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*OUR RECEPTION OF THE TRUTH OF CHRIST'S
MESSAGE, A PART OF OUR MORAL
PROBATION.*

A SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE

THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

ON THE

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 9th, 1856.

BY

SAMUEL, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD,

CHANCELLOR OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER OF THE GARTER, AND LORD
HIGH ALMONER TO THE QUEEN.

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M DCCC LVI.

A SERMON

&c.

ST. JOHN iii. 12.

If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

It is scarcely possible to exaggerate the importance of these words of our blessed Lord, placed as they are at the opening of His ministry, as an intimation to His Church throughout all time of the difficulties and dangers to the hearers of His words which must attend His revelation of the Truth. For here is the great Teacher from Heaven, the co-equal Sharer with the Everlasting Father of all the counsels of eternity, casting forward His gaze over all the generations of men to whom His truth should be proposed; foreseeing the multitude whom the working of that spirit which asked, "How can these things be?" would lead to reject the truth; and in the sorrow of that sight sighing forth these accents of an unspeakable compassion: "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?"

It is, then, to the caution which these words convey, as specially applying to these times of restless investigation, and to you as to men brought here in great part that your intellects may be developed, and who through that very development will be the more exposed to the danger against which our Lord would warn you, that I would call your attention this morning.

And first, I would have you observe that in these words it is implied by our Lord, that whether a man will or will not believe in the message which is thus sent to him by God, is a part of his moral probation here.

For our Lord here plainly declares that there is in men under certain circumstances an incapacity of believing them ; and a very little consideration will shew us that it is to a self-created moral incapacity that He points. For the disbelief, and so the non-reception, of any message coming with authority, must arise from some fault either in the bearer of that message,—or in him who sends it,—or in its receiver.

In this case, the Messenger being the Eternal Son of God, God's Divine Word, there *can* be in the delivery of the message nothing to prevent its reception. Neither can there be in Him, the Father of Lights, the All-wise and Almighty Creator, who knoweth whereof we to whom He sends the message are made.

It remains, then, that the cause of its not being received must be in the receiver.

And then, further, the cause must be in the receiver, not in virtue of any natural inability to receive the message, but in virtue of that as to which he has, under the circumstances in which he is placed, power either to receive or not to receive it. For to send a message which he to whom it is sent is incapable of receiving, implies fault in the sender, not in the receiver.

The fault, then, in the unbelieving receiver of this message from God must lie in that part of himself over which he has power, and not in that over which he has not power: that is, it must lie, not in any necessary incapacity,—as, for instance, in any intellectual inability to receive the message, (except so far forth as it is in his own power to obtain or to lose such intellectual ability,)—but in an incapacity which it is in his own power, under the circumstances in which he is placed, to cause to continue or to remove.

Further, it must, morally, lie in his power *alone*. For if it were possible, consistently with the object of sending it, for the sender or the deliverer of the message, by any variation in the message, or in the mode of its delivery, to remove the difficulty of its reception, just in that degree must the fault of its non-reception be in the sender, or in the bearer, and not in him to whom it is sent. It follows, therefore, from the perfections of the Eternal Father, who sends, and of the Co-eternal Son, who bears, the message of Revelation to man, that the cause of its non-reception by man must lie wholly in

man, under the conditions in which that message reaches him ; that is to say, that whether man will receive the message or not, is a part of that trial of his free agency which, under the continual acting of God's Holy Spirit, constitutes his probation here : and when our Lord asked the question, "How shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" He sighed forth His infinite compassion over His fallen creatures, who would, as He foresaw in the mystery of their trial, under all the assistances of His Spirit, which should make them able to believe, if they would be made able, still, to their own ruin, wilfully refuse to accept His message.

And this we may see more clearly still if we now take into consideration the subject, the circumstances, and the matter of this message.

For *the subject* of the revelation is the being and nature of God and of Man ; their mutual relation, the causes and the consequences of that relation, and the acts God has wrought to modify and change it. Now a message concerning these *cannot* be a set of bare, abstract propositions ; for the declaration and admission of these mutual relations must reach to the whole series of affections and actions in which those relations embody and express themselves. The message, that is to say, must concern the whole life of him to whom it is sent, both in his outward actions and in his inward affections ; so that here, again, we must conclude, that whether he receive it in this manner or in that, is really the same question, as how he answers

to his moral probation. And this we may see even more plainly still, if we consider *the circumstances* under which this message professes to be sent. For it purports to come from the All-perfect Creator to a fallen creature, unable of himself, in consequence of that fall, to receive it, but who shall be made able to receive it, if he seeks earnestly from Him who sends it, the aid which he needs to make him capable of receiving it.

So that here, in the alleged circumstances of the message, it is plainly declared that it depends upon the will of the receiver whether or no he receive it aright. That is, again, that his reception of it is a distinct part of his moral probation. And so even more strongly still does *the matter* of the message declare.

For its essential declaration is, that the creature who receives it has fallen from his own perfection by seeking for independence ; and that the first condition of his restoration is the abandonment of His self-will, and returning, as one unable to help himself, for all things to the Person, and will, and law, and work of His Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

Now such a revelation of Himself as this by the Creator and Redeemer may, (as we know that in fact it does,) contradict in ten thousand different ways the different desires of different men. It may, (as we know that it does,) require purity of the man who loves impurity, meekness of the proud and passionate, strictness of the soft and luxurious ; and it may be rejected by the man for the sake of

any one of these particular affections which he would, by its admission, be required to mortify : and in these cases we all, I suppose, see at once, that the rejection of the message is a simple failing in the man's moral trial. And yet, as it is most important to notice, no one of these does reach down to the very true and central part of man's probation. For the essence of that probation is, whether he will submit his will to the will of God ; and of the refusal to do this, there may easily be a far more intense and malignant form than that which is embodied in the unlawful submission of the man to any one or more of these particular affections. For from any of these (though, if they continue to hold him from God, they must destroy him) he may, with comparative easiness, be drawn off ; and, through God's grace, seeing the foul degradation from which he has been raised, cast himself in heart-broken gratitude before his Deliverer, to sit for ever at His feet, clothed, and in his right mind. But there are those to whom an entrance into the kingdom of heaven is more difficult than for publicans and harlots. And these are they in whom the reign of self is strongest,—who reject the message, not because it requires them to cast off this or that separable accident of their present life, but because it requires them to bow themselves before God ; to receive His Revelation as the Truth ; not to raise a single question concerning it ; not to modify and adjust it according to their notions of what is true, or what is good, or what is be-

fitting; but simply to receive it as true, as *the Truth*, because He has sent it to them, and requires their reception of it. In these cases the Tempter of man does really, as some skilful general, contract, it may be greatly, his lines of defence, abandon many outworks, and concentrate in the citadel the whole strength of his forces, in order that he may securely occupy that stronghold of the heart; in order that the rebellious will may, with the least exposure of itself to external disturbance, possess the inward centre of the unconverted soul.

Here then, again, we may see that at the very central point of man's probation rests the question of his receiving or rejecting the message of Salvation.

Nor is it in any real sense true, that to hold this doctrine is to make men's salvation depend upon their intellectual capacity. For the part of the intellect herein is to comprehend the propositions submitted to it in the message; and except in that degree in which this power of comprehension is itself the result of moral action, there is in this simple comprehension of the propositions submitted to him no question of man's moral probation. God has so constructed the message of salvation brought us by Christ, that it is indeed fitted in all its essential propositions for the comprehension of men of all degrees of mere intellectual capacity. If it were not so, the fault of the non-acceptance of the message by those for whose intellectual capacity it were

unfit, would rest with the sender ; which, as we have seen before, would be to impute imperfection to Him who is all-perfect. But the rejection of the message in these cases results, not from a non-comprehension of its propositions, but from a perception that those propositions contradict the pre-conceived notions of him who rejects them, and so implies in him who rejects it a refusal to yield up those notions at the bidding of the supreme Lord ; that is, the rejection is an assertion of the supremacy of self-will of the creature against the supremacy of the sovereign will of the Creator, and so is an act of concentrated rebellion against His rule.

Here, then, we may reach a still further conclusion than that the acceptance of Christ's message is a part of our moral probation ; for we may see that it is not only *a* part, but it is the very chiefest part, of that trial, and so we may come more fully to understand the meaning of our Lord's words: " If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" For here is manifestly a contrast of two separate parts of our probation. " If," He says, " ye fail in receiving aright My teaching concerning earthly things, much more must ye fail in receiving it concerning heavenly." Much more manifestly, because the difficulty there is greater ; because there you reach a higher point of your trial ; because, for a successful issue in it, you need a heart more entirely subdued by greater measures of grace to make you a submissive hearer. And now what are the sets of

truths which our Lord describes under these two heads? The 'earthly things' were manifestly the working of His Spirit upon man in the mystery of his regeneration; the mixed operations wherein God on the one hand, and man on the other, are concerned; and as to which, as affecting man, man might, comparatively speaking, have some natural insight. What, then, the 'heavenly things' *must be* it is easy to see: they are those which concern God *only*:—His nature, His attributes, His operations in heavenly places; as to which, as lying altogether without the range of man's observation and experience, except so far only as God reveals them to him, man could have no knowledge. And, in point of fact, it is to these that our Lord's discourse at once passes on; for He proceeds to speak of His own coming down from heaven, and of the wonders in the eternal counsels with which that coming down from heaven was connected · of His death upon the Cross: of the work of His Atonement. "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

It is, then, specially as to the simple acceptance of the message of God on these points, and pre-eminently as to the work of His Atonement, that

our blessed Lord here represents the moral probation of mankind as being concentrated.

But there is one further point on which we must touch, before we can bring all that has been said to a directly practical conclusion ; and that is, wherein consists, as to this revelation of Himself and of His work, a simple acceptance of the message of the Lord.

Now to answer this question aright, we must, my brethren, however elementary it may at first sight appear, remind ourselves that the message professes to be only a partial revelation of the actual truth. That it states from the first, that, in this state of our being, we are unable to comprehend the *whole*, and therefore, that only a part is communicated to us,—“For now we see through a glass darkly :” “For now we know in part^a.” Now it is, so far as we can see, the necessary consequence of the partial or incomplete knowledge of a subject, that there should appear to us to be in it contradictions, which a fuller knowledge of the whole matter would reconcile. It follows, therefore, that it is essential to a simple reception of this message, which professes to communicate to us only a part of the whole subject of which it treats, that we should not (for any apparent contradiction between its separate communications) reject the most natural meaning of any portion of it, in order to reconcile these apparent discrepancies. That if, for example, it appears to us that the revelation of the infinite love of the Eternal

^a 1 Cor. xiii. 12, and 9.

Father towards His fallen creature is at variance with the revelation that the death, as Man, of the Co-eternal Son was necessary to turn aside His anger from the sinner ; that we must not, if we would receive the message simply, explain away the strict and natural sense of this latter declaration, in order that we may create for ourselves a manifest consistency with the former, and so secure, as we think, for the message, an agreement in its separate parts ; but on the contrary, that we must simply accept each of these propositions in their fullest extent, and refer their apparent contradiction to the partial nature of our own knowledge. Here, then, is one essential part of a simple reception of the message, that we are ready to receive as *true*, even its apparent contradictions, humbly referring them to the imperfection of our own knowledge.

And closely connected herewith is another act of submission which is essential to a simple receiving of the message. For on this its heavenly side it professes to reveal Him, as to whom, except so far only as He reveals Himself to us, we can know nothing ; and further, even that revelation which He has vouchsafed to us, does not undertake to declare Him as He is in His own essential Being, but only so much of His unapproachable glory as we can receive, through the manifestation of the Incarnate Son. For so much is plainly declared in the words : “ No man hath seen God at any time. The only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.”

To all created intelligences, indeed, even to the highest and the purest it may be, as St. Chrysostom declares, this, the absolute fountain of Godhead, is unapproachable and unrevealed:—"God, in the very reality of His Nature, not only have the Prophets never beheld, but not even Angels or Archangels. For inquire of the Angels, and they will make thee no reply concerning God's essence: but,—'Glory to God in the highest,' is all their song; 'and on earth, peace; good-will towards men!' Or, if of Cherubim and Seraphim thou desirest to learn aught, the mysterious strain of thrice-Holy, is all the answer thou wilt get, and the assurance that 'Heaven and earth are full of His glory.' Nay, interrogate the heavenly powers, and thou wilt learn nothing save that their one occupation is God's *praise*^b."

Assuredly, whatever be the beatific vision which is granted to these elder-born sons of light, on us, poor fallen children of the earth, who could bear no more, He has bestowed but this partial revelation of Himself. From Scripture, (remarks St. Gregory,) "it is plainly given us to understand that, so long as we are in this mortal state, we can see God only through the medium of certain images, not in the reality of His own nature. A soul influenced by the grace of the Spirit may see God through certain figures; but unto His absolute Essence, it cannot attain. Hence it is that Jacob, who testifies that he saw God, saw Him only in the form of an Angel. Hence it is that Moses,

^b From the 31th, of Chrysostom's *Homilies on St. John*.

who spake unto God face to face, ‘as a man speaketh unto his friend,’ exclaims, in the midst of that very colloquy,—‘Shew me Thyself plainly, that I may see Thee!’ meaning that he ardently desired to see Him in the glory of His own infinite nature^c,—Him whom he had seen as yet only under certain images^d.” From which it follows that all the revelation of God is to us an accommodation to our weakness. That we see not *Him*, but such a representation of Himself as conveys to our minds the highest measure of truth concerning Him which we are as yet capable of receiving. From which it follows, further, that we cannot deduce from this language of accommodation more than itself conveys; that we cannot reason backward from it to some abstract truth behind it; that we cannot make allowances, and strike them off to obtain some clearer or more definite image of the truth,—all of which we might do if the object of our adoration were Himself visible by us, and so we were able to correct our own first deductions by others’ observations: because that so to treat the message is really to seek to improve it; is to endeavour to put it in a more distinct form than it has been put by Him that sent it; and so again is to impute imperfection to the All-perfect. For that if it be, as it professes to be, not the abstract truth, but that representation of it which conveys to us the greatest amount of truth

^c Exodus xxxiii. 18 to 23.

^d From Gregory the Great’s *Moral Exposition of the Book of Job*, lib. xviii. c. 28. -

we are capable of receiving ; that the taking it strictly in its most literal meaning is to receive it simply ; and that to make deductions from it, or to introduce qualifications of it, is really to impute imperfection to it, and to imply that in that form to which we reduce it, it is a better vehicle of the truth than it was in the state in which it was originally given to us,—instead of seeing, that if it were thus capable of improvement, it would originally have been given to us in that form, and not in this.

And now, I think, we may see clearly why our Lord represents the simple receiving His message, when in it He declares to us “heavenly things,” as so eminent a part of our moral probation.

For to receive it thus is to receive it “as a little child ;” and this is exactly that submission of the independent self-will to the will of God, which, as we have seen, *is* the central point of our probation.

It is, moreover, the harder just in proportion to the degree in which we are naturally tempted to think that we are entitled to be treated in a different way. That is to say, the possession, and even more, the consciousness of the possession, of high intellectual powers ; the living, in great measure, for the exercise of these ; the being used to apply them to the rigid examination of all propositions submitted to us before we admit their truth ; the having conquered the lower affections, and through that conquest be-

come in great part intellectual beings ;—all this must expose men signally to the temptation of *not* receiving the message simply,—must make this eminently *their* trial,—the point of their probation in which the great question of submission or resistance to their Creator and Redeemer is practically decided. And this difficulty, or this strife, will be increased, if they have formed to themselves systems of morality and justice ; because they will necessarily be tempted to try the details of the message by their preconceived notions as to what, on their theory, befits the character and acting of the Supreme Ruler, and so to accommodate its revelations to what they feel assured is the true, and the just, and the befitting ; and the more firm and self-reliant is the man's spirit, the greater must be the struggle and the more fearful the risk. So that we may see that here must be, for those who in many respects are of the highest natures,—for those who have triumphed over the coarser allurements of animal appetite, and even over the subtler temptations of ambition, and the common love of power, and have reached the calmer air and wider prospects which await those who have scaled the heights of philosophy,—that *here* must be for such the very especial point of their trial ; that which is for every reasonable soul of man the question of questions, whether or no he will indeed seek for his salvation, and the restoration to him of the light of God's countenance in the one only way in which the Lord has offered it to him, and in which, therefore, only he can attain

to it; whether, in a word, he will believe when the Incarnate Son tells him of 'heavenly things.'

Now amongst these, as we have seen, our Lord gives a prominent place to His teaching concerning that mighty Sacrifice for man's sins which, when lifted up as the Serpent in the wilderness, He offered on the Cross.

And so surely we might expect that it would be; for if it has, as we have seen that it has, pleased God that a great part of man's probation should lie in his humbling himself to receive without doubt or question the message of his Maker, we might expect that his humility would specially be tested by his willingness to receive this central point of all that vast economy whereby he is to be restored to communion with his God. And experience undoubtedly confirms this expectation. For in this point of the revelation are gathered up all those truths against which unaided human reason has invariably most readily rebelled.

Always, wherever the intellect of man has been allowed to speculate on the possibility of this truth, have the same objections to its simple statement been reproduced; as,—that it supposes a change of purpose in the Unchangeable,—a harsh severity in the Father of all mercies,—an unjust acceptance of the punishment of the innocent for the guilty in the All-just,—anger and resentment, and the appeasing of such passions in Him in whom passions are not, nor can be; and that therefore all the multitude of expressions in Holy Scripture which declare the

Atonement, and the reconciliation, and the sacrifice for sins, must be explained to mean the reconciling estranged man to God by a vast scenic representation of that love in which he thus is won to put his trust.

Now all these objections may be, and have been, well answered in detail. It may be shewn that the revelation which seems to attribute to the Almighty these earthly passions, does but use, as it must use, for our instruction, the language of the earth, even as it speaks of the arm, and the eye, and the mouth of the Lord^e. Again, it may be shewn that even our limited capacities can comprehend that it *may* be inconsistent with the relations of the awful Centre of all Justice to the reasonable creatures with whom His hand has peopled the heaven and earth, and all the countless worlds around us, that the guilty should be pardoned by a simple act of arbitrary mercy. And again, it may be shewn, that if an assurance so stupendous as that which may be read on the Cross of Christ was needed to enable man to believe in God's forgiveness of his sin, and so to reconcile him to God, that such an assurance could not be truly given unless the sacrifice and the Atonement made were real.

By these answers, and the like, the objections of which I spoke as at all times besetting the doctrine of the Atonement may assuredly be met; but the answer to them, to which I have sought to-day to

^e See the Ordination Sermon preached by Professor Hussey, Dec. 23rd, 1855, on *The Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

lead you, meets the whole flow of these difficulties still higher in its course. For if the simple reception of God's message to you be a great part of your probation, these difficulties *must* exist, in order to provide for your trial; and if so, they are to be met rather by the docility of a humbled soul than by the skill of a practised intellect: and so the Word of God loves to represent this master truth. There the Cross of Christ is to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness. It does contradict the preconceived notions of the worldly-wise, and the whole system of the self-righteous; and yet it is to them that believe, "Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God."

So that here, my brethren, our practical conclusion becomes plain. It is not safe for us to smooth down by our refinements such difficulties as those presented to us by the great doctrine of the Atonement: in doing so we run great risk of trying to improve the message Christ has brought us from the Father, and of failing in our probation. We must take it in its simplicity. We must believe in it as little children. We must believe simply that Christ "bare our sins in His own body on the tree,"—and that by His stripes we "were healed^f." We must believe that it is only "by the blood of Jesus" that we can "have boldness to enter into the holiest^g;"—that God "made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin^h;"—that "if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father,

^f 1 St. Pet. ii. 24.

^g Heb. x. 19.

^h 2 Cor. v. 21.

Jesus Christ the righteous, and that He is the propitiation for our sinsⁱ ;”—that “by His own blood He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us^k.”

Infinite, believe me, is the peril of trifling, in the least degree, with the simplest statement of this master-doctrine. Through it, pre-eminently, the power of God works for man’s conversion and renewal. To this truth, stated in its simplest form, the heart of man has ever yielded up itself. This truth, in its naked simplicity, has been the strength of missions, the converter of nations, and the true stay of every separate soul. Only the sight of Christ hanging on the Cross, the Sacrifice for man’s guilt, can shew the curse and evil of sin ; only that sight can shew God as “just, and the Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus.” Any obscuration of this master-truth must rob the ministry of its strength, and the sinner of his hope.

There are times in the life of every man in whom convictions of sin are deep and real, when this truth only, in its most naked simplicity, stands between him and an infinite despair. It may not seem so to you now ; but, depend upon it, it will seem so amidst the terrors of death and the realities of judgment. Then, when conscience has awoken indeed ; when the remembered sins of years press heavily upon your shuddering soul ; when the awful vision of God’s infinite justice appals your shrinking spirit ; and when the voice of your inmost being sighs

ⁱ 1 St. John ii. 1, 2.

^k Heb. ix. 12.

forth in broken accents, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"—then, depend upon it, there is no refuge, there is no comfort, but in clinging closely with the simplest hold to the Cross of Christ, and believing with the most child-like apprehension in His death for THEE. That is no time for subtleties and metaphysics. "I thank God, through Christ Jesus my Lord,"—*that*, and that only, will stand in that awful hour! No wonderful display of heroic virtue, no scenic representation intended to assure thy soul, will then bear up thy soul. If God have mocked thee once by an apparent sacrifice to reassure thy heart, how canst thou trust His perfect truth in that crisis of thy terror? Only in the marvellous truth of Christ's death *for thee*,—of His bearing *thy sin* in His own body on the tree,—canst thou then find rest. Oh, then, trifle not with the simplicity of this master-truth! Meet the difficulties which oppose its reception by earnest prayer for grace, and the crying of your soul for its enlightenment. Meet the subtleties of the Tempter with the simplicity of the Gospel. And when the sophist whispers to thee his objections to the simple truth of Christ's Atonement, remember that it is *God's* message to thee; and that to strive to mend it, is to disbelieve its truth,—and that to disbelieve its truth, is to throw away thy soul.

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