

XIV.

A Dying Man's Regrets.

1. THE SECRET OF A HOLY, ACTIVE, AND PEACEFUL LIFE.

JANUARY 13, 1856.

MY dearly beloved in the well-beloved of the Father, I thank God who again allows me to address you in His name, for your encouragement and for my own consolation; but I have great need that you have with me the patience of God, "with whom we are accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." My declining strength neither allows me to turn nor to raise myself, and it is only in this reclining position that I can speak to you. I hope to be able to do it so as to be heard by all.

A man is in a singular position who has been for a number of months, and may perhaps continue an in-definite time to come, constantly living under the impression that the bonds that held him to life are snapped—that God has struck him with an incurable and mortal disease, and he knows not how soon his Father's voice may call him home. He must, indeed, be insensible, and greatly wanting in reflection and Christian feeling, if he does not cast a retrospective look upon his past life; and at the same time, as thoughts of recovery ought and must rise in his mind—for, after all, he is in the hands of God, who can raise the dead, and who has raised many nearer death than he—he is disposed to ask himself, If I were restored to life, what use should I make of it? And while he recollects, that his whole life has proved the weakness and frailty of his resolutions, still he hopes that, by the goodness of God, such a visitation would not be lost for the second portion of his life and of his ministry. And then he says, I should like to do such or such a thing; and certainly there is nothing that I should not wish to do differently and better than I have done it. This is a cause of salutary humiliation for me; it may be a salutary instruction for you to reflect upon the regrets of a man who is dying, or who believes himself to be dying, and who seeks to represent to himself the different use he would make of life if it were restored to him.

It is more particularly towards such thoughts as these that I wish to draw your attention upon these occasions; and in order to choose immediately an example, there are points upon which, if I were to begin life anew, I would make considerable changes—I mean in my spiritual life. Of course, the private applications of the principle I have laid down belong to the Lord; but there are general applications of it that may be mentioned without inconvenience in a small meeting like this—for instance, prayer, the reading of the Bible, Christian liberty.

Now, here is a thing that strikes me. I regret having regulated my life too much upon my own plans—I mean upon my plans of faithfulness and Christian sanctification—and not more simply upon the plan that the Lord unfolds before each of us. I think I can easily make you understand my idea in a few words, and every child of God will be ready to apprehend it immediately. We

are disposed to form for ourselves a certain ideal of Christian life, of Christian activity, and of a Christian ministry, and to attach to our ideal certain plans and methods, and we are satisfied with ourselves only if we can attain to the realisation of them. It is, then, of importance to make the best plans, and to seek the best methods possible for their execution. All this is undoubtedly very good; but there is a great defect at the root of it: self—hidden self—which is so deeply rooted in the heart, and but too evidently appears in our best and purest works. What I should wish, would be to form the plan of my life, and of my daily conduct, not according to my own ideas, nor my own feelings, but according to the commandments of God, to His inward witness, to the guiding of His Spirit, and to the outward direction He gives to our life.

My ideas of the manner in which I would regulate my life will be easily understood by those who reflect upon the way in which Jesus regulated His. We do not find in Jesus those plans and methods that have so much occupied many good people, and have often perplexed them, and taken up a considerable part of their time which might have been better employed. But what do we find? We find a man (I consider Him here as the Son of man) who has no other wish than to accomplish the mission He has received from the Father, and who has no other plan than to enter into the plans of the Father; so that, with His eyes constantly fixed upon Him, He is only occupied in listening to His voice, that He may follow its directions, and to discern His will, in order to execute it. The works of Jesus Christ are prepared for Him one after another, and set by God before Him on His way, following each other so naturally, and arising so easily one out of another, that they never occasioned any confusion, even in the busiest days of His ministry. On a day, for instance, like that described in the ninth chapter of St Matthew, in which He calls one of His apostles, heals several sick, restores to life a dead child, and, as He was passing by, heals a woman who had been diseased several years, without mentioning the other good deeds which He spread all along upon His way, there is not an instant of hesitation or embarrassment, either for the arrangement of these works or for the time given to each, because Jesus Christ followed the plan of God, and God led Him by a straight path. Whenever there is on man's part this perfect accordance with the will of God, God on His part leads us in perfect light, and thus is realised an admirable and profound expression of the Holy Spirit : "We are created in Jesus Christ unto good works, which God hath prepared that we should walk in them." Here good works are presented, not as a path that we have to make out for ourselves, but as a path that God has traced, and in which we have only to walk. It is God's war, not our own; we have only to follow this path, and we shall perform every moment the will of God. If I have made you understand as well as I could, with so little development, what I wish I had done, and what I wish to do if restored to life, you will easily see the advantage that this conformity of our will with the will of God has over our personal plans, even the best of them. I must add, that I have no wish to discourage personal plans, which we should always endeavour to make as complete as possible. I think that our weakness requires this prop, provided

our personal plans are always subordinate to the general rule of following only the will of God.

Now, to mention two or three principal ideas, the method of which Jesus Christ gives us an example, is, in the first place, a condition of holiness. What constitutes sin, taken in its primitive sense? It is the seeking of self—self-confidence—self-will—self-righteousness—self-glory—and of all that relates to us personally. So the wish to do what is right, and even to do the Lord's will, if it is only founded upon our own will and projects, inevitably participates in some measure of the root of sin; while, on the contrary, the very essence of holiness being the conformity of our will with the Divine will, it is when we have no other plan than that of God, and no other will than the will of God, that we shall have attained true holiness—holiness that will not appear outwardly only, but that will have an inward influence—a holiness like that of Jesus Christ. The holiness of Jesus Christ follows and results from the principle I have just mentioned; that is to say, a constant surrender to the will of God alone, manifested inwardly by the testimony of His Spirit, and outwardly by the declarations of His Word and by the indications of His providence. Jesus Christ is holy, because He wills only what God wills—because He seeks not His own glory, but that of the Father. This is the power of His holiness.

This conformity to the will of God is, then, a condition of holiness, and it is at the same time a condition of activity. Much time may be lost in seeking to please ourselves even in what is good. It is well to recollect how easily we may be mistaken, and how we may be absorbed in endless reflections and considerations. But how many men have acknowledged at the end of their career, that a considerable part of their life has been spent in forming plans, that might have been more usefully employed in accomplishing the work immediately at hand, and promoting thus the good of others! See what activity the plan followed by Jesus Christ, that I have just mentioned, allows Him. In the ninth chapter of St Matthew and elsewhere, we see good works thrown in His way, not one upon another, but one after another; and there is no limit to an activity founded upon this perfect harmony with the will of God, the action of man becoming a Divine action, and his life, as it were, becoming a Divine life, implanted in our human nature, in which something of the power of God is wrought. We have no idea of what we could do if self were completely swallowed up in this perfect harmony with God; if we sought no other will than His; if every word of our mouth, every throb of our heart, every thought of our mind, every movement of our spirit or body, were drawn towards Him, saying, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." Some men have shown what man can do—Luther, Calvin, St Paul, Moses; these men showed what a man can do, when he seeks only the will of God. Jesus Christ did much more, because in Him alone the conformity with the Divine will was perfect. It is, then, a condition of activity—of almost unlimited activity; yet there is a limit, since God does not require of His creatures more than they are capable of doing.

Finally, and I here conclude, it is a condition of peace. There is no peace for a man who makes self his mainspring of action. There is always fear that he may be mistaken; he is troubled, and often commits errors, because human

will and human interests are subject to much error; he can find no rest, he is agitated, tormented, and excites the profound compassion of him who, seeing the sincere desire he has to glorify God, sees at the same time how many obstacles his want of simplicity accumulates around his way; while, on the contrary, when we look to God alone, we can cast our burden upon Him, and He will sustain us.

And again, if my plans are of my own imagining, they may not be practicable. I wish to embrace a profession, but a certain expenditure, that I cannot meet, would be requisite. I wish to be a painter, but my sight is not good; or an orator, but I have no voice; or a surgeon, but my hand trembles. All my hopes are disappointed, and I shall never be consoled. But there could be no such disappointment if my projects were chosen in accordance with God's appointed plan. If they were, the impossibility of doing what I had at first intended, would show me that what I wished was not what God called me to; and the obstacles that rise in my way are like so many lights, by which God reveals to me my true vocation.

If we act in this spirit (I say it with deep reverence), our vocation is God's affair rather than our own—it is His work, and not ours; and the activity, the individual exertion that God always requires of us, consists only in following where He leads, in a spirit of faithful and childlike obedience. In that we shall find perfect peace. God cannot mislead us. We are often tormented with the thought, that we do not do enough, or that we do amiss, or that we do not do the work which God appointed for us.

During the first weeks that followed the declaration of the doctors (that my disease was beyond their skill), I recollect how much I was troubled by the idea that my work was not done. By the grace of God I am now delivered from these thoughts, because I understand that is not my work, but God's; and I acknowledge that, by the sufferings and the afflictions He has sent me, and by the hope of eternal life that will follow, the Lord teaches me to exercise a new ministry, probably a more important one than what I had purposed, and at all events more sure, because it comes more directly from the hand of God, who mercifully constrains me to walk in this path for His service and glory. It is in such cases that we can say, like Jesus Christ before He suffered death, "I have finished the work thou gavest me to do." And why could he say that? Because He sought only to do the work of God, and God withdrew Him, as a ripe fruit is gathered, when His mission was accomplished. Well, and shall not we, too, seek to do the work that the Father has given us to do, committing ourselves to His care. And if we are faithful, we also shall only be withdrawn when our work is accomplished. To God alone it belongs to decide when the work He will do by us is accomplished. It may be imperfect, incomplete in the judgment of men; but if we are upright before Him, the Lord will not allow us to pass away without leaving any trace behind us upon the earth; He will not withdraw us before our work is accomplished in His sight; and we shall be enabled to say, in a spirit of humility, with the Lord, "I have finished the work that thou gavest me to do." Vinet said so, without being aware of it, when he gave his last theological lecture upon these words, "I have finished the work

that thou gavest me to do." And what was accomplished in Vinet, was also in Rochat, and in all the true servants of God. There is much peace in seeking our plans only in God, and in following Him, denying ourselves; and it is only thus peace is to be found.

Let us, then, endeavour to seek our plans in God alone; that those who are summoned away may humble themselves, and those who have still to live may grow in grace. Let us in this spirit endeavour to follow Jesus Christ in His Gethsemane, having our eyes constantly fixed upon the Father's will. It will be for us as it was for Jesus Christ, a condition of holiness, a condition of activity, and a condition of perfect peace. It is this peace that I ask of God for you, and I should be happy if I could think that these few reflections have excited in those who have still before them life and strength the wish to use them faithfully, and simply to glorify God according to their Saviour's example, so that they may be able to say, when their turn comes, "I have finished the work that thou gavest me to do," and may spend in perfect peace the time that intervenes till they are called from this world to the Father, by the grace of the Lord, and by the power and unction of the Holy Spirit.