

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

BY THE

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WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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XIX.

LITTLE THINGS.

“He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.”—LUKE xvi. 10.

WHEN we study the work of God in creation, it presents itself to us under two equally admirable aspects: the infinitely great and the infinitely small. On the one hand, we have those immeasurable distances of the universe which no figures can express, and in presence of which our imagination stands still in awe; those endless ages unfolding one after the other throughout all eternity. On the other hand, we have that not less marvellous spectacle of life with all its wonders displaying itself in a space which is imperceptible to the human eye, those masterpieces of organisation, of mechanism, of structure, concentrated in beings of which a single drop of water can contain thousands. . . . Two infinities which alike fill us with amazement

And if we cast our eyes upon humanity alone, we Christians who believe in the intervention of God in its history, a similar spectacle strikes us. On the one hand, we see the sublime and oft terrible action by which God leads the nations at His will, making of certain tribes the instruments of His wrath, mowing down thousands of lives by war, by storms, by epidemics, effacing, as has been the case in America, a national iniquity in torrents of blood. On the other hand, we adore that paternal Providence which forgets not one of its creatures, which counts our sorrows and tears, and for which no being is too small or too insignificant. Accordingly, in little things as well as in great, we adore Divine wisdom and bow before its purposes.

Let us descend from these heights. From the works of God, let us pass on to the works of man. We may do so without pride, since man was created in the image of God. We also, in our lowly existence, have a twofold activity; before us are placed duties great and small. Great duties impose themselves upon us with strong evidence; we are constantly reminded of them, and we cannot neglect them without, at once, hearing the expostulations and warnings of our conscience. Therefore I will not refer to them today; I shall draw your attention to the faithfulness we are called to bring to the accomplishment of the little duties of life.

But at the very outset, I meet with several dangers which I must, first of all, point out.

In the first place, if, with Scripture, I lay before you the importance of small duties, I do not mean to say that you are to become fully absorbed by them. That is the danger of shallow minds. From the way in which they set to work, it would seem that little things alone are of importance; they con-

tinually hold them out to us, they weary others and confuse themselves with them. Every detail is for them an event, every obstacle a mountain, every anxiety a crushing burden. Accordingly their life is a busy, bustling, restless thing which leaves their soul neither peace nor serenity. Such must be incessantly reminded that small duties are to be performed in a great spirit, that they must be referred to the noble sentiments which are the springs of action of the Christian life, and that the soul, even in the midst of the most agitated life, must tend towards a higher aim, just as the skiff on the dancing waves makes for the port under the firm hand of the pilot who guides it. Let us take another illustration: the trees must not prevent us from seeing the forest, or, in other words, the duties of each successive hour must not prevent us from taking in the whole of life. Martha, absorbed by her household cares, must not prevent Mary from coming, peacefully and contemplatively, to sit at the feet of her Lord.

Secondly, observe that, if I recommend small duties, I do not mean to say that they are to be preferred to greater. This is the danger of pharisaism. When the soul forgets its true destination, which is the service of God in love, it transfers upon unimportant objects the need of holiness by which it is tormented; and the more insignificant these objects, the more ardently and fanatically does it pursue them. Remember the Scribes of the Gospel straining a gnat, paying the tithes of the meanest herbs, counting the number of steps which might be taken on the Sabbath day. Today habits and customs are changed, hut the same spirit manifests itself. Thus, the superstitious Roman Catholic will plunge into the most minute observances, and the stranger these will be, the more valuable also will they become in his sight. Thus, the sectarian Protestant, losing sight of the grand instructions of the Gospel, will easily imagine that little things possess I know not what particular holiness: a small Church, a little flock, ordinary remarks of edification upon a subject of detail reserved for the most advanced Christians, all these will be his objects of predilection, and, far from wishing to enlarge the circle of the Divine mercies, he will prefer restraining it to the measure of his own narrowed heart. Alas! and he will peradventure forget justice, love, and holiness!

Deplorable error which has often served to justify the preventions of unbelief! Those who fall into it must be energetically reminded that we are not permitted to reverse the Divine order of things; that there are in life duties which are clearly indicated; pressing, imperious duties to which God wishes all others to be subordinate; that these duties are the grand moral lines to which all commandments of detail must be referred, just as the rivulets which traverse the valleys must, that they may not become transformed into marshes, flow towards the river in whose region they have taken their source; —that, if this be not considered, piety goes astray, and that,

by separating itself from moral life, it falls into ridiculous and often odious extremes.

But it is not only the narrow-minded who are in danger of becoming fully engrossed in little things; it is often, on the contrary, in the noblest and most sincere natures that conscience reaches the highest degree of sensibility. Here we are in presence of one of the most real and most painful religious phenomena I know of, namely, the disease of over-scrupulousness. Have you never met with any of those souls preoccupied to the highest degree with finding out what is the Divine will and living in constant dread lest they should fail to acquire an adequate knowledge of it? Troubled, anxious, trembling, they dare not take a decision, make one step, utter one word without a scrupulous pre-examination, and, ever absorbed, on the one hand, by their painful recollections of a past whose errors they deplore and on the other by apprehensions as regards a future whose snares they dread, they lose all confidence, joy, and peace. This is a touching error, which commands our respect, for these very scruples betoken a serious search after holiness; nevertheless, it is also a perfidious error, for it robs the soul of all its vigour and energy; it destroys in it the inspiration of love by bringing it back to the servile fear of the slave, and, sinking it into hopeless sorrow, it gives piety a morbid and repulsive character.

Those who have fallen into its toils must be reminded that salvation is a mercy, and that, by continually bringing into question its efficacy, by making it wholly dependent upon the incessant fluctuations of their troubled conscience, they constantly give the lie to the Divine promises. They forget that God is an all-pardoning God, they set at nought the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. They must be reminded that the God of the Gospel will not be served by slaves, but by children, and that He expects of them a filial confidence and a joyful trust. They must, finally, be told that the Gospel bids them rejoice because joy is a power, because alone it enlightens and warms the soul; to their downcast eyes the love of God must be presented such as it was revealed in His Son until they learn to read upon the Cross of Calvary the joyous assurance of Christian liberty which alone enfranchises the soul and restores it to life.

I have pointed out the dangers presented by the subject before us; I have removed the obstacles which might have impeded our march. I now go straight to my text, and the first thing which strikes me is the vast importance of those small duties which Jesus Christ recommends in it.

Look closer and you will see that little things, small virtues, small sacrifices, small duties, in a word, form the whole texture of the moral life of individuals as well as of societies. Have you ever taken into consideration the vast number of obscure sacrifices and forgotten actions which are daily required in order that a grand result may be obtained, nay, in order that

good be not overborne by evil in that struggle which they have waged with one another from the beginning of the world? When we read the account of a battle, we generally see nothing beyond the skilful tactics and the heroic charge which, in the decisive hour, produced victory; but we must not forget the clever calculations, the slow and complicated works, the multiplied precautions, the unknown labour which, at the given moment, rendered the final manoeuvre possible, and placed at the general's disposal well-disciplined, well-fed, well-rested soldiers, well-armed for the battle, and provided with all that was necessary. Suppose one of those insignificant details had been omitted, suppose one of the general's orders had been neglected, suppose one of the advanced vedettes had feared to peril his life by uttering the cry of alarm, and who can tell if victory would not have been changed into defeat?

This is a striking image of Christian life. When we cast a superficial glance upon the reign of God here below, we see only the grand struggles and the grand triumphs, only the glorious results which are connected with the names of great men; but we forget all the perseverance and abnegation, all the hidden prayers and tears, all the privations and sacrifices that have been required ere a moral triumph could be won. Obscure actions, sacrifices buried in oblivion, prayers apparently lost! All these were nothing, you would perhaps have said. True, all these were nothing. They are nothing also, those imperceptible grains of sand which cover the shores of the sea; taken separately, they scarcely would cause the balance to oscillate; nevertheless, when clustered together, they stay the rush of the waves, and say to the raging ocean, "Thou shalt go no farther."

Accordingly, I feel no surprise when, in history, I see that the greatest men have precisely been those who have paid most attention to little things. In the political or military order, as well as in the domain of art or poetry, all true geniuses have been men of detail; never have they judged of little things as being below their notice. True, they have never allowed themselves to be fully absorbed by them, but never have they thought it possible to dispense with them. On the contrary, it is by making themselves familiar with all the little drudgeries of their art or science that they have learned to master it at will. Examples of this abound. Here is Cæsar minutely recounting in his Commentaries the exact measures of the entrenchments of his soldiers or of the bridges which they have built at his command. Here is Michael Angelo curbing the ardour of his genius to study with a scholar's patience the play of the muscles and the laws of anatomy. Here is Rembrandt unwilling to trust any but himself with the grinding and mixing of the colours which give their magical tint to his immortal paintings. Here is Racine seeking with indefatigable perseverance the correct expression, the fitting word which alone can exactly render his thought. Here is Napoleon

governing empires, but growing angry in presence of the slightest error which his eagle-eye detected in the calculations that were referred to him. But let us set aside these examples, and return to the Gospel. Who can deny that Jesus Christ has accomplished the most extraordinary and the most mighty revolution which the world has ever seen? Well, it is Jesus Christ who has taught us what, in the moral order, is the value of the sinner's tears, of the widow's mite, of the publican's humble sigh, of those little things for which none had cared before Him. Jesus Christ! How can we pronounce His name without being reminded that His life is the most admirable commentary of the words we are now meditating, "Faithful in that which is least?" Would you know the secret, if this word I may use, of the prodigious work by which He has conquered the world? See him in Galilee, beside those humble and lowly ones whom God gave Him as His first disciples. Does He look upon them as unworthy of His attention? Is He preoccupied with seeking a wider scene for His activity? Does He think that the soul of a Samaritan woman is incapable of comprehending His instructions, or that He is labouring in vain when He teaches sinners and publicans? No, Jesus is faithful in the accomplishment of the humblest duties, faithful towards each of His disciples, even towards the most unintelligent and tardy to believe, faithful towards each soul He meets, towards each sorrow which God calls Him to comfort. No work of restoration and salvation is beneath His notice, and it is often in the lowliest sphere that His Divine wisdom and His mercy shed forth their most dazzling lustre.

Therefore, everything in the world and in the Gospel tells of fidelity in matters of detail.

Now, how do we accomplish this duty which is laid before us in a manner so clear, so evident, so imperious? On this point I will appeal to your own testimony and to your own conscience.

You, my brother, for instance, you have a grand ideal of holiness. The moral beauties of the Gospel attract and subdue you; and when we tell you of a life consecrated to God, of a joyless and, if need be, crucified life, we are sure to awaken a noble ambition, an enthusiastic admiration in your soul. When you compare modern society or even the Church of the present day with this ideal, then bitter and sorrowful words escape your lips. You condemn your epoch, you point out all its pollution, all its meanness, all its turpitudes, and you say, "Who will restore moral rectitude, obedience to principle, the authority of conscience to the world"? I understand and admire that holy ambition. Would to God it were more universally spread and fired all our souls!

Here is an immediate occasion for realizing in detail that holiness which you so much admire in the gross. Here is a luxurious and sensual habit to be retrenched from your daily enjoyments. You loathe the corruption of

your epoch, you deplore the laxity of its morals. Well, here, in your own life, are lusts to be quenched, unwholesome reading to be given up, a frivolous society with whom all intercourse should be interrupted, a connection which disquiets your heart, and which should be broken off. But what! You draw back! Where is the generous ardour which but a moment ago expressed itself in burning words, where is that moral firmness of which you were so proud, where is that noble disinterestedness? Vainly do I seek them now that the hour for action has come. That is because in reality those acts of devotion and self-denial of which I speak are too insignificant for you. Were you called to great sacrifices, to striking actions, you would be found ready, but in the unpretending duties of life where is your fidelity?

You, my brother, have a grand ideal of charity. That is the feature which strikes you most in the Gospel; it is this aspect of the Cross which most powerfully attracts and subdues you. You feel a thrill of emotion in presence of the work of restoration and love which the Lord expects of you, you embrace the whole of humanity in your sympathy, and in particular, its poor and destitute members. You long most ardently for the advent of the reign of righteousness, and gladly hail its approach. Noble desire! holy ambition! Would to God all our hearts were filled with it!

Here is an opportunity for exercising that charity by which you are thus animated. Here, at your door, is a beggar, a wretch in rags; here is a misery, surely not ideal or poetical, but low, vulgar, defiled perhaps; or here is a Christian work which needs your aid. What is required of you? A trifling sacrifice, one pleasure less, a little less of luxury in your dwelling, a little more of simplicity in your life. Or here, beside you, are soured hearts, whose sufferings a word of sympathy might alleviate; here is a rancour to be effaced, an offended brother to be brought back to your affection, or a wandering soul to be brought back to God. Nay, it is even less than this. The question is simply to show in your daily life a little condescension and meekness, a little of that humility which thinks not of self; . . . the question is merely to repress a bitter spirit of judgment, a hateful predilection for biting words, which leave behind so many poisoned wounds. . . . But what! you remain inactive! Where is that ardent sympathy, that profound love of humanity, which caused your heart to throb? I understand such duties are too unpretending for you. They weary and annoy you, they are all alike. It is continually the same appeals, the same complaints, the same lamentations. Ah! you are willing to love humanity at large, and for it you would perhaps die a martyr's death; but in little things where is your charity?

You, my brother, have a grand ideal of the Church and of its destinies. You delight in reverting in imagination to its heroic age, when, in the amphitheatre or on the burning pile, it triumphed over the world while succumbing beneath its blows. As you think of the divisions by which it is

now rent, and of its sufferings, you sorrowfully exclaim, Who will restore us the Church of olden time? Noble ambition! would to God it seized upon us all, and that the zeal of God's house fired each of our hearts! Now here is an immediate opportunity of raising the Church or extending its limits. The Gospel is to be spread in an obscure locality, schools are to be established, a missionary is to be sent to some foreign land . . . Nay, it is less than this even. The question is simply for you to defend, in a conversation, some attacked truth, or to confess the despised name of Jesus Christ. . . . It is less than this still. . . . You are required to fill some humble office in the Church; to show by the very assiduity with which you will accomplish its meanest duties, what is your faith, your principles, the general direction of your life. All these duties are very small, alas! too small, perhaps, for you to feel their importance; and trampling them under foot, or, to say the least, setting them continually aside, you wait for the advent of the great day of the Lord; you look forward to the grand future of the Church, and you forget that the Church today is suffering and pining away through the unconcern and apathy of men who think as you think and do as you do.

You have, doubtless, observed that all these examples bear the same character. In all of them imagination takes the place of conscience, and admiration that of will. Let us beware! All Christian virtues, holiness, faith, love, devotion, have their grand and luminous side, which strikes and touches even the most insensible souls. Nothing is easier than to give way to these emotions; but when all these grand things are to be realised in detail, then we perceive that they involve innumerable sacrifices, sacrifices which, for the most part, are obscure and unpretending; then we perceive that we must come in collision with many a repulsive duty; that we must submit to bow beneath the yoke of obedience; that we must renounce human glory, and bear what Scripture rightly calls the reproach of Jesus Christ. Now, that is precisely what we are anxious to avoid. Thus overlooking small duties, we comfort and reassure ourselves with the thought that what has most deeply affected and penetrated us in the Gospel has been its grandest and most sublime points; and we do not reflect that this very emotion, this very admiration, render our responsibility still more terrible, and that, in the last day, God will not ask us if we have admired His Gospel, but if we have believed in Him, if we have confessed Him, if we have lived for His glory.

We have still to show what are the logical and inevitable consequences to which the neglect of small duties fatally leads.

The first result of this neglect is the gradual weakening and decline of religious life in the soul. And why? Because, as we have already said, life is commonly made up of small duties, and because, by daily overlooking them, we finally die to true life. Very small is the number of those who are

called to striking actions or heroic deeds, and even for such, these actions and sacrifices are required of them only once or twice during their whole life-course. Our common destiny will probably be modest, unnoticed . . . ; it is to little duties that God will doubtless call us. What will become of us if we neglect them? Nothing strengthens faith and moral energy as much as unbroken fidelity; a multitude of unknown actions, of trifling sacrifices, eventually form a compact and indissoluble mass resembling those Roman walls which have remained standing amongst the heaped-up ruins of centuries, because they are composed of tiny stones joined together by an indestructible cement. On the contrary, nothing weakens the soul as much as petty but multiplied infidelities. Each of them separately is as nothing, yet each of them shakes the moral life and loosens some of its parts till the day when, under the stroke of some sudden temptation, the entire edifice crumbles into dust in one moment.

To this first result is added another more terrible still. Reflect seriously upon this: by neglecting small duties, conscience becomes obliterated, it insensibly loses its uprightness and sensibility, and this all the more rapidly that it is warned or alarmed by no crying scandal. Not that it becomes utterly silent; on the contrary, it protests; at each of our faults it utters a deep groan; but who is not aware of the fact that its voice may be stifled even by sanctimonious words and by the sounds of an apparently fervent and piously employed life? Thus man goes on deceiving himself more and more.

But he does not deceive others, brethren. The world has a penetrating eye, and soon detects the secret laxities and the inconsistencies of a religious life. The world which often disdains the Gospel, nevertheless expects much of the Gospel. I appeal, in support of my affirmation, to the extreme severity with which it judges Christians. The world, and this must not surprise you, is not easily taken in by pious discourses or fair appearances; it will resolutely require of you fidelity in small duties, and if its expectations be not realised, your piety will be, in its opinion, as the empty sound of a clashing cymbal. If it finds you consistent with your principles, scrupulous in the observance of insignificant duties, I do not say that it will love you more (for how could it love you when it hated Jesus Christ?), but in reality and in spite of itself it will do you justice, or if its lips condemn, its conscience will approve, and though it may curse you, yet will it feel your power and come inevitably under your influence. That is the most powerful and the only true apology for Christianity, compared with which all our affirmations are as nothing.

We must conclude, and my first conclusion will be a warning. Be faithful in that which is least, and, in the first place, be faithful in small temptations.

It was a lustful glance that lost David, it was the simple question of a

servant-girl that lost Peter, it was an avaricious thought that lost Judas. Great temptations are less to be feared; they warn and alarm us by their very greatness; they call forth all our moral vigour, all our powers of resistance, and often save us by the dread which they inspire. If, for instance, the world should tell you to deny Jesus Christ, and to desert His cause, you would shrink back in terror. But it will surround you with its blandishments, it will lavish its praises upon your talents and virtues, it will tell you that you are losing your strength and your influence in too gloomy a piety; and if you yield to its seductions, it will govern you so completely, that one day you will be ashamed of that Cross beneath whose shadow it is now your hope to die. Again, if the world should tell you to hate one of your brethren, all your generous instincts would rise against this thought; but it will awaken in you a slight feeling of jealousy which will not alarm you in the least, and, if you entertain it secretly, that heart which now is so loving, so sympathetic, will soon fall a prey to bitter sentiments, to a hellish blending of envy and detestable passions. If the world should tell you to yield to the flesh, and to bring your soul under its shameful bondage, all your instinctive nobility of sentiment would loudly protest; but by one unchaste look it will cast a secret disquiet in your breast, and if you yield to it, all the powers of an unbridled passion will bear you away as they will, until the day when you will awake to find yourself wallowing in the mire of vice. Ask those fallen beings whose very sight is loathsome to you, and whom the world crushes with its scorn, ask them the secret of their history. How many of them commenced their downward course by a great fall? Very few. An apparently innocent habit, a small temptation gave the first impulse towards the abyss of perdition. It was a mere nothing, they said, but that mere nothing lost them.

Here is a ship setting sail at dawn; the breeze fills her sails; majestically she advances towards the open sea, all eyes follow her, and joyful cries hail her passage out of port. But with what sorrowful looks would you look after her if you knew that, in the depth of her hold, by an imperceptible fissure, the water is entering drop by drop without one moment's interruption; if you knew that while the sun shines and all is joy and gladness upon her deck, death is stealthily invading her, and will soon swallow up its prey; if you knew that far out on the fathomless ocean, in the silence of the approaching night, she will suddenly go down!

Alas! how many have we seen of those Christian lives advancing, they also joyfully and trustingly, on the ocean of life. The Church followed them lovingly, and already hailed their brilliant destiny; but in their hidden depths some new-born passion was noiselessly giving entrance to the seductions of the world, to its pleasures and lusts. Everything has sunk, . . . and now all that is left us is the sad and heart-rending memory of those

souls whom the world has entrapped in its snares, and over whom the angels of God with us mourn. Brethren, beware of small temptations.

Again, be faithful in the least opportunities you have of serving God. Be faithful, for, as we have already said, nothing strengthens us more than unbroken fidelity. Be faithful, that you may attain a stronger faith, a deeper sanctification. Be faithful, and after each sacrifice which you will have made for truth, holiness, justice, you will feel that these are not mere abstractions but the most real things in the world. And, in fact, who does not see that in the service of God each faculty which He has given us is developed by exercise and weakened by inaction? Here is a conscience, careless at first, which having obeyed the voice of duty in a first trial, becomes more delicate, more keenly sensitive. Here is a heart, hitherto happy in its selfishness, which having answered the first call of God, has opened to the true life of devotion and love. Here is a soul, long wavering and undecided, which having, in spite of all sophisms, on one occasion followed the truth, feels its faith growing stronger and stronger until it reaches to the possession of the eternal realities. Thus in every domain is accomplished this strange saying of the Gospel: "Unto every one that hath shall be given;" thus, under the blessing of a faithful God, the fidelity of the Christian bears its fruits and brings with it its own reward.

Again I say, be faithful in the little which God has given you. It is on this point that fidelity is often the most difficult, and Jesus acknowledges this sufficiently when, in a striking parable, He shows us the servant who had received but one talent despising that which he has received, and giving himself up to envy, to anger, and to cowardly discouragement. Striking image of the temptations of poverty which the Gospel has never flattered, and of which it points out at the same time the blessings and the perils. Oh, you to whom God has denied the blessings of earth, and who have often said with bitterness that if you possessed them you would be faithful in their use, more faithful than those whom you envy, beware lest in casting upon your brethren a look of anger, you forget what is still left you; beware lest you become so completely blinded by ingratitude as to scorn that which God has left you. Ah! how can you consider yourselves destitute and incapable of action when you are in the service of a Master who has said that a glass of cold water given in His name will not lose its reward? Up to this time, sadly looking to yourselves alone, and mourning over your miserable lot, you have ignored all the good you may do, you have despised the sublime mission to which God has called you. It is time to learn it. Heirs of eternity, servants of God, awake, and in the humble position where God has placed you, show us what a loving heart can do to prove its love to Him. Show us all the resources it can call forth, all the work it can accomplish. Prove by your example that the last often may become the first, and that the

feeble are called to confound the strong. Courage! the reign of justice is approaching. It comes, the day when all the seeming grandeurs of selfishness and pride will appear in their hideous nakedness, but when the humblest and most obscure life which will have glorified God here below will shine with eternal glory. Happy those who in that day will hear the words: "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Grant, O God, that we may be among those who will hear them, among those who, from this day forth, will seek their encouragement in Thy approbation and their reward in Thy love!