

TRIFLING WITH CONSCIENCE.

– MARK 6:14-29. – *MAY 20.* –

Golden Text: – "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess."
– Eph. 5:18.

TRIFLING with conscience is one of the great dangers of our time, as it has been of all past time. Our lesson offers an illustration along this line, showing how Herod Antipas, King of Galilee and Berea, trifled with his conscience and was thereby ensnared into adultery and murder. Every intelligent person of experience can bear witness to the fact that sins usually creep on gradually. No one plunges instantly from purity into the depths of sin. There is a gradual beginning in which the voice of conscience is heard, and if it be heeded the calamity of gross transgression may be avoided, but unheeded its voice grows more and more faint, its influence in the control of life less and less potent, until, with conscience asleep, the outward course goes from bad to worse, and there is a rude awakening of the individual to find himself ensnared, a captive – perhaps a libertine or a thief or a murderer, or all of these, and apparently with no alternative except to go on in the same direction. How many who have reached such a lamentable state have wished in vain that they again had the opportunity that was theirs at first – of heeding conscience and taking the path of righteousness.

"THE SPIRIT OF A SOUND MIND"

The whole world has this experience to some extent, because, however depraved and fallen, as a race we are still not totally depraved; – there still remains in each sane mind an element of conscience, a measure of ability to discern truth from untruth, justice from injustice, right from wrong. Christians perhaps, at the beginning of their new life, have neither more nor

less of this quality than the remainder of mankind, but having consecrated their lives to the Lord and his service they have the promised assurance that they are taught of God. Under this teaching their conceptions of right and wrong are clarified – they are less superstitious, less guided by impressions merely, and, instead, have the positive instruction of the divine Word whereby they may more clearly than before discern what is the right and what is the wrong. Still, conscience is the same; it has merely received enlightenment, and must not be any less alert in the Christian than in the worldly person.

On the contrary, backed with the spirit of a sound mind, backed with a consecration of their all to the Lord, and led by the exceeding great and precious promises of the Scripture, they have every reason for following the voice of conscience more carefully than ever. To the enlightened Christian, guided in judgment by God's revelation, the Bible, the voice of conscience becomes really the voice of God, and obedience to it is imperative. Any transgression of its commands is sure to bring disaster, more serious by far than any which could come to the natural man, because the Christian has taken the advance steps and has received advance knowledge. To the Christian, therefore, the heeding of the voice of conscience may mean either eternal life or eternal death – the Second Death. And even amongst those who will attain the eternal life the Scriptures show us two classes – the "more than overcomers," the "little flock," who shall be heirs of God, joint-heirs with Jesus Christ, and the "great company."

All of this first class, we may be sure, have given earnest heed to the voice of conscience, and have willingly and gladly and promptly followed its guidance as the voice of the Truth, as the voice of the Lord speaking to them through his Word and his providences, leading them from grace to grace and from glory to glory until their final change in the First Resurrection. To the

other class, viz., the "Great Company" of Revelation 7, conscience will also be the guide by which they will attain the blessing before the throne in the honors and blessings which the Lord will confer upon them as overcomers of the world. Why will conscience lead them to a lower plane, and the first-mentioned class, the little flock, to the higher plane of the divine nature? Not, we answer, because conscience as the Lord's representative will have led them differently, but because they have followed the voice of conscience less carefully, with less zeal, with less perseverance, with less appreciation of how much importance depended upon their following it.

HEROD'S CONSCIENCE TORMENTED HIM

The Herod of our lesson (Antipas) was the son of "Herod the Great," who slew the babes of Bethlehem in his endeavor to thwart the divine program. Palestine was directly under the control of the Roman emperors, and instead of perpetuating the Kingdom of Herod they partitioned it, and gave one quarter to his son, Herod Antipas, the chief figure in our present lesson. Herodias, a beautiful and ambitious woman, a descendant of Cleopatra, a granddaughter of Herod the Great, was ambitious to be a queen and married her oldest uncle, Philip, supposing that to him would fall the kingdom honors at the hands of the Roman emperor. But he was passed by and Antipas was made tetrarch (i.e., ruler of a fourth part of the kingdom). Herodias was greatly disappointed, and when Herod Antipas came to Rome to be invested with royal honors she arranged it that he should be entertained at his brother's house, her home, and improved the opportunity to entangle him with her personal charms, so that when he departed for his dominion she eloped with him.

Here we see the parting of the ways for two and how both took the wrong course: the Golden Rule and their **[R3778 : page 154]** instincts for righteousness should have hindered them. We

cannot doubt that each had a voice of conscience at that time, to which both closed their hearts. The woman had not only the ties of chastity but the obligations of her marriage covenant to assist her conscience and to strengthen her in the avoiding of the wrong. The man also had a conscience, and knew that in accepting the blandishments of his brother's wife he was violating his marriage covenant with his own wife; he must have known also that in violating the sacred hospitalities of a host, his entertainer, his brother, he was doing an unbrotherly act. Above all he had a sufficient knowledge of the Jewish Law to know that his conduct was heinous in the sight of God.

Coming to his home, accompanied by his niece, his brother's wife, as his paramour, a great scandal was raised throughout Palestine, as the people, instructed by the Law, recognized that their ruler was living in open violation of it. His proper wife, disheartened, crushed, in the presence of the usurper, obtained permission to remove from Galilee across the lake to another part of the domain, to another palace, Machaerus. She was the daughter of the Arabian king Aretas, and soon managed to return to her father's house. Aretas was very angry and threatened war.

HEROD, AND NOT OTHER RULERS, REBUKED

When John's ministry was at its height and he was rebuking sin in its every form, the question of Herod's conduct came up, and the great prophet roundly denounced the misconduct, saying that it was contrary to the Law that Herod should thus have his brother's wife, his own niece. The Greek text intimates that this was not said once merely, but rather as though it read, "John was saying" – was teaching continuously that there was wrong at the very head of the nation. As the Jewish nation claimed to be and was accepted as God's special kingdom and people, and professed to live under his special laws in every particular, John was probably within the proprieties of the case in denouncing a ruler

of the Jews, while making no criticism of the other rulers of the earth not under divine law and covenant.

Nevertheless, we are to remember that Jesus made no comment along this line. Nothing in John's course should be construed as a special example of what we should do today in respect to public functionaries – in criticism of their lives and affairs. There is no nation today in the world which God has accepted in the same sense that he accepted the nation of Israel, no nation today that professes to be under discipline and guidance as was Israel then. Our Lord indicates our relationship to the world, saying, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:21.) The Apostle explains that in all matters that do not conflict with our own personal liberties and conscience we are to recognize the official position of those who are governing the world. Hence Christians of today are to judge themselves and to scrutinize the affairs of the Church and to purge out from their midst all leaven, but they are not to attempt to purge the world or to think of the world as being under their judgment now.

True, the Apostle says, "Know ye not that the saints are to judge the world?" (1 Cor. 6:2.) But he evidently refers to the time when the saints shall be qualified as judges, when in the end of this age they shall be changed from mortal to immortal, from imperfect to perfect, and be like their Lord and associated with him in the judging and ruling of the world, which then will begin and extend to every nation and every member of Adam's race. They were to live peaceably, so far as possible, with all men, rendering homage to whom homage is due, reverence to whom reverence is due, but always, both publicly and privately, acknowledging our primary obligations every way to the Heavenly Father and to his Son, our Redeemer.

HEROD CAST JOHN INTO PRISON

Herod's pride was stung by John's comments, and no doubt he feared that, unreproved, unchecked, this might lead to disorders in the realm. He settled the matter by putting John in prison. Nevertheless we read that he feared John, realizing that he was a righteous man – a man who was following his conscience in a right course to the best of his ability. There is even an intimation (vs. 19,20) that John's imprisonment was in part at least to protect him from the anger of Herodias, who desired to kill him, and who doubtless would not have hesitated to hire assassins who would be more bold to thus procure a large reward, in the expectancy that Herodias would intercede with the king and secure their release.

The intimation of the Greek is that Herod gave John the Baptist frequent hearings, listened to his arguments – that he heard him willingly but was much perplexed. (R.V.) Herodias evidently realized that her hold upon the king was endangered. She seems to have been a woman of practically no conscience. She had risked all for her present station, and now what would she not risk to maintain it? If John the Baptist's teaching should influence Herod to put her away she would be in worse condition than ever before – a reprobate, an outcast, without a name or home or anything. To such a mind such an outcome was not to be considered, and anything was to be undertaken that would stand in the way of such a danger.

Thus it has been with many others occupying less prominent places in the world's history: ambition has misled them, and pride has been the force which not only overruled the voice of conscience but ultimately made murderers of those who at first, when conscience began to reprove, would have been shocked at the very thought of such an outcome. So it is on a lesser scale with some: pride and ambition, perhaps operating in another

direction, have led conscience a chase, until figuratively in a corner the deluded one has resorted to lies and slanders and assassinations of reputation, the very thought of which at first would have been repelled with horror. How necessary to heed the voice of conscience!

Look at Herod, too, how his failure to heed conscience led him step by step deeper into the mire. Notice how, when he heard John and was perplexed, if he had followed conscience he still might have gone free; but failing to heed it he became more and more entangled, until the culmination recorded in this lesson was reached, until he murdered the Lord's prophet.

Herodias was on the lookout for a convenient occasion on which to entrap still further the man who was already **[R3778 : page 155]** under her power through neglecting the voice of his conscience. Days were precious to her; she knew not when the Prophet's words might take effect upon Herod's conscience; she believed that he had a little conscience, and that it was troubled to some extent. Her auspicious time came with Herod's birthday; she would encourage his vanity; she would help to arrange the preliminaries for making it a great day of festival; she would thus endear herself to Herod as the one who sought most his elevation before the world.

Herod had sent John away from Galilee to the palace at Machaerus, which was also a fortress. In so doing he was removing him from Herodias and her particular influence, and satisfying her also in that he was at a greater distance and would be less frequently seen by Herod. It is supposed that the feast was held at that palace fortress, that indeed Herod was there at that time preparing for the war with the king of Arabia, and that the gathering of the nobles of the land was in a measure a patriotic rally throughout the kingdom to assure himself of the favor and good will of all of his under lords and influential subordinates.

Such festivals were attended by men alone, and bountifully supplied not only with food but also with beverages, as a result of which the whole company would become quite convivial.

Herodias knew the king quite well and was laying a trap for him. She knew that when he was surrounded by his nobles and princes whatever he promised he would feel bound to fulfil: she knew, too, that it was the custom of the time and country that, toward the conclusion of such a feast, dancing girls would appear in the midst clothed in transparent garments, and that under such circumstances it was customary for the king to give some present to the danseuse proportionate to his appreciation of her self-abandonment in the voluptuous dancing. Herodias prepared a surprise for them all: the dancing girls were usually from the lower classes – she would make a special impression upon all by sending her daughter, a princess, a granddaughter of Herod the Great, to perform this part. The woman's cunning shows at every step, and, her plans carried out exactly as she had arranged and hoped, the king and his nobles were taken by surprise, and the former said to the maiden, "Ask your gift and it shall be yours to the extent of one-half of my dominion." If we are inclined to think of this as an extravagant matter, let us remember that many a wealthy voluptuary has been similarly foolish, spending thousands and hundreds of thousands upon actresses and other conscienceless women in our day.

THE CUNNING OF A SERPENT

Herodias kept the matter to herself – not even her daughter Salome knew of the price she expected to exact; the girl had merely been advised that when the king would **[R3779 : page 155]** ask her choice of a gift and had declared his willingness to give her one, she should withdraw to inquire of her mother what she should ask. Herod was astonished at the request for the head of John the Baptist. Unprincipled as he was, hard-hearted,

without a conscience, sadly demoralized, he had never thought of murdering God's prophet. We read that the king "was exceeding sorry." To some extent evidently he began to realize that he had been entrapped. To a man of well-balanced mind, of properly guided judgment, the question would have been easily settled, but not so to one of Herod's character.

Whatever conscience Herod had, now got onto the other side of the question, and insisted that he had made oath and that an oath should not be broken; and that for a king to break his oath, made in the presence of his nobles, would imply that he was a man devoid of all principle and character, and that these courtiers could not rely upon him or any promises he would make to them in connection with the war about to be prosecuted. Hence we read that for his oath's sake and for the sake of those who were of the company, and we might add for pride's sake, Herod yielded, and as the request was one that should be met forthwith he sent the executioner at once to John. He thus showed his greatness as a king, his respect for his illustrious company, and his high standard of value for his oath and his authority and power as a king. Truly the Scriptures declare that many things that are highly esteemed amongst men are an abomination in the sight of God, and in proportion as God's people become possessed of his spirit, his mind, his disposition, the spirit of a sound mind, in the same proportion these things become an abomination to us.

JOHN THE BAPTIST VERSUS HEROD ANTIPAS

Two great characters on the page of history are before our minds: The Lord's prophet, of whom Jesus declared, "There hath not arisen a greater prophet than John the Baptist," and Herod Antipas, prominent in his day and black marked on the page of history for the past eighteen centuries. The one was a man of God, whose life and time and all were consecrated to the service of his Maker, to the promulgation of righteous principles, to exhorting

his fellow creatures to abandon sin and to follow righteousness: the other enthroned in power, with great possibilities of influence for good or evil, used those opportunities injuriously to himself and contrary to every principle of righteousness and every good influence upon the people over whom he held a brief authority. The one used up his life in the preaching of the truth, suffered imprisonment and then beheading; the other lived a luxurious life of self-gratification amongst the plaudits of men, and had the power to take the life of the other. What will the harvest be?

Can any one who believes in a God, and trusts to the fulfilment of his promises respecting a future life, doubt that there will be a wide distinction between these two men in the future? Can any one who understands the divine plan doubt that John the Baptist, faithful until death, will be one of the princes whom the Lord of glory will appoint in the future for the guidance and direction of the world's affairs and for the uplift of the groaning creation? To such sterling characters the Lord can entrust much of his work, and we, perceiving the Lord's selection for the same, can have all the greater confidence in the grand outcome of that work in God's due time. But what shall we expect for Herod and others of his class, who have violated their consciences and degraded themselves and misused their opportunities for evil instead of for good? We must surely expect that they will be beaten with many stripes, that they will have punishments – not eternal torment, thank God, but, as the Scriptures **[R3779 : page 156]** declare, a just recompense of reward to every soul of man that doeth evil. – Rom. 2:9.

In proportion as Herod had great opportunities and defiled and degraded his conscience, in the same proportion, undoubtedly, he will awaken in the resurrection morning in a low condition morally, and proportionately will he have the more steps to retrace to God back to what he was at the beginning of his career, poor as that might have been. And still it will require

further advancement, development, upward steps during the thousand years of the Millennial age to attain if he will in the end gain the perfection that was lost in Eden and redeemed at Calvary.

"SHAME AND LASTING CONTEMPT"

The violation of conscience and the abuse of power practiced by Herod and Herodias have made them infamous throughout the world. The Scriptures assure us that in God's due time, during the Millennium, they with the remainder of Adam's family will as a result of Christ's redemptive work come forth from the tomb. Through the prophet Daniel the Lord has pictured the mass of mankind as awakening to shame and lasting contempt, and these two, we may be sure, will have special shame and contempt along with Nero and other horrible characters of history. By the time they are awakened, we may presume that the whole world will have reached a fair degree of development and progress toward perfection.

The knowledge of the Lord will be world-wide and ocean deep, and the human mind will have expanded proportionately, so that the misdeeds of this pair will be more intensely abhorred than at present, except by the saints. It will be a heavy burden upon the guilty ones as they face the knowledge of the world respecting their reprobate course. They will feel like sinking through the earth from very shame. Moreover, the violations of conscience and degradation therefrom will serve to keep them longer in this detestable condition than they might otherwise remain – their progress toward perfection will be the slower on this account, and hence their measure of shame and contempt the greater and the more prolonged.

We thank God, however, that through Christ there is forgiveness of sins even for the vilest, and that these, who never heard of Christ in the true sense of the word, but whose minds were thoroughly blinded and degraded by sin under the influence

of the god of this world, will ultimately reach enlightenment, and that learning of the grace of God through Christ they will have an opportunity of laying hold upon his mercy and receiving an uplifting blessing that gradually will deliver them from their shameful condition and from the contempt of fellow creatures – or, failing to use this mercy and these privileges and thus proving themselves unworthy of any of God's favors, they will die the death – the Second Death. We must remember in this connection our Lord's promise that it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom and Gomorrah than for Capernaum and other cities of Galilee, and so we presume it will be more tolerable for the King of Sodom than for King Herod. And yet, withal, the Lord's blessed provision is such that his arrangements for even the worst of mankind in general will not be intolerable. Everything that can be done for their recovery from sin and death we may be sure will be done.
