

OUR YEAR TEXT FOR 1904.

[Reprint from Pittsburgh Gazette.]

PASTOR C. T. Russell of the Bible House chapel, Allegheny, yesterday afternoon spoke on "A Text for the New Year." He said:

I choose for my text the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to the Church at Philippi – appropriate to us also. I suggest that we each make it our year-text, and trust that our minds, continually recurring to it, may be profited, strengthened and assisted in the right ways of the Lord. The words are:

"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are reputable, if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things." – Phil. 4:8.

Few seem to realize the power of the mind, the power of thought, as an element in the formation of character. "As a man thinketh so is he." How important, then, it is that we should think properly – that our minds should be rightly directed. The Scriptures assure us, and the experiences of the noblest people of the world convince us, that we have all so inherited degeneracy from our father Adam, that "there is none righteous, no not one; all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." This degeneracy affects us physically – we are a dying race under the Creator's sentence, "Dying thou shalt die." And this dying affects us not only physically but mentally and morally. "We are prone to sin as the sparks to fly upward." The taint is in us from our birth, for were we not "born in sin and shapen in iniquity"?

HUMAN REGULATIONS NECESSARY.

There are various methods of appealing to humanity, the success of each varying with the individual. Some need imprisonment and "stripes,"

others can be profited by moral suasion, by appeal to their reason, by appeal to the better elements of their natures, even though tainted or tarnished through original sin. Both of these methods of appeal are recognized in the world to-day. Pulpits and newspapers are appealing to the minds of men with more or less propriety and with more or less success; but nevertheless society protects itself by penal institutions – reformatories, jails, penitentiaries, etc. So it is with the divine government. Nature has some general laws by which the whole world of mankind is dominated – laws of retribution, by which every virtue brings a certain degree of reward, satisfaction and peace, and every crime brings a certain measure of chastisement, pain, trouble and unrest.

Nevertheless, the course of nature is so disordered in the present time by the prevalence of sin and its penalty and the operation of the laws of heredity that we cannot say that the laws of nature are at the present time absolutely just as respects each individual, whatever we may say of their general justice in respect to the race as a whole. Hence, as the Scriptures declare, "some men's sins go before to judgment and some they follow after."

In the coming millennial age, when Christ's Kingdom shall administer justice amongst men, the rewards and punishments will be equitable. No longer will the child suffer for the sins of the parents. No longer will the righteous suffer; but only the evil-doers, for thus it is written. (Jer. 31:29; Psa. 72:7.) In that blessed time the Lord will use both methods of appealing to the world. (1) An appeal will be made to their hearts and consciences, with inducements and rewards for obedience to the principles of righteousness – the reward of physical, mental and moral restitution or uplift, which will bring the obedient gradually back to the full image and likeness of God enjoyed by father Adam before his fall. (2) This appeal to the hearts and consciences of mankind will be supplemented by stripes, judgments, chastisements "upon every soul of man that doeth evil." We can to some degree realize the great advantage that will accrue to mankind under such dealings – how great will be the assistance. **[R3304 : page 22]**

THE LORD'S METHOD AT THE PRESENT TIME.

In the present age the Lord does not use this double method of appeal, but merely the first. He appeals to our hearts, our reasons, saying, "Come, let us reason together." But those who will not reason with the Lord now are not chastised, even if they go into grievous sins. The worldly are permitted to take their course; they receive no particular stripes or corrections from the Lord, because the day of the world's trial or judgment has not yet come. As the Apostle says, "The wicked shall do wickedly and none of the wicked shall understand;" and so we have on every hand sin, wickedness abounding, and that without interference from the Lord. Only with one class is the Lord now dealing, namely, the Church. We recognize, of course, that there is a divine supervision over the nations; that the Lord has kept in his **[R3305 : page 22]** own power more or less of the times and bounds of the nations, as the Apostle expresses the matter. (Acts 17:26.) However, these dealings with the nations have little to do with the world as individuals, and nothing to do with the world's trial, which belongs to the next age. "God hath appointed a day [the millennial day – a day with the Lord is as a thousand years] in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath afore ordained" – the Christ, head and body. – Acts 17:31; I Cor. 6:2.

We repeat, then, that the Lord's special dealings at the present time are with those who believe and not with unbelievers. He sends his message, "speaking peace through Jesus Christ," to him that hath an ear to hear and a heart to receive the message – and these are very few, comparatively. The appeal of the evangelist who follows the scriptural pattern is an appeal to the heads and the hearts of the people who have the ears to hear. He is not privileged to mete out stripes or other judgments or corrections to those who disregard his message. Those who have the ears, and who receive the word with gladness, get a great blessing – and that in proportion as they receive it into good and honest and obedient hearts. Those who do not hear at all, whose hearts are not in the condition to respond to the Gospel message, suffer a loss – a loss of the joy and peace and blessing and "comfort of the Scriptures" which the believers enjoy.

"BY THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING."

Not only does the Lord begin the work of grace among his people with the above-described message, speaking forgiveness and peace through Jesus, but, to those who do receive the message and who are exercised by it he continues the same process of dealing – still appealing to their hearts, heads and consciences. This is what the Apostle means when he says, "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." – I Cor. 1:21.

To the world this method of appealing merely to the heads and hearts seems like a weak and unsatisfactory method of dealing. The world finds it necessary to resort to force, and wonders that the Almighty does not resort to force to compel obedience to His laws rather than merely to exhort obedience to them. We have just seen that in the millennial age the Lord will use both methods, and the question properly arises, Why does he not use both methods of appealing to mankind in the present time – first, appeal through the intellect and heart, and second, appeal through force?

We answer, that the reason lies in the fact that God is now selecting a peculiar class – to use scriptural terms, he is now electing "a peculiar people." The class he is now seeking needs no stripes or punishments to constrain their obedience. They are constrained by love – love for God, love for the Redeemer, love for the principles of righteousness and a sympathetic love for the whole world of mankind, even their enemies.

If force were introduced in the present time it would be a hindrance to the development of this particular class which the Lord is now seeking, each of whom must be in heart, in intention (not in flesh) a copy of God's dear Son. Those who require stripes, punishments, etc., to enforce obedience to the divine requirements cannot be of the "very elect," whose disposition of heart is represented by the words of our Lord expressed through the prophet: "I delight to do thy will, O my God; thy law is written in my heart." – Psa. 40:8.

HOW GOD WORKS IN US TO WILL AND TO DO.

It is in harmony with this thought that God is now operating in the Church along the lines of appeal to our sentiments and not along the lines of force. As the Apostle says: "It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." God works in this class through the intellect and heart. He makes known to them "the riches of his grace" little by little as they are able to appreciate and willing to respond.

The first effect of this upon the proper heart is to induce a responsive sentiment, expressed by the Apostle thus: "The love of Christ constraineth us: for we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that we who live should henceforth live not to ourselves, but to him who died for us." (2 Cor. 5:14.) The class represented in this text have experienced the Truth working in them as the power of God up to the point of willing – willing to do the Lord's will; willing to renounce self; willing to follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus; willing to be copies of God's dear Son. The power of God continues to operate in such and unfolds to them more and more of the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the love of God which passeth all understanding, and which is expressed to these in the "exceeding great and precious promises" of the divine Word.

These promises operate upon the heart and mind and lead to works – obedience, self-denial, self-sacrifice – even unto death. It is such as are thus rightly exercised by divine grace and truth who may now hope to attain to all the great and wonderful things which God hath in reservation for them that love him.

Not only does God thus appeal to our minds, our thoughts, our reasoning faculties, with his explanation of right and wrong, truth and untruth, righteousness and sin, and promises of his continued favor unto life eternal, or for the disobedient his disfavor unto cutting off from life in the second death; but he urges upon us co-operation with him along the same lines – that we take hold of our minds, of our thoughts, and shape them into conformity with the divine mind, with the divine will.

This is the signification of our text: On the principle that every thought has its influence upon our words and conduct, the Apostle urges that our thoughts be the special objects of our solicitude, care, watchfulness. Our Redeemer expresses the same sentiment in different language saying, "Out of the abundance of the heart [mind] the mouth speaketh."* And out of the heart [R3305 : page 23] (mind) proceedeth envies, malice, strife, etc., – or contrariwise kindness, gentleness, goodness, love.

IMPORTANCE OF A RIGHT HEART.

It is all important, then, that we have right hearts; for as a bitter fountain cannot send forth sweet waters, neither can a heart that is in the bitterness of sin send forth blessing to those in contact with it. We admit that a certain amount of refinement and grace belonging to the children of God may be copied by the unregenerate, but it has no depth, it fails easily, it quickly discloses the real bitterness, selfishness and acrimony of the natural heart which underlies.

In the present time, therefore, the Lord does not appeal to these bitter hearts to send forth sweet waters. The appeals of the Scriptures are to the regenerated hearts of consecrated believers, addressed in all the epistles as "saints," "children of God," "the sanctified in Christ Jesus," "the Lord's brethren," etc. These having new hearts, new wills, sanctified or set apart to the Lord, to righteousness, to truth, to goodness, need nevertheless to keep watch over their every deed, word and thought.

Our text is the apostle's appeal to this class along this line. It is well that we should scan our outward conduct, to take note that our good intentions may not be so exhibited to others that they will misapprehend our real sentiments – "Let not your good be evil spoken of." It is right, too, that we should "set a guard upon our mouth lest we should sin with our lips," lest our words be such as would not be honoring to the Lord or edifying to the brethren or to the world. But the number of watchmen or pickets doing duty and standing guard over our actions and words will be

fewer in proportion as the picket line guarding our minds, our thoughts, is a strong one. It is here that we need to be especially on the alert.

"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."* This general truth is particularly exemplified in the regenerate, who are more open in their conduct and language, proportionately, than others. Having the right sentiments at heart they are less on their guard in respect to their manner of expression perhaps than previously; but all the more, they need to remember the words of the Apostle. "If any man sin not with his lips, the same is a perfect man." – Jas. 3:2.

LIKELIHOOD OF ERROR.

The inference is that even the most advanced of the Lord's people are liable at times to err with their lips. Hence the appropriateness, to all of the Lord's people, of the prayer, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer." – Psa. 19:14.

Before coming more particularly to the items of our text let us briefly glance at the preceding context; for we notice that the Apostle introduces the text with the word "Finally." What comes before Finally? Let us see. His words are, "Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand: be not worried about anything; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and minds [thoughts] in Christ Jesus."

What a wonderful exhortation this is! Those of us who are able to do so will do well to take the entire four verses for our Scripture text for the new year. The Christian is not to be sorrowful and moping. If he is a true Christian and understands the Father's message he must rejoice. True, as the Apostle elsewhere remarks, through manifold trials, discouragements, weaknesses, etc., there may be moments of dejection and sorrow; but these are only like the sun-showers of the summer-time. To the true

followers of the Lord, instructed through his Word, the light of the Lord's kindness shines through all [R3306 : page 23] earth-born clouds and troubles, to bring him joy and peace and blessing.

FORGETTING THE THINGS BEHIND.

At the present time, at the close of the old year and the dawning of a new one, it is especially appropriate that the Lord's people should clearly apprehend the great lesson which the Apostle is here inculcating and which he also taught in another place, saying, "Forget the things which are behind, and press forward to things which are before." In the year that is past every enlightened and proper-minded child of God will be able to discern both weakness and success, defeats and victories. We know this because "There is none righteous, no not one" – none that come fully up to the mark of perfection.

Hence all may look back and find in the year that is closing sources of regret as well as sources of joy and comfort. Are we to mourn over the failures of the past? Is this the will of the Lord concerning us – that we should stop, because we find that we have not been able to walk perfectly in every particular – not even up to our own imperfect standards? Nay, verily! With the Apostle we exclaim, "Let us go on to perfection."

Perfection is not a thing of the past, but of the future. We cannot be satisfied with the past but we "shall be satisfied when we awake in his likeness," sharers in the glorious first resurrection. For this we are pressing along, forgetting the things that are behind.

We forget the things that are behind, because it is right that we should do so. Because God forgets them, and declares that he has cast all of our imperfections behind his back; that our imperfections are all covered from his sight, by the merit of him who loved us and who died for us, and whom we love, and in whom we are trusting, and in whose steps we are seeking to walk with more or less of imperfection according to the defects we have inherited in the flesh. We are not meaning to suggest that slips or failures should be lightly esteemed or quickly forgotten; they should be rectified

to the extent of our ability, and Divine forgiveness should be sought for these defects daily.

It is for this very purpose that the Lord has provided access to the "throne of heavenly grace, where we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in every time of need." We merely mean that it is the Lord's will respecting us that, having corrected errors to the best of our ability, and having appealed for Divine forgiveness, we should believe the word of the Lord and accept his forgiveness and start afresh with rejoicing with each new day – and now, as we near it, start afresh for the new year, 1904.

CULTIVATION OF GENTLENESS.

"Gentleness," the forbearance or moderation mentioned in the context, is to be cultivated by each of us to such an extent that it will not only be manifested to ourselves and to the brethren, but to others. This may not [R3306 : page 24] mean the same amount of gentleness in each of the Lord's people, because the treasure of the new mind is in earthen vessels in every instance; and the possibilities for one may exceed the abilities of another. But, in any event, this quality of gentleness (moderation or forbearance) should be increasingly an outward manifestation of the grace of the Lord, dwelling in us richly and abounding, so that those who have known us in the past will at least be able year by year to see in us progress, development along this line.

We have already referred to the necessity for prayer, supplication, mentioned by the Apostle. We now observe that those who are dwelling in close fellowship with the Lord will be so appreciative of the favors and blessings already enjoyed that they will not feel like asking for greater blessings, but rather like giving thanks with a realization that they have already received not only more than they deserved at the Lord's hands, but more than they could have asked or thought. And what has already been received is only a foretaste of the promised coming blessings.

Our requests should be, increasingly, for grace and wisdom and the fruits of the spirit and opportunities for serving the Lord and the brethren, and for growing more and more into the likeness of God's dear Son.

Under these conditions who can doubt that the promised "peace of God beyond all understanding" would "guard" such "hearts" and their "thoughts"? This peace would of itself dispel one of the great evils that afflict the hearts of many. Selfishness and ambition would find little room in a heart so filled with gratitude. God's peace, and not merely the peace of the world, would reign in such a heart, controlling ambitions and energies. Divine peace can dwell in our hearts and rule in them, so as to keep out the worry and turmoil of the world, even when we are surrounded by these disadvantageous conditions – even when the adversary himself is besetting us through deceived agents.

EMPTIED OF THE OLD; FILLED WITH THE NEW.

Then comes our text, suggesting that, with this peace ruling in our hearts, and keeping guard over our thoughts, so that they are spared from many of the intrusions of the world, the flesh and the devil, we should see to it that our hearts are not merely barren and empty of evil, but should give our thoughts food even as we provide sustenance for our bodies. We should see that their exercise is in a proper direction to produce proper and helpful conditions.

We all know how easy it is to allow the old natural mind to assert itself, to allow envy, gossip, backbiting, malice, strife, pride, vain-glory, to enter our minds and to absorb time and attention. We all know that these need to be continually repelled; but all do not know how necessary it is that, while repelling these, we invite into our minds proper thoughts that will fill them and thus effectually bar the way and hinder the coming again of evil thoughts.

It is along this line that the Apostle exhorts, that we believe it will be profitable for us all to specially exercise our attention during the year just at hand. While thanking God for the forgiveness of sins and for the new

hearts, new wills, which we have attained by his grace, let us keep guard over our thoughts – let us exercise them upon the lines the Apostle lays down in this text.

"Whatsoever things are true." The Lord's people are to be so in accord with righteousness that everything that is false or unjust or untrue in word, thought or act will be offensive to them – cause them pain. Truthfulness, then, must be the first test to apply to any matter that will be accepted by our minds. It is not for us to waste our time and attention chasing imaginary matters, errors, fictions, etc. First of all, we want to know, Is it true? While this truth will apply in a general way to everything in life, and to everybody, and promote a love for the right and the true, and a heart-opposition to all that is adulterated, yet the principle is specially applicable to the affairs of the new creation and to their spiritual food.

In respect to the latter, our first inquiry should be, Is this the truth or is it to any extent contaminated with traditions of men, calculated to "make void the Word of God"? as our dear Redeemer expressed it. The prophet declares, speaking of God, "Thou desirest truth in the inward parts" – sincerity of heart. It is remarkable how many people would shun to tell an open falsehood, who nevertheless appear not to have a heart-love for the truth. Let us during the year beginning cultivate a love for the truth wherever we may find it, and at any cost. Let us take time to "prove" everything we receive as truth.

THE THOUGHTS WE SHOULD ENTERTAIN.

"Whatsoever things are honorable." This is a second test of what our thoughts should be permitted to rest upon. We cannot avoid the intrusion of thoughts which our judgments would disprove, but we must scrutinize and test our thoughts, as they present themselves, and must refuse to entertain or harbor those which are ignoble, dishonorable, unworthy of us as human beings, and especially as members of the new creation, "the body of Christ." Many things may be true which are not honorable, and their truthfulness must not give them a resting-place in our minds if they will not stand this second test.

"Whatsoever things are just," or equitable. This is the third test which the Apostle would have us apply as we scrutinize suggestions made to our minds from any quarter. Things might be true and might be honorable so far as the principles were concerned, and yet not be just or equitable to others. A story might reach us of an honorable exploit of some friend; we might know it to be true, and yet it might reflect against some one else unfavorably, unjustly, inequitably. If so, the thought must not be entertained, but must be repelled.

"Whatsoever things are pure." This is the fourth test which the Apostle urges us to apply to our thoughts as they present themselves from any quarter. Many things are true, just and perhaps not dishonorable that are not pure – calculated to awaken impure desires. Such things are strictly barred according to this inspired rule.

"Whatsoever things are lovely." This is the fifth test. Amongst true, honorable, just, pure things which we may properly consider, there is a variety, some more and some less lovely, some more and some less admirable; and our thoughts, the Apostle suggests, should give preference to the lovely and loveable as being more ennobling, more calculated to lift us and profit us, and hence more inclined to help others through us; because our influence with others is on a parity with our mental status.

"Out of the abundance of the heart [the mind] the mouth speaketh;" and hence those who follow this **[R3307 : page 25]** counsel of the Apostle will be found more and more speaking nothing but the truth, and avoiding truths that are not honorable, or not just and equitable, or not pure; and preferring especially those topics for meditation that are lovely. What a lovely character would be assured in one who could strictly and completely follow the Apostle's advice herein given. He would be a copy of Jesus – just what we all wish to be. None of us can attain this.

"Whatsoever things are reputable, possessing any virtue or any praise." By this expression the Apostle seems to throw out general lines of test and examination. His words imply that we should have a scrutiny of our thoughts to the intent that only things that could be profitable to us

and to others should be entertained, considered, discussed. Frivolous things would be excluded also by this test. Who will not admit that a mind thus freed from rubbish and evil and allowed only to entertain true, good, clean, profitable thoughts would be a mind which the Lord would be pleased with and which would conduce to the development of the character-likeness of our Lord Jesus, which is demanded of us if we would be his joint-heirs in the kingdom. – Rom. 7:29.

"PERFECT AS YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN."

The standard which the Apostle has here raised resembles the standard which our Lord raised before us when he said, "Be ye perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." We cannot be perfect as the Father is perfect, but we can and do aim at that perfection; and whatever we come short in while thus endeavoring is made up to us of the Lord's grace through the merit of the precious blood. Likewise we cannot hope to attain so complete a control of our thoughts as the Apostle's words in this beautiful text suggest, but we can make that our standard; and in proportion as we view this standard and daily strive to measure up to it, in that sense and proportion no doubt we will have a blessing every day throughout the year, and at its close find ourselves considerably strengthened in mind, and advanced along these lines, which the Apostle elsewhere speaks of as "bringing every thought into captivity to the will of God in Christ." – 2 Cor. 10:5.

The scriptural proposition is that even the most saintly of the Lord's people, the most developed in character, will need the merit of Christ's righteousness imputed to them until they are made perfect in the first resurrection. Only in our minds, in our wills, have the old things passed away and all things become new. Actually, this great change will be accomplished when this mortal shall have put on immortality, when this corruptible shall be raised in incorruption – raised in glory, in power, spirit beings. But meantime, in order to be counted worthy of a share in the first resurrection, it is required of us that we shall demonstrate our willingness of mind, our earnest desire to be all that the Lord would have us be; and

in no way can this be better demonstrated to the Lord and to ourselves, or prove more helpful, than by keeping a strict surveillance of our hearts and of our thoughts. The Lord's blessing will surely be upon all who shall seek to follow this word of his grace during the new year.

=====