

LESSONS ON SELF-CONTROL.

– MATTHEW 5:33-48. – *MARCH 11.* –

Golden Text: – "Keep the door of my lips." – Psa. 141:3.

AGAIN we gather at the feet of the great Teacher of the school of Christ to hearken for his further instructions. In connection with his discourse on the beatitudes, which constituted our last lesson, the Master proceeded in the words of today's lesson.

Our Lord refers to the traditions of the ancients, which evidently had a great control over the people of that time. No fault is to be found with having respect for the opinions and teachings of those who have gone before us in life's pathway, but one of the important lessons for every Christian to learn is that the fact that a matter is ancient, that it has been long believed, is no positive proof of its correctness. The thoughts of ancient times are to be weighed and tested, as well as those of modern times by the one standard, the divine revelation – "If they speak not according to this word it is because they have no light in them." – Isa. 8:20.

The traditional teaching to which our Lord referred was not wholly erroneous, just as the traditions of the "dark ages" contain some elements of truth. Error alone is weak in comparison to error mixed with a little truth; hence our great Adversary usually endeavors to interweave some measure of truth with all the injurious falsehoods which have burdened the world for centuries, and still burden us in proportion as we are deceived by them. This was true in respect to the matter our Lord was discussing: the Law had something to say respecting the taking of God's name in vain, and tradition had modified the Law and limited it to false swearing. Our Lord called attention to the error,

pointing out that the third commandment had a broader and deeper meaning than the tradition implied – that it meant that God's name should never be used in any irreverent manner, and not merely forbidding its use in connection with the violation of an oath in the Lord's name. Our Lord extended the thought, teaching his followers that they should not continue the custom of their day, of proving their assertions by appeals to God, to heaven, etc. The same lesson is for the followers of Jesus today: others may feel it necessary to emphasize their statements by oaths or expletives, but the followers of Jesus are to so live, so act, so speak, that their words pass for par anywhere and with anybody. To this end they must be absolutely truthful, so that whoever may hear them may know that their yea is yea and their nay is nay.

"SWEAR NOT AT ALL"

Oaths and solemn asseverations in the ordinary conversation of life imply that the truth of the speaker is questionable – that his yea is not always yea, and that his nay is not always nay. The tendency is to make him less careful in the ordinary statements of his conversation which are not thus solemnized; the effect is also to make him less reverent toward the Lord or the other holy things which he may call upon as witnesses, as evidences of his truthfulness. As the word of such people becomes common and liable to be broken, so their oaths would soon also become common and liable to be broken – such matters go on from bad to worse usually. On the contrary, where the word is held sacred the avenues of sin and error and falsehood are measurably stopped.

Nothing in this injunction can properly be understood to apply to the taking of an oath in a court of law. Such oaths, commanded by the law of the State, are necessary, because all have not the high standard of truth desired. But even in the courts

of law in many States it is permitted that an affirmation may be made instead of an oath if any so prefer. To one of the Lord's people an affirmation must mean exactly the same as an oath; he would not affirm what he would not be willing to swear to. He recognizes that, as a follower of the Lord and one of his representatives, his yea or his nay must be as truthfully kept as his oath would be.

Whatsoever is more than yea or nay cometh from evil – the revised version says "of the Evil One." Indirectly all of our evil tendencies come from the Evil One, [R3738 : page 77] for was it not by his lie in Eden that the fall from perfection and the divine image brought us all into our present evil, imperfect condition, exposing us to error through our own weaknesses and imperfections and the weakness of our neighbors? While our Lord's injunction is good for all who have ears to hear it, it is especially appropriate to the little flock who have applied themselves to hearken to all of his commands, and to be taught of him, and, to whatever extent is necessary, to suffer with him in following the course of righteousness. Truly all such should be models of truthfulness and uprightness, and thus be burning and shining lights, glorifying our Father in heaven in their homes and in the communities where they live.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

Another of the teachings of the ancients was that absolute justice should be rendered, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Some features of the Law did indeed imply this. If one caused an injury to another intentionally he should be maimed himself correspondingly. This strict requiting of justice prevailed, not only amongst the Jews, but also amongst the Romans and the Greeks. It may be said to have been a juster law in some respects than those which now prevail, which indirectly favor the rich: for instance, the penalty today for injury to

another might either be a fine of so much money or an imprisonment of so long a time. In either case the rich would have the advantage in that they could spare the money, and the loss of time would not be so disastrous to them as to the poor. However, there were disadvantages in a juster system of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: it cultivated a feudal spirit, and led to anger, malice, hatred, envy, strife, murder, works of the flesh and of the devil. Seeing what the strictest interpretation of justice would imply, let us see what the great Teacher would present as the preferable course of action.

Hear his words, "I say unto you, resist not evil [do not retaliate, rendering evil for evil], but whosoever shall smite you on the right cheek turn to him the other also." This is an astounding proposition – who can obey it? Even if we modify it all that language will permit, it is still apparently beyond reach of any fallen human being – it teaches the ideal requirements of the divine law of perfect love. When seeking for an interpretation of the expression, Resist not the evil doer, but turn the other cheek, we must look to our Lord and the apostles as examples. We find, for instance, that our Redeemer was smitten upon the cheek, and that while he did not literally turn the other he did not attempt to smite back, to retaliate even in word. In this indirect sense he did turn the other cheek. And this should mark our course. Our Redeemer did expostulate with his smiters in kindly terms, however, and we may properly follow his example, and consider it in full agreement with his instruction in this lesson.

We may remember him again when evilly entreated and taken to the brow of the hill to be cast headlong: he did not use his superior power to do injury to his opponents, but passed through their midst, evidently either directly or indirectly exercising over them a restraining influence, because his time for death had not yet come. So, too, we may use any moral influence we may possess to escape from the power of our enemies, and

be assured that we will have the divine care and protection until our lessons and experiences are completed – until our time shall come to pass beyond the veil. Similarly the Apostle, learning of the threats of the Jews against his life, did not make threats against them nor pray evil upon their heads; but he did use such steps as were at his command to thwart their evil designs, sending word to the governor and invoking the power of the civil authority; and on another occasion he defended himself by appealing to the people. – John 18:22,23; Acts 23:1-5,17.

The lesson for us is that we may use all lawful and legal means in our self-defense, and may even wisely run away from dangers and persecutors, as the Lord directed and the apostles exemplified. (2 Cor. 11:33; Matt. 10:23.) But we are not authorized to retaliate. Difficult as this proper course may appear, it undoubtedly will be found to be the best one. Remember our Lord's words, "They that take to the sword shall perish with the sword," and again the Apostle's words to the Church is, "If ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another." (Matt. 26:52; Gal. 5:15.) The lesson evidently is, –

"FOLLOW PEACE WITH ALL MEN"

"If any man sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also." The revisers translated this to mean that if any one is disposed to go to law with you and take away your coat you should settle with him, even though it deprive you of both coat and cloak. This lesson of submission, of non-resistance, is surely a very difficult one to thoroughly learn. We cannot doubt that many would take advantage of such a disposition, and that as a result he would have the bad end of many a bargain. However, this would not prove the Lord's counsel unwise even as respects the present life. The lesson upon ourselves would certainly be valuable as respects the

development of the Master's graces, and how can we tell that the example would not be very potent upon those who might fraudulently, violently take advantage of our obedience to the great Teacher.

We know, too, that the Lord would be quite able to compensate us for anything we might suffer in way of loss in obedience to his directions, to whatever extent he might see would be to our advantage. We should never forget the two occasions on which the Lord told the disciples to cast in their nets after they had toiled all night and had caught nothing, and how on both occasions miraculous draughts of fishes were caught. He who is for us is more powerful than all they that be against us, and undoubtedly loyalty to him and obedience to his Word will prove eventually the better part. Let us remember also the proverb **[R3738 : page 78]** which says, "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty." (Prov. 11:24.) It is not always those who fight most strenuously for their rights that fare the best even amongst the children of the world.

"GO WITH HIM TWAIN"

The next injunction is not generally understood: it does not mean that we should be turned aside from the duties and affairs of life at anybody's bidding. In olden times certain magistrates, governors, etc., had the authority of law to press the service of the people for governmental work. For instance, note how Simon the Cyrenian was compelled to bear the cross for Jesus a certain distance. The word compel in our lesson is from the same Greek word, and refers to a similar legal compulsion; "commandeered" would be the modern way of referring to such a matter. Our Lord's injunction is that his followers should be so broad-minded, so liberal, so generous, that they would not only obey

the legal commands but be ready to go farther – to do more than had been required.

In thus doing heartily, joyfully and agreeably all and more than would be commanded they would be exemplifying the generous spirit which represents our Lord and his teachings. By such breadth of sentiment they would be known as Jesus' disciples, who had learned of him. Indeed we may say that the whole trend of the teachings of the Lord and the apostles is in line with this, and opposed to stinginess and narrowness and selfishness – in accord with generosity, full measure, pressed down, heaped up and running over. The Christian measure would be nothing short, though it might be a little more. A Christian measure of anything must be full, never skimp. This is an element of the higher law, the law of love, and its spirit of generosity in our hearts.

In similar strain the great Teacher enjoins that we shall give and lend to those requesting. We cannot suppose that he meant that a parent should give a razor to the child which cries for it; we cannot suppose that the Lord meant that our loans or gifts would be such as would be injurious to the recipients. Love must be the basis of our conduct, as it is the very essence of the Master's law. We cannot think either that he meant that we should neglect the interests of our own homes and families in giving to others or loaning to them. We are bound to suppose that our Lord in this, as in all things, wished his followers to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. What he wished to enjoin evidently was that spirit or disposition which would have pleasure in loaning or giving to the needy, and which is so circumstanced as to be able to comply with such requests and would be glad to do so, using the proper discretion and judgment, as to time, place and persons. In other words, the spirit of Christ is a benevolent spirit and not a mean or stingy one, and all the Lord's people, more or less selfish, need to learn this. There are

few perhaps who would be in any danger of injuring themselves or others immediately dependent upon them by any acts of benevolence.

"LOVE THY NEIGHBOR"

Love for the neighbor was a feature of the Law, and in enjoining this the traditions of the elders were quite right; but they added to it that an enemy should be hated, whereas the Law said nothing of the kind, but on the contrary enjoined that if an enemy's ox or ass or property of any kind were seen going astray or about to be injured they should be protected and assisted and held for the owner, even though he were an enemy, and even though at a considerable cost of time and trouble. Our Lord thus pointed out the real meaning of the Law, making it the more honorable, saying, "I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven." (The rendering of v. 44 here given occurs in the revised version, and is in harmony with the oldest Greek MS., which omits a part of this verse.)

If we are sons of God we must have his Spirit, his disposition. To whatever extent we lack this disposition to love and desire good to our enemies as well as to our neighbors we lack evidence of relationship to our Father in heaven and to our elder brother, our Redeemer and Teacher. Here again the lesson of benevolence comes in – we must be large-hearted, generous. **[R3739 : page 78]** How can we cultivate this necessary quality, especially if our natural dispositions are mean and selfish, very much fallen from the divine likeness in this respect? We reply that the entire course of instruction in the school of Christ is in this direction. To make us compassionate and sympathetic with others, we are shown our own littleness and weakness in the Lord's sight; to teach us how to be generous and forgiving to others, we have the illustration of God's mercy

and grace and forgiveness toward us; to impress the matter upon us we are assured that our forgiveness and standing with the Lord can only be maintained by our cultivating this spirit and manifesting it toward our debtors and enemies.

We are to be generous with those who transgress against our rights and interests, our enemies. This does not mean that the Lord recognizes or treats his enemies with the same degree of blessing that he grants to his friends and his children, nor does it mean that we are to love our enemies in exactly the same sense that we love our bosom friends and companions. The Lord gives special blessing to those who are especially his, and we also may properly give more of our love and favor to those who are in accord with us. The lesson here again is large heartedness and generosity.

"LOVE THEM THAT LOVE YOU"

Our Lord points out that in merely reciprocating the love of others we would come far short of the standard he sets us, and of the lesson we must learn if we would be his joint-heirs and companions in the glory, honor and immortality of the Kingdom. Publicans and sinners even love those who love them – he must be a very mean man who will return evil for good and hate **[R3739 : page 79]** those who love him. Even though such a standard were recognized in the world, of loving those who love us, it would not be appropriate to the Lord's followers; they must rise to a higher plane if they would be his disciples.

Similarly our greeting, our salutations, the civilities of life are to be extended not merely to our brethren either after the flesh or after the Spirit. We are to have kind intentions toward all, and to enjoy the privilege of extending these, expressing them, and thus comforting and refreshing all with whom we come in contact. Generosity again is the thought – breadth of character and nobility of conduct.

PERFECT AS FATHER IN HEAVEN

The last verse of our lesson caps the climax of all instruction, telling us that the copy which we are to consider and follow is that of our heavenly Father – we are to be perfect as he is perfect. Ah, yes! It would have been impossible for the great Teacher to have set us any other pattern or example or standard than the perfect one. And yet he knew that none of his disciples would ever be able in the present life and under present conditions of sin and death working in our mortal bodies to come up to this standard – to follow this copy. What then did he mean? We answer that he there set before us the perfect copy, with instruction that, in proportion as we love him and desire to have his approval, we should endeavor to pattern after the heavenly Father's character.

The fact that this endeavor would not bring perfect results could only redound in blessings upon us, by bringing us to a realization of our own imperfections and of our need of the covering of our dear Redeemer's robe of righteousness, until the time shall come when in the first resurrection change we shall be made like him, see him as he is, share his glory, and be able to perfectly reflect, as he does, the heavenly Father's perfection. Meantime all of our shortcomings that are unintentional are graciously covered from the Father's sight with the merit of our Redeemer, who stands as our pledge or guaranty that our endeavors to follow the copy are sincere, of the heart. The Lord will judge us worthy or unworthy of the resurrection – not according to the flesh, but – according to the endeavors of our hearts as New Creatures.

THE OLD COPY-BOOK

Years ago it was the custom in the public schools to furnish the children with ruled copy-books, with copper-plate engraved lessons at the top of each page. The lesson to the pupil was the

copying of those perfect characters. Every modest child must certainly have felt abashed, timid, when receiving one of those lessons, from the realization that it could not produce characters that could at all compare with the copy. It was, however, explained that it was not expected that the child could duplicate the perfect copy, but that following the lines of the copy it would become more and more expert. How well this illustrates the Master's words, "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect," and the way in which he intends that we should profit by the instruction.

Another lesson: It was the duty of the teacher to examine the work of the pupil, and surely in a majority of cases it was found that the best copy of the original was found on the first line, and that the work became poorer and poorer toward the end of the page. So it is with many in the school of Christ – the great Teacher perceives that their first endeavors to copy God-likeness at the beginning of their Christian experience was more successful than their subsequent attempts. Why? The answer is the same in both cases. The child neglected to look at the copy and merely looked at its own imperfect efforts, and hence the poor results. So with the pupils in the school of Christ – their poor results come from comparing themselves with themselves, and neglecting to keep constantly before their minds the perfect copy – "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."

As the earthly teacher reproved and corrected the pupil, so with much long-suffering and patience the Lord reproveth and corrects the pupils in the school of Christ. Will not this explain many chastisements which are necessary for every son whom the Father would ultimately receive to home and glory, every one of whom must be conformed to the image of his Son, who is the express image of the Father's person? Let us, then, begin afresh, on a new page as it were, to copy the character-likeness of our perfect Father in heaven. Let us no longer look at ourselves and

our past attainments, but, as the Apostle says, "Forgetting the things that are behind and pressing on toward the things that are before," let us labor with patience to learn the all-important lessons connected with our discipleship and the gracious hopes set before us in the promises of our Father's Word.

"KEEP THE DOOR OF MY LIPS"

Our Golden text presents an important thought. The Lord's people find the tongue the most difficult member to bring into subjection, and therefore may well pray, "Keep thou the door of my lips." And if the prayer be sincere, from the heart, it will imply that the petitioner is doing all in his power in this direction himself while seeking the divine aid. And the divine aid comes in line with this lesson, and assures us that the lips are not at fault, that it is the heart that needs a completion of the regenerative work of the holy Spirit, for "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." The lesson here is that whatever difficulty we have through our lips needs correction at the heart. We need to get our hearts more in accord with the heart of the Almighty – more in tune with the gracious elements of the divine character, represented not only in justice toward others, but additionally in mercy, love, kindness and benevolence towards all.
