quality as much transcending Goodness, as that surpasses physical force, we should see in the world, I doubt not, still further revelations of God; qualities higher than Goodness. In Him there may be, must be, other abilities greater than Goodness, only you and I can now have no conception thereof, not having analogous qualities active in ourselves. It is by no means to be supposed that our ideas of God exhaust the character and nature of God; nor even that the material world reveals now to us all of Him which it might reveal had we a higher nature, or a larger development

of the nature we have. The limit of our finite comprehension is no bound to the Infinite God. If a Bear were to look at a watch, he might notice the glitter of the metal, perhaps attend to its constant click. But the *contrivance* of the watch he would not see, nor yet its *use*, not having in himself the qualities to appreciate, or even apprehend that contrivance or that use. How inadequate a conception must he have both of the watch and the man who made it ! So it is with us in our application of the World, and its Maker. We are all in this respect but as Bears.

Now men admire in God what they admire in themselves. It is so unavoidably. You may see three periods in man's history. In the first *bodily force* is most highly prized. Here the Hero is the strongest man ; he who can run the swiftest, and strike the hardest ; is fearless and cruel. In that state, men conceive mostly of a God of Force. He is a man of War. He thunders and lightens. He rides on the wind ; is painted with thunderbolts in his hand. He sends the Plague and Famine. The wheels of his chariot rattle in war. What represents Force is a type of Him. In some primitive nations their name of God meant only the STRONG — the POWERFUL.

Then as men advance a little, there comes a period in which *intellectual power* or Wisdom, is prized above bodily force. Men esteem its superiority, for they see that one wise head is a match for many strong bodies. It can command ten weak men to overcome a strong one, whom singly they dared not touch ; but no aggregation of foolish men, however numerous, can ever outwit a single wise man, for no combination of many little follies can ever produce wisdom. In this stage, he is the hero who has the most intellectual power ; knows the secrets of nature ; has skill to rule men ; speaks wise sayings. Saul, the tallest man, has given place to Solomon, the wisest man. The popular conception of God changes to suit this stage of growth. Men see His Wis-

dom ; they see it in the birth of a child, in the course of the sun and moon ; in the return of the seasons ; in the instinct of the emmet or the ostrich : God works the wonders of nature. Wisdom is the chief attribute in this age ascribed to God. *Who shall teach Him ?* says the contemplative man of this age — where the sage of a former day would have asked, *who can overcome Him ?*

There comes yet another period, in which *moral power* is appreciated. He is the hero who sees moral truth ; walks uprightly ; subordinates his private will to the universal law ; tells the truth ; is reverent and pious ; loves goodness and lives it. The Saint has become the Hero ; he rules not by superior power of Hand, or superior power of Head, but by superior power of Heart — by Justice, Truth and Love ; in one word, by Righteousness. “The Queen of Sheba came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon,” said Jesus, “but behold a greater than Solomon is here.” In this period, men form a higher conception of God. Men believe that he is not only wise, but good ; He loves men ; He loves justice, goodness, truth ; demands goodness and not sacrifice ; He keeps his word and is an upright God. He is no longer regarded as the God of the Mosaic law, jealous, revengeful, exacting ; but as a Father of infinite goodness. In one word, God is Love. He is not a man of war, nor a worker of wonders barely, but a Saviour. The Jewish name of God — Jehovah — does not appear in the New Testament ! Read the Old Testament and New Testament in connection, you will see this twofold progress in the state of man, and these divergent conceptions of God. However, you will not find them distinctly separated, as in this sketch ; you must estimate them by their centre and type, not by their circumference, for in nature and in human affairs there are no *classes* of things, but only individuals, which we group into classes for convenience in understanding their relations one to another. But these facts are suggestive to such as think.

It was said there is a Law at the bottom of all things ; that this law is the will of God, who is immanent in nature, and yet transcends nature ; that it is God in action. The same rule holds good in relation to mankind. Here also is a law. God is immanent in man as much as in nature, yet as much transcending man. This is a doctrine of the Bible, and appears in various forms in all the more spiritual sects of Christians. But we are conscious and free, having power to keep the law, or, to a certain extent, to violate it ; we are not merely to be governed as the material world — but to be *self-governed*. As conscious and free beings it is our duty to keep this law ; to keep it knowingly and voluntarily, not merely because we *should* as duty, but, also and no less, because we *would* as desire ; thus bringing the whole of our nature into obedience to God. This our duty is our welfare too. Now Goodness is the keeping of this law ; the keeping thereof knowingly and joyfully, with the hand, with the head, with the heart. Goodness is conformity with God in the matter of self-government. In its highest form it is a *conscious* conformity therewith, and so is Religion. The good man puts himself in a line with God ; in unison with Him. He accords with God, and works after where God has worked before. In the matter of self-government he is consciously one with God ; for God's law acts through him, and by him, with no let nor hindrance.

Now we do not always appreciate the excellence of Goodness. We seldom believe in its power. Mankind has been struggling here on the earth six thousand years — perhaps much longer, — who knows ? Yet even now, few men see more than signs of God's Power and Wisdom in the world. Most men stop at the first. The force of muscles they understand better than the force of mind, and that better than the excellence of justice, uprightness, truth and love. So it has become a political maxim to trust a man of able intellect, sooner than a just and good man of humbler mind.

Most men, perhaps, tremble before a God who can destroy the world to-morrow, and send babes new-born to endless hell, far more than they rejoice in a God who rules by perfect justice, truth and love, who to-day blesses whatever he has made, and will at last bless them all more abundantly than thought can fancy or heart can wish.

We bow before the man of great capabilities of thought, of energetic mind, of deep creative genius. Yet is the good man greater than the wise man — taking wisdom in its common sense of intellectual power, capacity of thought ; — greater and nobler far ! He rests on a greater idea. He lives in a larger and loftier sentiment. Yet I would not undervalue intellectual power. Who of us does not reverence a man that has the understanding of things ; whose capacious mind grasps up the wonders of this earth, its animals and plants, its stones and trees ; who measures the heavens, and tells the wonders of the stars, the open secret of the universe ; knows the story of man ; is possessed of the ideas that rule the world ; has gathered the wisdom of the past, and feels that of the present throb mightily within his heart ? Who does not honor that capaciousness of thought, which sees events in their causes ; can rule a nation as you your household, forecasting its mighty destinies and that for centuries of years, and moulding the fate of millions yet to come ? Who does not appreciate the man who can speak what all feel, but feel dumbly, and can't express ; who enchants us with great thoughts which we know to be our own, but could not say them ; the man who holds the crowd, or the nation, breathless, pausing at his thought, and sways them to and fro as sway the waters underneath the moon ? Who will not honor the poetic mind which tells the tale of our life, and paints to us in rhythmic speech the rocks, the trees, the wind singing melodious in every pine, the brook melting adown its sinuous course ; which tells anew the story of our hopes and fears, our passions, tears and loves, and paints the man so

very like, he trembles but to recognize himself? Who does not honor the man of vast mind, that concentrates in himself the ideas and sentiments of an age, and shoots them forth far on into the darkness of the coming time, a stream of light, dazzling and electric too, where millions come and light their little torch, and kindle with its touch their household fire? I would not undervalue this power of thought, the mind's creative skill. It is not the meanest ambition to seek to rise above the mass of men in this, and rule not o'er their bodies but o'er their minds, by power of thought, and live a king for many a hundred years. It is the last infirmity of noble men. There is a magnificence, in force of mind which may well bid us all look up to admire, and bow down to do homage. It is vast and awful even when alone, not wedded with a noble heart. I would be the last to undervalue this.

But it is little compared to the power of Goodness—the resting, living in those ever fair ideas which we call Justice, Right, Religion, Truth,—it is very little and very poor. In time we confess it is so of each great, but wicked man of thought. Men who stood aghast, awed by the terrific mind of Cæsar, of Cromwell, of Napoleon, come at length to see that a single good man, who conforms with God, yields to no temptation, harbors no revenge,—not railing when mocked at, not paying back scorn for scorn; who is able to stand alone amid the desertion of friends, and the ribald mockery of the public mind, serenely lifting up a forehead blameless and unabashed to men and God; he who lives in the law of the Just, the Good, the Holy and the True—he is greater than all Cæsars, all Cromwells, all Napoleons. His power is real, not depending on the accident of a throne or an army, and as the most ancient Heaven, is permanent and strong, resting on the same foundation with them—the law of God. He lives in his undying powers.

Ask yourself what is it that makes you admire this or that great man? Is it what is highest in you, or what is lowest?

Is it your best quality? If not, then is your admiration not of the best things in man, for the quality you admire in him is only an enlargement of the same quality in yourself. Your little honors his much, and if your little is not of your best, no more is his much. It is dangerous to admire what it is not safe to love.

Now all things in nature league with the good man ; her symbols and her soothing influence are on virtue's side. So are the highest sentiments that flash as lightning on your mind in some great hour — the sunrise of the soul. Goodness unites all men. It hinders no other man's goodness, for it is not selfish ; rests on nothing private, personal to you or me, but on what is universal, patent to the world. It is Badness that separates ; makes man afraid of his brother, jealous, and exclusive. Badness rests on somewhat private, and personal to you and me. It seeks its own ; only its own welfare. There cannot be a community of misers and cut-throats. They must lay aside their miserly and murderous principles before they can live together. Birds of prey never go in flocks ; they are grasping, each takes before the other. It is a social nature that unites in groups the harmless sheep, the ox, the horse. It is not this, but famine, stern necessity, that crowds hyænas and wolves together into bands, when they would bring down some beast of noble mark. Spiders cannot work together, harmonious as silk worms. They bite and devour one another.¹

When a good man commences his career of Goodness, skeptics will doubt and bigots will oppose him. These men have no faith in Goodness, only in cunning or in force. But the great heart of mankind will beat with him. Even men indented to sin will forsake their old tyrants, and welcome him

¹ It is said that some French philosophers, irreligiously disregarding this hint of nature, shut up a great quantity of spiders, in hopes of obtaining a material finer than silk, and in quantities proportionate to the spider's energy. But the spiders quarreled more than they spun, and in a few days there was but one spider left.

to their arms, confessing their former life a mistake and a grievous curse. By-and-by the world rolls round to his side, and the longer it stands the more will his ideas prevail, for the world is going a pilgrimage towards the Truth.

The secret history of the world is a contest between ideas of Goodness and Badness. We sometimes think it is all over with Goodness ; but it gets the better continually. What is bad dies out, perishing slowly in the ages. What is good lives forever. A truth is never obsolete. All nature is really leagued against selfishness ; for God is the author of nature, and *there* is no Devil. A selfish nation digs its own grave ; if strong it digs it all the deeper, and the more secure. That is the lesson which Rome teaches the world. A selfish party in the nation does the same thing. A selfish man in society seems to succeed, but his success is ruin. He has poisoned his own bread. For all that is ill got he must pay back tenfold. God is not mocked. The man laughs that he has escaped a duty. Poor, blind man ! A curse has fallen on him ; it cleaves to his bones. Justice has feet like wool, so noiseless you hear not her steps ; but her hands are hands of iron, and where God lays them down it is not in man to lift them up.

A moral man, from the height of his idea, looks down on the world and sees the cause, process and result of all this. He sees that the bad man has conjured up a fiend to stand always beside him, corrupting his dainties ; while all the foes that attack a good man are by the magic wand of his Goodness, transformed to angels which encamp about his dwelling-place to guard him from Sloth and Pride. For all good actions, sentiments and thoughts a tenfold recompense is paid him here. We all know the history of Cæsar, the fortunes of Cromwell, the story of Napoleon — men that towered over the world as giants of vast intellectual force of comparatively little goodness ; of little power of heart. What if one had the head of Napoleon, and the heart of Fenelon ;

if such an one should rise amongst us ; should be a senator of these United States, their president ; what an effect would it have on us ; on the nations of the world ; on millions yet unborn ! What a monument would he build — that should last perennially fair when the Pyramids shall have crumbled into dust ; what a furrow of light would his name leave behind him in the world ! How would he elevate our notions of a man — yes, our notions of God ! To be ruled by such an one would be the beginning of freedom. What advance should we make in the qualities of a man ! Nature would be on his side, and God none the less. If it be not the meanest ambition to rule over men's minds by the power of thought — but a great excellency, as the world goes, — what shall be said of the desire to live in men's hearts by the magic of Goodness ; the ambition to lead all men to be brothers, to conform with God, to live by his Law, and be blessed by the freedom of obedience, and so be one with Him ? Why, words cannot paint the excellence of that zeal of a seraphic soul.

Goodness is the service of God. The good Heart, the good Life are the best, the only sacrifice that He demands. When men saw mainly the power of God, trembling thereat, they made sacrifice of things dearest to them — to bribe their God, as to appease a cruel king. “Come not empty-handed before thy God,” said the priest. Even now, many a man who sees also the Wisdom of God, and bows before Him as the soul of thought, will sacrifice reason, conscience and good sense, as Abraham would offer Isaac, and as Solomon slew sheep and goats. They think God loves tears and hates smiles, so they pay him with gloom, gloomy Sundays and gloomy weeks, and most despairing and melancholy prayers. How many think Religion to consist of this ! Belief is the sign of their Christianity and its only proof ! No doubt there are, practically speaking, two parts of Religion : Piety the

sentiment, Morality the expression, a revelation of that sentiment, as the World is a revelation of God. Piety is the in-ness of Morality, as Morality is the out-ness of Piety. No doubt there are two parts of service to God, namely, Faith and Love within the man, Works and Goodness without the man. If faithful Love be in the man, works of Goodness must needs appear in his manifested life. If not, who shall assure us that Faith and Love exist within? A good tree is known by its good fruit. It is of more importance that the tree be good, than it be called by a good name.

Now one of the sacramental sins of the Christian Churches, has been to lay the main stress on expressions of faith, on Devotion, or Belief. If they laid the main stress on real Piety that were well, for it would be making the tree good, when of course its fruit would be also good. Piety is love of God with the mind and heart; he who has this must conform to God in his self-government, so far as he knows God's will. But Piety cannot be forced. It eludes the eye. It will not be commanded nor obey the voice of the charmer. So the churches early insisted that Belief and Devotion were the main things of Christianity. They told men what to believe — how to be devout. They gave men a creed for their belief, and a form or a rite for their devotion. The whole thing was brought into the outer court — placed under the eye of the Priest. Behold Christianity made easy; the Power of God and the Wisdom of God, and God's Goodness too become a stumbling-block and foolishness to the Christians themselves! None was accounted a Christian but a Conformist to the ways of man. He only was a Christian who believed the popular creed, and complied with the popular form. The Absolute Religion of Christ had passed away from the churches; the sectarianism of the priesthood had usurped its place. Goodness was cheated of its due. In the name of Christ was it taught that a good man might be damned; he had kept the Law of God, as reason and conscience make

it known ; he had been faithful to God and true and loving to man ; he had believed all things that to him were credible, and done prayerfully the duty of a man. “What of that,” said the priest, “he has not believed nor worshiped with the rest of men. Hell waiteth for such.” Would to God I could say that these things only *were* ; that they *are* not. It has for many a hundred years been a heresy in the christian churches, to believe that a man goes to heaven on account of his goodness, his righteousness, or is acceptable to God because he walks manfully by the light God gives him! *Has been*, did I say? Far worse, it is so now! It is a heresy to believe it now in all popular and recognized churches of Christendom! A creed and a rite are of course but external — only the gold of the altar — not the altar sanctifying the gold. Once they were symbols, perhaps, and signs of all good things to some pious man. They helped him to commune with God. They aided him to grow. Losing their first estate, to many they become not stimulants of goodness, but substitutes for it. The man rests at the symbol and learns no more!

It was so in Judea when Christ came into the world. No nation of old time surpassed the Jews in their concern for external rites of devotion. No modern nation has equaled them in this. But they were not a good and moral nation ; they were not then, and are not now. They were always hated — not without some reason. Let us do them justice for their marvellous merits, but not be blind to their faults. Christ found that in the popular faith Goodness and Religion were quite different things. Men thought that God was to be served by rites and beliefs. So the priests had taught, making religion consist in what was useless to God and man ; — a wretched science with the few, a paltry ceremony with the mass. Not so did the Prophets teach, for Priests and Prophets are never agreed. Christ fell back on Goodness. He demanded this, he set forth its greatness, its

power, in his words and in his life. He encumbered no man with creeds, nor rites. He said, "He that doeth the will of my Father shall know of the doctrine." He summed up the essentials of Religion in a few things, a right heart, and a right life, in Piety and Goodness. He knew they would extend, and that swiftly, to many things. Moses and the Law might go their way; they had authority to bind no man. His words were their own evidence and proof; moral truth *is* its own witness. He had authority. Whence came it? From the Scribes and the Priests? They hated him. From tradition, Moses, the Old Testament? Quite as little. He put them behind him. He had authority because he conformed to God's Law, in his mind and in his heart, and in his life. So God spoke through him; inspiration came; and though his friends forsook him, and Church and State rose in tumult, clamorous for his overthrow; though the world turned against him, and he stood alone, he was not alone — better than Friends, and Church, and State, and World, better than twelve legions of Angels, the Father was with him, and he fell not!

Even publicans and harlots welcomed him. They did not love Sin. They had been deluded into its service; they found it a hard master. Joyfully they deserted that hopeless Armada to sail the seas with God, soon as one came who put the heart, conscience, reason on religion's side, speaking with an authority they felt before they saw, showing that religion was real and dear. Humble men saw the mystery of Godliness, they felt the power of Goodness which streamed forth from their brother's heart of fire. They started to found a Church on Goodness, on Absolute Religion, little knowing what they did. Alas it was a poor Church which men founded in that great name, though the best the world ever saw; it was little compared with the ideas of Jesus; little and poor compared with the excellence of Goodness and the power of real Religion.

Some day there will be churches built in which it shall be taught that the only outward service God asks is Goodness, and Truth the only creed ; that a Divine Life — piety in the heart, and Morality in the hand — is the only real worship. Men will use symbols or not, as they like ; perhaps will still cling to such as have helped us hitherto ; perhaps leave them all behind, and have communion with man in work, and word, and joyful sympathy, with God through the elements of earth, and air, and water, and the sky ; or in a serener hour, without these elements, come nearer yet to Him. But in that day will men forget Jesus — the son of Joseph, the carpenter, whom the priests slew — as a madman and an infidel ; but whom the world has worshiped as a God ? Will his thought, his sentiments, his influence pass away ? No ! oh no. What rests on the ideas of God, lasts with those ideas. Power shall vanish ; glory shall pass away ; England and America may become as Nineveh and Babylon. Yes, the incessant hand of Time may smooth down the ruggedness of the Alleghany and the Andes, but so long as man is man must these truths of Jesus live ; Religion be the love of man, the love of God. Men will not name Jesus God ; they may not call him Master, but the world's Teacher. They will love him as their great Brother, who taught the Truth, and lived the life of Heaven here ; who broke the fetters of the oppressed, and healed the bruises of the sick, and blessed the souls of all. Then will Goodness appear more transcendent, and he will be deemed the best Christian who is most like Christ ; most excelling in Truth, Piety and Goodness. They will not be the preachers who bind, but they who loose mankind ; who are full of truth ; who live great noble lives, and walk with Goodness and with God. Worship will be fresh and natural as the rising sun — beautiful like that, and full of promise too. Truth for the creed ; Goodness for the form ; Love for the baptism — shall we wait for that ; with folded arms ? No, brothers, no. Let us live as if it were so now. Earth shall be blessed and heaven ours.

