

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

BY THE

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WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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LONDON:

JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.

MDCCCLXXXIII.

II.

THE WIDOW'S MITE; OR, THE UNRESERVED GIFT.

“And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And He called unto Him His disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.”—MARK xii. 41-44.

A GRAND spectacle was that presented by the Temple of Jerusalem when, at the close of the divine service, the crowd descended Mount Zion to return to the holy city. The songs had ceased in the sanctuary; the multitude of the faithful thronged the porches. No one, at that time, would have willingly kept away from the solemn assemblies; for the Temple, to the Jews of those days, was not merely a religious edifice, it was the refuge of their national memories, of their past glory and of their future hopes; it was the only spot throughout the land of Judea which the brutal foot of the conqueror had, till then, respected. When the Levites struck up the Psalms, and thousands of voices responded, a powerful emotion seized this invincible people that quivered beneath the stranger's yoke; they looked forward, with inward rapture, to the approaching day of deliverance, in which all the promises of the prophets would be fulfilled, in which Jerusalem would be more brilliant, more honoured than it had been in the reigns of David and Solomon, in which, even from the most distant isles of the sea, the nations would bring their tribute to the Temple of the Almighty. When, therefore, the Jews passed before the treasury in which were deposited the offerings destined to the embellishment of the Temple and the support of the national worship, they cast in their gifts with a secret pride; and fondly indulging in their carnal hopes, they returned to their dwellings with a lofty brow and a satisfied heart.

It was on such a joyous day that crowds were coming down the steps of the Temple; first came the Pharisees, distinguished by their stern expression and their religious attitude. The rich passed on, followed by their retinues of slaves; and, drawing the silver or the gold from their purses, they dropped it ostentatiously before the admiring gaze of the multitude. But here, in the midst of the throng, is a poor woman, advancing with a meek and gentle step. Who was she? We know nothing of her past life. She was a widow; in other words, her heart had been stricken in its tenderest affections; life stretched out before her a lonely and dreary waste; and whilst loved and loving ones passed her on her solitary way, whilst happy and smiling mothers accompanied their children, whom they had

consecrated to Jehovah, whilst others joyfully retired to the homes where so much felicity awaited them, she walked slowly on, for she knew that none would welcome her at her fireside, that, no loving voice would hail her return. She was a widow, and she was poor. Poor! that is, doubly widowed. For the consolations and sympathy which are generally lavished upon those whose sorrows are brought into evidence by the distinguished rank they occupy, are rarely proffered to those who have the greatest need of them. She was a widow, and she was poor; that is, to her life appeared henceforth as an unceasing conflict with misery, as a hard and painful struggle, with the continual dread of sickness without provision, and the gloomy prospect of a lonely death.

And yet, you who pity this poor woman, you fail to discover, beneath her mourning garb, the profound joy which fills her heart. She is happy, for she has found God in His Temple. Whilst so many others have gone thither with minds full of their dreams of national glory, or hearts satisfied with their wholly formal worship; whilst the priests themselves think only of exalting Israel, and ascribe to the God they serve their own narrow, ambitious, and vulgar notions, her heart has taken in what the scribes who sit in Moses' seat know nothing of—the love and compassion of the Lord. She has seen in the Scriptures that Jehovah has promised a special tenderness to all sufferers like herself; she has been drawn towards Him by a deep sense of gratitude; ties of love have been formed between herself and her Heavenly Father, and she has found in heaven what has failed her on earth. When the songs of the Levites have extolled the glory of the God of Israel, how fervently has she joined in them! How consoling have these words of the Psalmist appeared to her: “The Lord executeth judgment for the oppressed; He giveth food to the hungry; He raiseth them that are bowed down; He relieveth the fatherless and the widow!” All this she has understood and believed; from the depths of her broken heart those beautiful utterances have risen to her lips as the natural language of gratitude, and in this vast assembly none perhaps have more sincerely proclaimed the goodness of the Lord than this poor disinherited widow, apparently so much to be pitied.

But she is anxious to give expression to that gratitude which fills her soul; she has sung the praises of God, she has paid Him her tribute of adoration, but that is not enough for her. She too would bring her offering to the sanctuary, and contribute for her share towards the beautifying of the Temple of Jehovah. How will she do this? Alas, she is so poor! a farthing is all she has! But what is the value of so insignificant a sum where the embellishment of that vast edifice, and the support of that magnificent worship are concerned? With a farthing one cannot even replace a worn-out stone, nor buy a little incense, nor so much as purchase a turtledove for the

sacrifice. And yet with this farthing she might procure a little oil or bread for herself; it would suffice to maintain her existence for a day or two. Surely she needs it sadly, for what can be more uncertain than her position, what more precarious than her resources? Even supposing she might, by this meagre offering, contribute to the beautifying of the sanctuary, can she be expected to do so? Are there not others who might give more easily than she? Poor as she is, can she, ought she, to deprive herself of all that is left her? All these thoughts have doubtless entered the heart of the widow, but she will not entertain them; thoughtful, unperceived, she drops her little gift into the treasury and walks on, rejoicing in her sacrifice, towards the dwelling where indigence awaits her.

Poor woman! who can have seen her in the crowd? Who among those noble and wealthy worshippers, who among those priests and Pharisees, has taken notice of her? Alas! the world forgets her as it forgets so many silent acts of heroism, so many unknown sacrifices, which, after all, are that which is noblest and best upon earth. But there is One who has seen her and whose eye follows her with tender sympathy. It is He whose name is Truth, it is the Eternal Son of God; He also is contemned by that multitude who admire nothing but visible and ostentatious grandeur. Ah! go in peace, poor woman, *He* has seen thee! He has seen thee, and that look of His is enough for thy silent act to be transmitted to all coming ages, when not one stone of Jerusalem and of her magnificent Temple will be left standing. He has seen thee, and He has blessed thee. Go in peace; thou wilt perhaps never meet Him again upon earth, but one day, when thou wilt have ended thy humble career, He will receive thee in the everlasting habitations!

Let us now endeavour, with God's help, to learn the lessons which this touching narrative teaches.

The treasury was placed at the Temple door. A profound thought underlies this simple detail. It is this:—All sincere worship must result in sacrifice. We must assemble in the sanctuary to adore Jehovah. We must join, in thought, with the celestial beings who surround His throne, and with them proclaim His greatness and His holiness. That is our reasonable service, our calling; thus shall we sanctify our lips, so often profaned by trifling, frivolous, or wicked words. We must humble ourselves before Him whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity; we must unburden our hearts to Him, tell Him of our open transgressions and of our secret sins, beseech Him to dispel our natural unconcern and to give us a sense of our misery, so keen that we shall bring Him a broken and contrite heart, for that is what He demands. We must contemplate the salvation which God has prepared for us, worship the Saviour He has given us, rejoice in the thought of His mercies, and to His glory raise the hymns of our gratitude and praise. That is the adoration God requires of us, that is the incense which is agreeable to

Him. But if, at the close of this service, after this humiliation, these thanksgivings, we go away fully satisfied; if we think we have offered to God an adequate worship; if this inward rapture, these tears, these prayers, lead not to sacrifice,—then indeed is our worship vain, and God will surely reject it.

Moreover, this truth is graven upon the human conscience in characters so deep and ineffaceable, that all religions have proclaimed it. Everywhere, connected with the sanctuary, you find the altar; here, consisting of a monument of marble and gold, admirably sculptured by ancient art; there, composed of two or three stones, which the savage, obedient to an irresistible instinct, has raised in the wilderness, to offer upon them his bloody offering. And what is the altar but the place for sacrifice? This, then, is the centre of all serious religion, and whenever the satisfaction of the inward law which urges man to sacrifice has been concerned, you well know that he has shrunk from no suffering, that he has offered to his gods all that was dearest to him; ay, his own children, and sometimes his own life. Argument has been powerless against this profound instinct. That is what so many nations which we are pleased to call by the disdainful name of heathen have so well understood. As for me, when I see those rivers of blood which everywhere mingle with the worship of the Deity, I am terrified by that spectacle; and yet, even in those fearful excesses, I recognise the voice of conscience attesting the necessity of sacrifice. By those immolations which appal us, man proclaims that he owes himself to God.

Well, that law of sacrifice, which has never been obliterated in the human conscience, Christianity affirms it with incomparable power. What is the cross but the greatest of sacrifices? What do we see there but the most perfect offering which any being has ever made of his life and of his blood for the glory of God and the salvation of his brethren? What says that spectacle but that you owe yourselves wholly to God, and that, if religion be not the gift of one's self, it is indeed a senseless thing? Thus did the apostles understand it, St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John, when in every page of their epistles they remind us that we are no longer our own, but that we belong to Him who has saved us, that we are to offer ourselves to Him as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice. Yes, self-consecration, that is the true sacrifice, the only one which God accepts, and which fully satisfies Him.

But however clear this truth may be, we always find a way to escape it. Ah! the multitude is large of those who go up to the Temple for praise and adoration; but how many of those worshippers offer to God only out of their superabundance, and then depart happy and self-satisfied? Now, God will not be content with our superabundance, He wants an unreserved gift, and that is what Jesus teaches us with so much authority by the example of

the poor widow.

But here I must anticipate a doubt which assuredly arises in your minds. "What!" some will say, "you pretend that man must give to God, not his superfluous wealth only, but even that which is necessary to his existence! You would have wished those wealthy nobles who preceded the widow to cast the whole of their fortune into the treasury! That, in your opinion, was the only way for them to please the Lord. But what would become of society if everybody, in order to be agreeable to God, should dispossess himself of all he has? Would not this be permanent indigence, that is, an immoral and impossible thing?"

That is how modern unbelief has interpreted the words of the Lord. It has overdrawn their meaning in order to weaken it. It has taken them as the expression of a superhuman and chimerical charity. This surely is rather too convenient a method of setting at naught the teaching of Jesus Christ. Men alter it, they give it an extravagant signification, that they may the more easily set it down as the enthusiastic dream of a generous soul.

Could it be true that the aim of Jesus, in placing this example before us, has been to persuade us to live in absolute poverty? Could it be true that His design has been to teach us that none can keep what is necessary to his existence and be agreeable to God notwithstanding? Ah! how little do those who pretend this to be the case understand the character of the teaching of Christ, of the most spiritual teaching to which the world has ever listened. What! Jesus would have dreamed of a social revolution! The ideal, in His eyes, would have been poverty, nay, hopeless misery, set up as a system! But then, if this was His thought, why should we still speak of the grandeur of His views, or of the wondrous penetration of His mind? His kingdom would be nothing more than a foolhardy enterprise! Ah! I know that Christ bade His first disciples leave all their possessions to follow Him. It was to be so. Their mission obliged them to this. For that stupendous work men were required, willing to break all the ties of flesh and fortune. But when has Jesus rendered this rule universal? When has He made of it a condition of salvation for all? What He preaches to all is quite a different doctrine; it is the inward, spiritual sacrifice, that poverty according to the spirit which the rich may know as well as the poor. And, in the very example before us, what Jesus wishes to teach is that God looks to the heart and not to the offering. Why has this widow's mite so great a value in the eyes of Jesus? Because this gift, paltry though it be, is the expression of an inward, complete, unreserved sacrifice. She has given herself to God, this poor woman! That is what renders her offering more precious than all the treasures of the Pharisees, than all the splendours of the Temple. When the others, on the contrary, have given liberally out of their abundance, this has been, on their part, an effort to escape the complete sacrifice which *she* has

offered so lovingly. You are not, therefore, required to give your fortune, your all, towards some special religious work; the point is to know, taking the spirit of our text, if, like the widow, you have given yourselves entirely to God, or if, in all things, you have given Him only a portion of your superfluous wealth. Such is the teaching of the Master, such is the thought I beseech God to impress deeply upon all your consciences today.

To give God one's superabundance! To give Him one's overplus when one owes Him everything! Do you know who is capable of such a mode of reasoning, of such a method of calculation? The man who does not believe. God, the future life, heaven, perdition, none of these are realities for him. He does not believe in them, and yet he is not at ease, for he sees continually rising before him the phantom of a *perhaps* which suffices to disturb his peace. Whatever he does, this uncertainty troubles him; he has often been mistaken, mistaken in visible and palpable things, might he not also be mistaken in things invisible? Is there not a mystery in death? Is the grave to be the end of his destiny? Under the influence of these thoughts, I understand that such a man should say to himself: "It is true that I do not believe in God any more than in an eternal future; but nevertheless I might be labouring under an error. I will, therefore, save a plank for the shipwreck. I will keep a supreme resource. I will give to the present life, to my present interests, to my present happiness all these interests, this happiness, this life demand, and I will give the remainder to God. If I have something left, a little money, a little strength, I will consecrate it to the Lord, that will be my refuge." I can understand this combination of a prudent egotism on the part of an unbeliever; but on the part of a Christian I cannot understand it.

Let us now endeavour to put into words the sentiments of a Christian who, refusing to God the complete sacrifice He claims, will consent to give Him only the residue of his wealth. Hear how he speaks, and how he unwittingly bears witness against himself.

"I believe in God," says he, "that is to say, I acknowledge that all I have I owe to God; my life, my health, my faculties, my intelligence, my heart, all these come to me from Him. Those affections which gladden my heart, those cherished beings, those children in whom I feel, as it were, my life beginning anew, He has given them to me. Not only has He given them, but He has restored them to me. Those blessings have seemed to escape me once; the gloomy prospect of distress has cast its shadow over me; that health has seemed ready to disappear; I have seen sickness, and perhaps death, holding me in its grasp. Those beloved ones who are my joy, I have seen them pining away, I already considered them as lost; but in His infinite love God has recalled them to life; I have come again into possession of that vanished strength; that daily bread has never failed

me,—and all this has been God’s doing.

“But, above all these gifts, there is another infinitely superior, and far more wondrous still. I had wandered far from God, I was living for the world and for myself; I had transgressed the Divine law, I had brought upon myself a just condemnation. I had fled from the paternal roof and delighted in sin. Then God, who desired not my death, but my life, sent me not only His prophets, not only His apostles, but His only and well-beloved Son. Jesus Christ has come to seek and save me. To snatch me from eternal death, He has given Himself up to the most painful of sacrifices. He has known all my miseries; He has taken upon Himself all my sins. He, the Holy One and the Just, has willingly submitted to the Divine desertion which I had merited. He has offered to God all that a man may offer Him, and though I should exhaust the tongues of men and angels, I would find no fitting words in which to express the depths of His mercy. All this God has done for me, who had fled from Him; and now, to prove my gratitude towards Him, this is what I shall do: of all I possess, of my fortune, of my affections, of my life, I shall make two portions,—the largest and best I shall keep for myself, and then, if there is something left, well, it will be the share of my God!”

This language shocks you. I do not wonder at it. The soul has a modesty of its own, which causes it to blush with shame whenever it looks evil in the face. But the supreme art of the seducer of souls is to conceal his designs. I certainly know none who would be willing to hold this language, but what if, though we dare not utter it, we dare realise it in our life? Oh, the depth of misery of our depraved hearts! What we blush to speak we blush not to do! This language which revolts us, does, after all, but express clearly the line of conduct of the greater number, even among those who continually speak of the love of God, and who have the appearance of piety. A supposition will show you if I am mistaken. In the narrative from which our text is drawn, we are told that Jesus sat down to see what the worshippers cast into the treasury, and that amongst all those who offered to God out of their abundance only, He perceived but one woman, one poor widow, who gave Him all she had. Let me suppose for a moment that today, at the very door of this sanctuary, Jesus should watch us passing before Him one by one, and let us endeavour to picture to ourselves the spectacle He would behold.

First of all, a young man steps forward. He is full of joy and hope. He is strong, and life opens before him as a field for noble struggles. His is a generous soul, whose dream is of a grand and useful career upon earth. Methinks I read in his heart and discover there all his plans for the future. He feels himself born for a superior *role*, he loves art and the lofty research of science, he hopes one day to see a ray of glory surrounding his name.

His ambition, it may be, reaches not so high; it is limited to the bettering of his condition, to the attainment of some advantageous situation, which would enable him to realise the fond desires of his heart. The career is difficult, numerous rivals surround him; there is no time to be lost; he must march, march on untiringly. That, for him, is the aim of life; that, for him, is the essential. Now in all this I see the share of man, but in vain do I seek the share of God. I question him; he answers that he keeps this portion in store, that he hopes to be able to offer it at some future time. He really means that God will some day come in for a share of all those labours, of those successes, of that fortune, of that glory which are his day-dream. Ah! pass on, my youthful brother, pass on with your offering, for what you have reserved for God is simply a part of your superfluous wealth! Your heart, your life, you have kept them all for yourself.

Here is a maiden advancing with a trusting heart, for the future, for her, is fraught with mysterious promises. Who will tell the countless dreams among which her thought wanders? She sees herself happy, admired, envied; she pictures to herself an existence suited to her tastes and the desires of her heart. Hers, too, may be a generous soul whom the love of dress and worldly frivolity would fail to satisfy. But however noble her tastes be, her true aim in life is the satisfaction of self. And yet she believes, her conscience has spoken; she feels that she must give God a portion of her life. This portion, she keeps it in store. Yes, in store. When her heart will have tasted all the joys she dreams of; when she will have drained all the cups of bliss; when she will have known all she longs to know, then she will go to God for refuge. Ah! pass on, my young sister, pass on with your offering, pass on amid the approving smiles of the world. There is One whose eye follows you sadly, it is He who is sitting at the door of the Temple; He hoped you would give Him your heart, and you have given Him only what you wanted not for yourself.

Here is a business man. God has blessed his enterprises. His affairs have prospered. His fortune is large. He approaches in his turn, with the buoyancy and confidence which wealth and a strong will give. Oh, if he gave himself to God, what good might he not do! What excellent works might he not sustain! How many of his suffering and degraded brethren might he not raise from their abjection! How many young minds might he not snatch from moral corruption, and thus prepare them for the kingdom of heaven! Will he do so? He believes in God, he knows that God claims a share in his life; but this share, he keeps it in store. Later, says he; later, when I shall have increased my fortune; when I shall exert a wider influence; when I shall have left behind me all those rivals by whom I am surrounded; then I shall consecrate an abundant tithe to the Lord. Ah! pass on, you also, my brother, pass on with your offering! God demanded the

gift of your life, you have given Him only out of your abundance!

But here is an aged man who has but a few years, or even, it may be, but a few days to live. What remains of his existence, what is left of a withered heart, that residue of strength and energy, to whom might he give them if not to God? To whom could he confide then with greater security? Everything is about to escape him; all around him has gradually disappeared; all things speak to him of the vanity of his desires and of his approaching end. Ah! with those trembling hands, so soon to be frozen in death, what will he give to the Lord? He has only half of himself to offer now. Well, God would accept even that; He would not refuse this labourer of the eleventh hour. But no; he will not give himself. In his will, perhaps, he has marked out the Lord's share; but, until then, what remains to him of life he will live for himself. Ah! pass on, brother, pass on with your miserable offering, pass on with your superabundance!

When will she come then, the poor widow? When will he come then, the man who is to give himself wholly to God? Jesus is waiting for them still. Alas! how long has He waited! They are, perhaps, in this assembly. Have they come hither fully resolved to bring to God only their usual offering of a purely outward adoration, in which the heart has no part? Ah! if there be any such, let them come; had they nothing to give God save their extreme poverty; had they nothing to bring Him save their moral and spiritual misery; were they but defiled sinners, let them come, and in the silence of the sanctuary, let them give themselves to the God who calls them! And God will see them, and, turning His eyes away from so many worshippers who today have brought Him gifts out of their abundance, He will bless them in secret until the day when He will receive them in the abode of peace.

But you who still hesitate,—you who are unwilling to give God more than your overplus,—you who, like misers, press the best portion of your treasure upon your hearts,—think you that because you have refused to yield it to God, it will always be yours? It will be taken from you tomorrow, perhaps, and then what bitter regret at not having consecrated it to God! For, had you consecrated it to Him, you would never have lost it. What we give Him we find again, and thus is realised that strange saying of the Gospel: “Whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.” Yes, that youth snatched from the world and devoted to God, nothing could have withered it; those powers, employed in the service of the best of Masters, would have been restored to you; that fortune, lost in the eyes of the worldly, you would have recovered it, increased a hundredfold; those affections, placed in God, would have lasted for ever. It is the Master who tells us so. Whoever will have renounced what is dearest to him upon earth, will receive, even in this life, an hundredfold; and in the future,

everlasting life. Blessed loss, which, after all, is the surest gain!

But though you have refused the best portion of your possessions to God, it does not follow that you will be able to refuse them to death. Now death will surely come. Hark! the gloomy messenger is already on the wing; he is approaching; he is about to knock at your door. Of what use, then, will be those treasures so selfishly guarded,—those worldly affections,—those calculations of a prudent egotism? Oh, how bitterly will you then repent that you have not kept the essential part for God, and given to the world only what remained of your heart, of your time, of your life! But the terrible angel will come, and he will not be content with your overplus. He will require all; you will be obliged to yield everything to him. He will force you to open those arms which you so jealously cross upon your treasure in a supreme effort. He will force you to leave those riches which you had thought to reserve for yourselves alone. O miserable wealth! O delusive possessions! If all is to finish thus, is life indeed worth living? Is the end of so much labour, of so much planning and scheming, of so much suffering to be annihilation? Annihilation! Ah, if there were nothing more than annihilation to expect! But there is an account to be rendered. God will not be mocked. How do you suppose God will judge a life of which the share assigned to Him has been but a derisive homage? How do you suppose He will welcome those who have so easily dispensed with Him here below? Think you He will be able to say to such servants as those: “Enter into your Master’s rest?” Ah, what manner of servants are they who have served only their own interests and personal glory, who have centred all in self? Christ has foretold their future. To them will be addressed this awful and just sentence: “Depart from me, ye cursed; I know you not!”

I feel a misgiving as I draw towards the close of my discourse. I fear I have not been sufficiently faithful to the narrative I have selected for my text. What do I see in it? A poor woman offering all she has to the Lord. I have shown that what we are called to imitate in this example is the inward sacrifice, of which her offering is the faithful expression. This is true; for if, in this gift of her all, she had been actuated by a feeling of pride or fanaticism, her action would have had no value whatever before God. It is therefore to the intention of her heart we must look; it is in this respect we are to consider her as our pattern; what we are to learn from her is not to give all we possess, but to give ourselves.

All this is true, and yet there is something more in this story. The poor widow has given her *all*; I cannot forget this fact, even though I acknowledge its spiritual meaning. Vainly do I endeavour to persuade myself that we are not called to such sacrifices as this, and that we are to take them in their spiritual sense. I am not satisfied with my explanation.

She has given her *all*. That is the fact I would leave upon your hearts to-day without any commentary. I do not say, "Give all, as she did." I feel that this cannot be a duty. Nevertheless, "she has given all she had." Sublime folly! I hear some exclaim. Yes; but it is by folly such as this that the world is to be saved. This folly is not a duty for all; but does it not stand out before us as a bitter reproach? Where are they now, the Christians who have made themselves poor for Christ? I could point you to men who have given their all for their country. I could tell you the name of a mother who sent, one after the other, her three sons to die for the independence of their fatherland. What more shall I add? I humble myself and bow my head low. Alas! will the heroic ages of the Church never again dawn upon her? Will such sacrifices be admired by the world only in other spheres? O God! in presence of the temptations of the world, in this age of comfort and self-indulgence, may these words, uttered by Thine own Son, thrill through our consciences today as a withering reproach, "She of her want hath cast in all that she had, even all her living!"