

## PARABLE X.

## THE TWO SONS.

MATTHEW XXI. 28-32.

OUR Lord had put back with another question (ver. 24, 25) the question (ver. 23) with which his adversaries had hoped either to silence Him, if He should decline to answer; or to obtain matter of accusation against Him, if He should give the answer which they expected: and now, becoming Himself the assailant, He commences that series of parables, in which, as in a glass held up before them, they might see themselves, the impurity of their hearts, their neglect of the charge laid upon them, their ingratitude for the privileges vouchsafed them, the aggravated guilt of that outrage against Himself which they were already meditating in their hearts. Yet even these, wearing as they do so severe and threatening an aspect, are not words of defiance, but of earnest tenderest love, spoken with the intention of turning them, if this were yet possible, from their purpose, of winning *them* also for the kingdom of God. The first parable, that of the Two Sons, goes not so deeply into the heart of the matter as the two that follow, and is rather retrospective, while those other are prophetic as well.

‘*But what think ye?*’ We have the same introduction to a longer discourse, xvii. 25—‘*A certain man had two sons.*’ Here, as at Luke xv. 11, are described, under the figure of two sons of one father, two great moral divisions of men, under one or other of which might be ranged almost all with

whom our blessed Lord in his teaching and preaching came in contact. Of one of these classes the Pharisees were specimens and representatives, though this class as well as the other will exist at all times. In this are included all who have sought a righteousness through the law, and by help of it have been preserved in the main from gross and open out-breakings of evil. In the second class, of which the publicans and harlots stand as representatives, are contained all who have thrown off the yoke, openly and boldly transgressed the laws of God, done evil as 'with both hands earnestly.' Now the condition of those first is of course far preferable; that righteousness of the law better than this open unrighteousness;—provided always that it be ready to give place to the righteousness of faith, when that appears; provided that it knows and feels its own incompleteness; which will ever be the case, where the attempt to keep the law has been truly and honestly made; the law will then have done its proper work, and have proved 'a schoolmaster to Christ.' But if this righteousness is satisfied with itself,—and this will be, where evasions have been sought out to escape the strictness of the requirements of the law; if, cold and loveless and proud, it imagines that it wants nothing, and so refuses to submit itself to the righteousness of faith, then far better that the sinner should have had his eyes open to perceive his misery and guilt, even though this had been by means of manifest and grievous transgressions, than that he should remain in this ignorance of his true condition, of all which is lacking to him still; just as it would be better that disease, *if in the frame*, should take a definite shape, so that it might be felt and acknowledged to be disease, and then met and overcome, than that it should be secretly lurking in, and pervading, the whole system; its very existence being denied by him the sources of whose life it was sapping. From this point of view St. Paul speaks, Rom. vii. 7-9; and this same lesson, that there is no such fault as counting we have no fault, is taught us throughout all Scripture. It is taught us in the bearing of the elder son towards his father and return-

ing brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke xv. 28-30); and again in the demeanour of the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to his house toward Him and toward the woman 'which was a sinner' (Luke vii. 36-50); and in that of another Pharisee, whose very prayers this spirit and temper made to be nothing worth (Luke xviii. 10; cf. 29-32).

'And he came to the first and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard.' This command, which we may compare with that of Matt. xx. 1-7, was the general summons made both by the natural law in the conscience, and also by the revealed law which came by Moses, that men should bring forth fruit unto God. This call the publicans and harlots, and all open sinners, manifestly neglected and despised. The son first bidden to go to the work '*answered and said, I will not.*'<sup>1</sup> The rudeness of the answer, the absence of any attempt to excuse his disobedience, are both characteristic. The representative of careless, reckless sinners, he has dismissed even the hypocrisies with which others cloke their disobedience; cares not to say, like those invited guests, 'I pray thee have me excused;' but flatly refuses to go. '*But afterward he repented and went.*' There came over him a better mind, even as we know that such under the preaching of the Baptist and afterwards of the Lord Himself came over many who before had stood out against God.

'And he came to the second, and said likewise; and he answered and said, I go, sir.'<sup>2</sup> The Scribes and Pharisees, as professing zeal for the law, set themselves in the way as though they would fulfil the command. But they said, and did not (Matt. xxiii. 2); the prophet Isaiah had long since described them truly (Matt. xv. 8; cf. Isai. xxix. 13), 'This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard: 'The life of sinners is nothing but the actualizing of the cry and profession, "We will not do the will of God."'

<sup>2</sup> Ἐγὼ, κύριε. The readings here are various; *ναὶ κύριε, ὑπάγω κύριε*, and many more; all, however, easily traced up to transcribers wanting to amend a phrase which seemed to them incomplete. Πορεύομαι, ἀπέρχομαι, or some such word, must be supplied. See 1 Sam. iii. 4, 6; Gen. xiii. 1.

honoureth Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.' So was it here. When the marked time arrived, when the Baptist came to them '*in the way of righteousness,*' and summoned to an earnest repentance on the part of all, when it was needful to take decisively one side or the other, then when many hitherto openly profane were baptized, confessing their sins (Matt. iii. 5, 6), '*repented, and went:*' the real unrighteousness of the Pharisees, before concealed under show of zeal for the law, was clearly displayed: professing willingness to go, they '*went not.*'

To the Lord's question, '*Whether of them twain did the will of his father?*' his adversaries cannot plead inability to reply, as they had pleaded to a former question (ver. 27); they have no choice but to answer, though their answer condemns themselves. '*They say unto Him, The first:*' not, of course, that he did it absolutely well, but by comparison with the other. Then follows the application to themselves of the acknowledgment reluctantly wrung from them: '*Verily, I say unto you, That the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you*' (cf. Luke vii. 29, 37-50). In these words, '*go before you,*' or '*take the lead of you,*' there is a gracious intimation that for them too the door of hope was open still, that as yet no irreversible doom excluded them from that kingdom: the others indeed had preceded them; but they might still follow, if they would. And why are they thus proving the last to enter into the kingdom, if indeed they shall enter it at all? '*For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not.*' An emphasis has been sometimes laid on the words, '*in the way of righteousness,*' as though they were brought in to aggravate the sin of the Pharisees, as though the Lord would say, '*The Baptist came, a pattern of that very righteousness of the law, in which you profess to exercise yourselves. He did not come, calling to the new life of the Gospel, of which I am the pattern, and which you might have misunderstood; he did not come, seeking to put new wine into the old bottles, but himself fulfilling that very form and pattern of righteous-*

ness which you professed to have set before yourselves; became an earnest ascetic (Matt. ix. 11-14); separating himself from sinners; while yet you were so little hearty about *any* form of earnest goodness, that for all this he obtained no more acceptance with you than I have done. You found fault with him for the strictness of his life, as you find fault with Me for the condescension of mine (Matt. xi. 16-19). And this unbelief of yours was not merely for a time; but afterward, when God had set his seal to his mission, when *the publicans and the harlots believed him*, even then ye could not be provoked to jealousy: *ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.*'

In many copies, and some not unimportant ones, it is the son that is first spoken to, who promises to go, and afterwards disobeys; and the second who, refusing first, afterwards changes his mind, and enters on the work. Probably the order was thus reversed by transcribers, who thought that the application of the parable must be to the successive callings of Jews and Gentiles,<sup>1</sup> and that therefore the order of their calling should be preserved. The parable, however, does not in the first instance apply to the Jew and Gentile, but rather to the two bodies within the bosom of the Jewish Church. It is not said, '*the Gentiles,*' but '*the publicans and the harlots, go into the kingdom of heaven before you;*' while yet that former statement, if the parable had admitted (and if it had admitted, it must have required it), would have been a far stronger way of provoking them to jealousy (Acts

<sup>1</sup> So Origen, Chrysostom, and Athanasius: Jerome too, who quotes as a parallel to '*I go, sir,*' the words of the children of Israel at the giving of the law, 'All that the Lord hath said will we do and be obedient' (Exod. xxiv. 7). The *Auct. Oper. Imperf.* is almost the only ancient author who interprets the parable rightly; noting at length the inconveniences that attend the application of it to Jew and Gentile. But the 'as it seems to me,' with which Origen introduces his erroneous explanation, marks that there was another interpretation current in the Church, as is explicitly stated by Jerome: 'Others do not think that this is a parable of the Gentiles and Jews, but simply of the sinners and the just.'

xxii. 21, 22; Rom. x. 19–21). The application of the parable to Gentile and Jew need not indeed be excluded, since the whole Jewish nation stood morally to the Gentile world in the same relation which the more self-righteous among themselves did to notorious transgressors. But not till the next parable do Jew and Gentile, in their relations to one another, and in their several relations to the kingdom of God, come distinctly and primarily forward.