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ZEAL THE MEASURE OF LOVE.

"There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he to whom he forgave most. And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged." – Luke 7:41-43.

THE peculiar circumstances which drew forth the above colloquy will be very generally remembered. It was toward the close of our Lord's ministry, and a prominent Pharisee had invited him to dine with him and a company of friends; and while they reclined at dinner, after the custom of those times, – the table being spread in the centre and couches surrounding it on which the guests rested upon one elbow, while their feet extended out behind the couches – there came behind the Lord a woman, Mary Magdalene, widely known as a disreputable character; she was in deep contrition and was weeping, her tears falling copiously upon the Master's feet. She had with her an alabaster box of very expensive ointment, and as she prepared to anoint our Lord's feet with it she first wiped them with her hair. Such a scene probably never occurred before or since, and was well calculated to move even the hardest hearts. But, so far from entering into the real spirit of the situation, the Pharisees were of cynical mind and merely interpreted this as a proof that our Lord was not a prophet: arguing that, if he were, he would have known the character of the woman, [R2200 : page 241] for she "was a sinner." Our Lord, discerning their hearts, gave them a better explanation of the case in the language of our text.

We are not to understand from our Lord's illustration that Mary was ten times as guilty before the divine law as was Simon, the Pharisee, but rather that in this illustration our Lord pictured the sentiments of the two sinners. Really "there is none righteous, no, not one;" "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God;" both Simon and Mary were under the Law of Moses, according to which he who

was guilty of violating one feature of the Law had broken the Law as a whole; and had therefore failed of the reward promised to the one who would keep the whole, and had incurred the penalty pronounced for the violation of the whole, – death. Strictly speaking, then, both Simon and Mary owed the same amount – the lives of both were forfeited because of sin: and if either one of them were ever to obtain eternal life it could be only by the mercy of God, in the forgiveness of their sins. Strictly speaking, then, they each owed five hundred pence (were under sentence of death), and were alike unable to meet their indebtednesses.

Our Lord put the illustration of ten to one, not as representing his view of the situation, but as illustrating the sentiments of Mary and Simon. Mary realized her unworthiness, and in this respect was like the publican mentioned in one of our Lord's previous illustrations, who smote upon his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner;" – she realized her sinful load and how much need she had of the Lord's mercy in its removal. But Simon was like the other character of our Lord's discourse, who thanked God that he was not like other men, but that if not entirely perfect in every particular he was at least very nearly perfect. Alas! those who are in this condition of mind are farther from the Lord than the truly humble and penitent who realize their need of a Savior, even tho as respects many moralities they may be humanly on a higher plane. So in this case, while the Savior was present and Simon might have had a great blessing, it was penitent Mary who really received it. She heard the Master's words, "Thy sins are forgiven," while Simon who appreciated his unworthiness but slightly got no forgiveness. Here we have an illustration of our Lord's statement at another time, – "The whole need not a physician, but the sick." In reality there are none whole, all are sick; but only those who realize their sickness apply to the physician for his remedies.

Not only did our Lord justify his course in receiving the kind offices of penitent Mary, but, turning the argument, he administered a gentle but sharp reproof to Simon; he pointed out that he had neglected the common courtesies of that country and time. It was customary then

to receive guests with a kiss, as it is now our custom to shake hands; it was customary then to provide water for the washing of the guest's feet, uncomfortable by reason of travel along the dusty roads [R2201 : page 241] of that time; in the case of an honored guest a servant would be sent to wash the feet. Furthermore, with special guests sometimes perfumed ointments for the hair and toilet were provided. Our Lord calls Simon's attention to the fact that these little courtesies had been ignored by him, but had been more than made up for by Mary; and that the secret of the difference of sentiment lay in the fact that Simon loved him little, and that Mary loved him much.

It could not be that Simon had accidentally omitted these courtesies, for all Pharisees were punctilious on the subject of washings; nor need we suppose that it was an intentional slight put on our Lord. On the contrary, we may reasonably suppose that Simon, like Nicodemus, had a genuine interest in the Lord, and a surmise that he was a more than ordinary prophet. But both Simon and Nicodemus belonged to the respectable class, or higher caste, and came under the description of John (12:42,43), "Nevertheless, among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God."

Nicodemus came to the Lord by night to interview him, but Simon more shrewdly thought to get the opportunity of a conversation directly with the Lord by inviting him to dinner; but to prevent the thought that he had anything more than a general interest and curiosity respecting Christ, and thus to maintain the good opinion of his co-religionists, he treated the Lord and the disciples, who evidently were also guests, as persons of a lower caste; and as tho he thought that it was a sufficient honor to them to be his guests at all, he entertained them as inferiors; altho, probably, could he have done so without endangering his standing as a Pharisee, he would have enjoyed extending to the Lord every courtesy.

How many who like Mary have realized their sins and have appreciated the divine mercy in the forgiveness of their sins have almost envied Mary her privilege of touching the feet of the blessed Master and, as he declared, "anointing them for his burial." With us, such opportunity might properly be appreciated still more highly, because of greater knowledge; for we have learned what Mary probably very imperfectly understood, that our Lord Jesus for our sakes left the glory which he had with the Father and humbled himself to human conditions in order that we through his poverty might be made rich. And not only so: Mary at this time had no knowledge of the extent to [R2201 : page 242] which the Master would go on her behalf and ours, to redeem us from sin and its sentence of death; – Calvary was then still in the future.

What a comforting thought it should be to all who are of Mary's attitude of mind that it is still possible to wash and to anoint the Lord's feet. His own lips have declared that, whatever is done for the least one of his consecrated followers, is accepted by him as done unto himself. Ah! blessed thought; the Lord is still in the flesh, representatively; his faithful are to be esteemed "members of his body," as new creatures. And while these are still in the flesh, the sufferings of Christ in the flesh are still in progress, and will not be finished until the last member has been glorified. – Col. 1:24.

Moreover, the Scriptural figure holds good: Christ is the Head of this body which is his Church, and which for eighteen hundred years has been in process of development; and now the last members of the body are here, – "The feet of him." As members of the feet class many are weary, discouraged, needing rest, refreshment and comfort, such as was bestowed upon the literal feet of the Master.

Here comes in a test with respect to the symbolic feet of Christ, similar to that with respect to the natural feet which proved the great love of Mary and the slight of love of Simon. The members of the feet class are unpopular to-day as was the Master himself in his day, with a

class corresponding to the scribes and Pharisees and doctors of the Law. Only those who love the Master much and appreciate greatly their own forgiveness will love his "feet members" in the present time to the extent that they would be willing to serve them and to fellowship them; while others like Nicodemus and Simon, altho well-meaning and considerably interested, will be ashamed of the gospel of the Nazarene in the present time, and ashamed of his feet, which published to Zion glad tidings, saying, "Thy God reigneth" – the Millennial age is dawning and the reign of Christ has already begun. (Isa. 52:7.) But those who are ashamed either of the gospel or of its servants are ashamed of the Master and of the Father; and such cannot be recognized as "overcomers" of the world, because instead they are overcome by the world and its spirit. Such shall not be accounted worthy to progress into the full knowledge and privileges of discipleship.

How few there are who seem to have a large measure of the spirit of Mary Magdalene! How few are really very helpful to one another. How few pour upon one another the spikenard ointment of comforting words, helpful suggestions and encouragements. Those who are thus helpful will be found filled with a genuine love for the "head," for the "body" in general and even for the "feet." And the secret of their love as in Mary's case will be found to be a large appreciation of their own imperfections and of the Lord's mercy and grace toward them, in the forgiveness of their sins. The Apostle expresses the sentiments of these helpful and loving members of the body, who are the only ones who are making their calling and election sure, saying, – "For we thus judge, that if one died for all then were all dead; and that we who live should not henceforth live unto ourselves, but unto him who died for us and rose again."
