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WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?

BY C. BRADLAUGH.

THE doctrines of Jesus may be sought for and found in a small compass. Four thin gospels are alleged to contain nearly the entirety of his sayings, and as most Englishmen are professedly Christians, it might be fairly supposed that the general public were conversant with Christ's teachings. This, however, is not the case. The bulk of professors believe from custom rather than from reading. They profess a faith as they follow a fashion—because others have done so before them. What did Jesus teach? Manly self-reliant resistance of wrong, and practise of right? No; the key-stone of his whole teaching may be found in the text, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* Is poverty of spirit the chief amongst virtues, that Jesus gives it the prime place in his teaching? Is poverty of spirit a virtue at all? Surely not. Manliness of spirit, honesty of spirit, fulness of rightful purpose, these are virtues; but poverty of spirit is a crime. When men are poor in spirit, then do the proud and haughty in spirit oppress and trample upon them, but when men are true in spirit and determined (as true men should be) to resist and prevent evil, wrong, and injustice whenever they can, then is there greater opportunity for happiness here, and no lesser fitness for the enjoyment of further happiness, in some may-be heaven, hereafter. Are you poor in spirit, and are you smitten; in such case what did Jesus teach?—"Unto whom that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer also the other."† 'Twere better far to teach that "he who courts oppression shares the crime." Rather say, if smitten once, take careful measure to prevent a future smiting. I have heard men preach passive resistance, but this teaches actual invitation of injury, a course degrading in the extreme. Shelley breathed higher humanity in his noble advice:—

"Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms and looks, which are
Weapons of an unvanquished war."

There is a wide distinction between the passive resistance to wrong and the courting of further injury at the hands of the wrongdoer. I have in no case seen this better illustrated than in Mr. George Jacob Holyoake's history of his imprisonment in Gloucester Jail,‡ where passive resistance

* Matthew, v., 3.

† Luke, vi., 29.

‡ "Last Trial by Jury for Atholam," p. 69.

saved him from the indignity of a prison dress, and also from compulsory attendance at morning prayer in the prison chapel, which in his case would have been to him an additional insult. But the teaching of Jesus goes much beyond this kind of conduct; the poverty of spirit principle is enforced to the fullest conceivable extent—"Him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee, and from him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again."* Poverty of person is the only possible sequence to this extraordinary manifestation of poverty of spirit. Poverty of person is attended with many unpleasantnesses; and if Jesus knew that poverty of goods would result from his teaching, we might expect some notice of this. And so there is—as if he wished to keep the poor content through their lives with poverty, he says, "Blessed be ye poor for yours is the kingdom of God."† "But woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation."‡ He pictures one in hell, whose only related vice is that in life he was rich; and another in heaven, whose only related virtue is that in life he was poor.§ He at another time tells his hearers that it is as difficult for a rich man to get into heaven as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.|| The only intent of such teaching could be to induce the poor to remain content with the want and misery attendant on their wretched state in this life, in the hope of a higher recompense in some future life. Is it good to be content with poverty? Nay, 'tis better far to investigate the cause for such poverty, with a view to its cure and prevention. The doctrine is a most horrid one which declares that the poor shall not cease from the face of the earth. Poor in spirit and poor in pocket. With no courage to work for food, or money to purchase it! we might well expect to find the man who held these doctrines with empty stomach also; and what does Jesus teach?—"Blessed are ye that hunger now, for ye shall be filled."¶ He does not say when the filling shall take place, but the date is evidently postponed until the time when you will have no stomachs to replenish. It is not in this life that the hunger is to be sated. Do you doubt me, turn again to your Testament and read, "Woe unto you that are full, for ye shall hunger."** This must surely settle the point. It would be but little vantage to the hungry man to bless him by filling him, if when he had satisfied his appetite, he were met by a curse which had awaited the completion of his repast. Craven in spirit, with an empty purse and hungry mouth—what next? The man who has not manliness enough to be righted wrong, will probably bemoan his hard fate, and cry bitterly that so sore are the misfortunes he endures. And what does Jesus teach?—"Blessed are ye that weep now, for ye shall laugh."†† Is this true, and if true, when? "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."‡‡ Aye, but when? Not while they mourn and weep. Weeping for the past is vain; 'tis past, and a deluge of tears will never wash away its history. Weeping for the present is worse than vain—it obstructs your sight. In each minute of your life the aforesaid future is present-born, and you need dry and keen eyes to give it and yourself a safe and happy deliverance. When shall they that mourn be comforted? Are slaves that weep salt tear-

* Luke, vi., vv. 29, 30.

† Luke, xviii., 25.

‡‡ Matthew, v., 4.

† Luke, vi., 20.

‡ Luke, vi., 21.

‡ Luke, vi., 24.

** Luke, vi., 25.

§ Luke, xvi., 19—31.

†† Luke, vi., 21.

drops on their steel shackles comforted in their weeping? Nay, but each pearly overflowing, as it falls, rusts mind as well as fetter. Ye who are slaves and weep, will never be comforted until ye dry your eyes and nerve your arms, and, in the plenitude of your manliness—

“Shake your chains to earth like dew,
Which in sleep have fall’n on you.”

Jesus teaches that the poor, the hungry, and the wretched shall be blessed? This is not so. The blessing only comes when they have ceased to be poor, hungry, and wretched. Contentment under poverty, hunger, and misery is high treason, not to yourself alone, but to your fellows. These three, like foul diseases, spread quickly wherever humanity is stagnant and content with wrong.

What did Jesus teach? “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”* So far well, but how if thy neighbour will not hear thy doctrine when thou preacheth the “glad tidings of great joy” to him? Then forgetting all thy love, and with the bitter hatred that a theological disputant alone can manifest, thou “shalt shake off the dust from your feet,” and by so doing make it more tolerable in the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for your unfortunate neighbour who has ventured to maintain an opinion of his own, and who will not let you be his priest.† It is, indeed, a mockery to speak of love, as if love to one another could result from the dehumanising and isolating faith required from the disciple of Jesus. Ignatius Loyola in this, at least, was more consistent than his Protestant brethren. “If any man come unto me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”‡ “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man’s foes they shall be of his own household.”§ “Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my sake, shall receive an hundred fold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”|| The teaching of Jesus is, in fact, save yourself by yourself. The teaching of humanity should be, to save yourself save your fellow. The human family is a vast chain, each man and woman a link. There is no snapping off one link and preserving for it an entirety of happiness; our joy depends on our brother’s also. But what does Jesus teach? That “many are called, but few are chosen:” that the majority will inherit an eternity of misery, while it is but the minority who obtain eternal happiness. And on what is the eternity of bliss to depend? On a truthful course of life? Not so. Jesus puts Father Abraham in Heaven, whose reputation for faith outstrips his character for veracity. The passport through Heaven’s portals is faith. “He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, and he that believeth not, shall be damned.”¶ Are you married? Have you a wife you love? She dies and you. You from your first speech to your last had ever said, “I believe,” much as a clever parrot might say

* Matthew, xix., 19.

§ Matthew, x., 34—36.

† Matthew, x., 14, 15,

‡ Matthew, xix., 29.

¶ Luke, xiv., 26.

¶ Mark, xvi., 16.

it, if well taught. You had never examined your reasons for your faith; for, like a true believer should, you distrusted the efficacy of your carnal reason. You said, therefore, "I believe in God and Jesus Christ," because you had been taught to say it, and you would have as glibly said, "I believe in Allah, and in Mahomet his prophet," had your birth-place been a few degrees more eastward, and your parents and instructors Turks. You believed in this life and awake in Heaven. Your much-loved wife did not think as you did—she could not. Her organisation, education, and temperament were all different from your own. She disbelieved because she could not believe. She was a good wife, but she disbelieved. A good and affectionate mother, but she disbelieved. A virtuous and kindly woman, but she disbelieved. And you are to be happy for an eternity in Heaven, while she is writhing in agony in Hell. If true, I could say with Shelley, of this Christianity, that it

"Peoples earth with demons, hell with men,
And heaven with slaves."

It is often urged that Jesus is the Saviour of the world, that he brought redemption without let or stint to the whole human race. But what did Jesus teach? "Go not into any way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritan enter ye not."* These were his injunctions to those whom he first sent out to preach. "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel," is his hard answer to the poor Syrophenian woman who is entreating succour for her child. Christianity, as first taught by Jesus, was for the Jews alone, and it is only upon his rejection by them, that the world at large has the opportunity of salvation afforded it. "He came unto his own and his own received him not."† Why should the Jews be more God's own than the Gentiles? Is God the creator of all? and did he create the descendant of Abraham with greater right and privilege than all other men? Then, indeed, is great and grievous injustice done. You and I had no choice whether we would be born Jews or Gentiles; yet to the accident of such a birth is attached the first offer of a salvation which, if accepted, shuts out all beside. The Kingdom of Heaven is a prominent feature in the teachings of Jesus, and it may be well to ascertain, as precisely as we can, the picture drawn by God incarnate of his own special domain. 'Tis likened to a wedding feast, to which the invited guests coming not, servants are sent out into the highways to gather all they can find—both good and bad. The King comes in to see his motley array of guests, and findeth one without a wedding garment. The King inquired why he came in to the feast without one, and the man, whose attendance has been compulsorily enforced, is speechless. And who can wonder? he is a guest from necessity, not choice, he neither chose the fashion of his coming or his attiring. Then comes the King's decree, the command of the all-merciful and loving King of Heaven. "Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Commentators urge that it was the custom to provide wedding garments for all guests, and that this man is punished for his non-acceptance of the customary and ready robe. The text does not warrant

* Matthew, x., 5.

† John, i., 11.

this position, but assigns, as an explanation of the parable, that an invitation to the heavenly feast will not ensure its partakal, for that many are called, but few are chosen. What more of the Kingdom of Heaven? "There shall be joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance."* Nay, it is urged that the greater sinner one has been, the better saint he makes, and the more he has sinned, so much the more he loves God. "To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."† Is not this indeed asserting that a life of vice, with its stains washed away by a death-bed repentance, is better than a life of consistent and virtuous conduct? Why should the fatted calf be killed for the prodigal son?‡ Why should men be taught to make to themselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness?

These ambiguities, these assertions of punishment and forgiveness of crime, instead of directions for its prevention and cure, are serious detractions from a system alleged to have been inculcated by one for whom his followers claim divinity.

Will you again turn back to the love of Jesus as the redeeming feature of the whole? Then, I ask you, read the story of the fig-tree§ withered by the hungry Jesus. The fig-tree, if he were all-powerful God, was made by him, he limited its growth and regulated its development. He prevented it from bearing figs, expected fruit where he had rendered fruit impossible, and in his *infinite love* was angry that the tree had not upon it that it could not have. Tell me the love expressed in that remarkable speech which follows one of his parables, and in which he says:—"For, I say unto you, that unto every one which hath shall be given, and from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away from him. *But those, mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring them hither, and slay them before me.*"|| What love is expressed by that Jesus who, if he were God, represents himself as saying to the majority of his unfortunate creatures (for it is the few who are chosen):—"Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."¶ Far from love is this horrid notion of eternal torment. And yet the popular preachers of to-day talk first of love and then of

"Hell, a red gulf of everlasting fire,
Where poisonous and undying worms prolong
Eternal misery to those hapless slaves,
Whose life has been a penance for its crimes."

In reading the sayings attributed to Jesus, all must be struck by that passage which so extraordinarily influenced the famous Origen.†† If he understood it aright, its teachings are most terrible. If he understood it wrongly, what are we to say for the wisdom of teaching which expresses so vaguely the meaning which it rather hides than discovers by its words? The general intent of Christ's teaching seems to be an inculcation of neglect of this life, in the search for another. "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life."‡‡

* Luke, xv., 7.

§ Matt., xxi., 18-22; Mark, xi., 12-24.

†† Matt., xix., 12.

† Luke, vii., 47.

|| Luke, xix., 26, 27.

‡‡ John, vi., 27.

‡ Luke, xv., 27.

¶ Matt., xxv., 41.

"Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.....take no thought, saying, what shall we eat? or what shall we drink? or wherewithal shall we be clothed? But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." The effect of these texts, if fully carried out, would be most disastrous; they would stay all scientific discoveries, prevent all development of man's energies. It is in the struggle for existence here, that men are compelled to become acquainted with the conditions which compel happiness or misery. It is only by the practical application of that knowledge, that the wants of society are understood and satisfied, and disease, poverty, hunger, and wretchedness, prevented. Jesus substitutes "I believe," for "I think," and puts "watch and pray," instead of "think, then act." Belief is made the most prominent feature, and is, indeed, the doctrine which pervades, permeates, and governs all Christianity. It is represented that, at the judgment, the world will be reproved "Of sin because they believe not." This teaching is most disastrous; man should be incited to active thought: belief is a cord which would bind him to the teachings of an uneducated past. Thought, mighty thought, mighty in making men most manly, will burst this now rotting cord, and then—shaking off the cobwebbed and dust-covered traditions of dark old times, humanity shall stand crowned with a most glorious diadem of facts, which, like gems worn on a bright summer's day, shall grow more resplendent as they reflect back the rays of truth's meridian sun. Fit companion to blind belief is slave-like prayer. Men pray as though God needed most abject entreaty ere he would grant them justice. What does Jesus teach on this? What is his direction on prayer? "After this manner pray ye—Our Father, which art in Heaven." Do you think that God is the Father of all, when you pray that he will enable you to defeat some others of his children, with whom your nation is at war? And why "which art in Heaven?" Where is Heaven? you look upward, and if you were at the antipodes, would look upward still. But that upward would be downward to us. Do you know where Heaven is, if not, why say "which art in Heaven?" Is God infinite, then he is in earth also, why limit him to Heaven? "Hallowed be thy name." What is God's name? and if you know it not, how can you hallow it? how can God's name be hallowed even if you know it? "Thy kingdom come." What is God's kingdom, and will your praying bring it quicker? Is it the Judgment day, and do you say "Love one another," pray for the more speedy arrival of that day, on which God may say to your fellow "depart ye cursed into everlasting fire?" "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven." How is God's will done in Heaven? If the devil be a fallen angel, there must have been rebellion even there. "Give us this day our daily bread." Will the prayer get it without work? No. Will work get it without the prayer? Yes. Why pray then for bread to God, who says, "Blessed be ye that hunger.....woe unto you that are full?" "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." What debts have you to God? Sins? Samuel Taylor Coleridge says, "A sin is an evil which has its ground or origin in the agent, and not in the compulsion of circumstances. Circumstances are compulsory, from the absence of a power to resist or control them: and if the absence likewise be the effect of circumstances.....the evil derives from the circumstances.....and such evil is

not sin."* Do you say that you are independent of all circumstances, that you can control them, that you have a free will? Mr. Buckle says that the assertion of a free will "involves two assumptions, of which the first, though possibly true, has never been proved, and the second is unquestionably false. These assumptions are that there is an independent faculty, called consciousness, and that the dictates of that faculty are infallible."† "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Do you think God will possibly lead you into temptation? if so, you cannot think him all-good, if not all-good he is not God, if God, the prayer is a blasphemy.

I close this paper with the last scene in Jesus' life, not meaning that I have—in eight pages—fully examined his teachings; but hoping that enough is even here done to provoke inquiry and necessitate debate. Jesus, according to the general declaration of Christian divines, came to die, and what does he teach by his death? The Rev. F. D. Maurice it is, I think, who well says, "That he who kills for a faith must be weak, that he who dies for a faith must be strong." How did Jesus die? Giordano Bruno, and Julius Cæsar Vanini, were burned for Atheism. They died calm, heroic, defiant of wrong. Jesus, who could not die, courted death, that he, as God, might accept his own atonement, and might pardon man for a sin which he had not committed, and in which he had no share. The death he courted came, and when it came he could not face it, but prayed to himself that he might not die. And then, when on the cross, if two of the gospels do him no injustice, his last words—as there recorded—were a bitter cry of deep despair, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The Rev. Enoch Mellor, in his work on the Atonement, says, "I seek not to fathom the profound mystery of these words. To understand their full import would require one to experience the agony of desertion they express." Do the words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" express an "agony" caused by a consciousness of "desertion?" Doubtless they do; in fact, if this be not the meaning conveyed by the despairing death-cry, then there is in it no meaning whatever. And if those words do express a "bitter agony of desertion," then they emphatically contradict the teachings of Jesus. "Before Abraham was, I am." "I and my father are one." "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." These were the words of Jesus, words conveying (together with many other such texts) to the reader an impression that divinity was claimed by the man who uttered them. If Jesus had indeed been God, the words "My God, my God," would have been a mockery most extreme. God could not have deemed himself forsaken by himself. The dying Jesus, in that cry, confessed himself either the dupe of some other teaching, a self-deluded enthusiast, or an arch-impostor, who, in that bitter cry, with the wide-opening of the flood-gates through which life's stream ran out, confessed aloud that he, at least, was no deity, and deemed himself a God-forsaken man. The garden scene of agony is fitting prelude to this most terrible act. Jesus, who is God, prays to himself, in "agony he prayed most earnestly."‡ He refuses to hear his own prayers, and he, the omnipotent, is forearmed against his coming trial by an angel from heaven, who "strengthened" the great Creator. Was Jesus the Son of

* "Aids to Reflection," 1843, p. 200.

‡ Luke, xxii., 44.

† "History of Civilisation," Vol. I., p. 14.

God? Praying, he said, "Father, the hour is come, glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee."* And was he glorified? His death and resurrection most strongly disbelieved in the very city where they happened, if, indeed, they ever happened at all. His doctrines rejected by the only people to whom he preached them. His miracles denied by the only nation where they are alleged to have been performed; and he himself thus on the cross, crying out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Surely no further comment is needed on this head, to point more distinctly to the most monstrous mockery the text reveals.

To those who urge that the course I take is too bold, or that the problems I deal with are too deep or sacred, I will reply in Herschel's version of Schiller—

Wouldst thou reach perfection's goal,
Stay not! rest not!

Forward strain,
Hold not hand, and draw not rein.

* * * *

Perseverance strikes the mark,
Expansion clears whate'er is dark,
Truth in the abyss doth dwell,
My say is said—now fare thee well.

* John, xvii. 1.

