

WE ARE UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS

– *MAY 24.* – *LUKE 17:1-10.* –

**"He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."
– 1 CORINTHIANS 1:31.**

TODAY'S lesson is in four sections, each apparently distinct and separate. Even the connection in which these words were uttered is not given. Nevertheless, they manifest the Wisdom from Above. We shall consider them in their order.

"It is impossible but that offenses will come." The word offenses more particularly signifies stumblings, or still more literally, ensnarement. The consecrated followers of Jesus are called little ones, because they are New Creatures who have only started in the new way of full consecration to God's will. "Babes in Christ," St. Paul styles these. (1 Corinthians 3:1.) "Little children," writes St. John. This infantile condition, however, should not continue. There should be growth in grace, knowledge, love. Strength of character should be attained, which would not only be wise, strong and difficult to ensnare, but able also to assist others less developed.

Thus in the Church the more developed ones are styled Elders – literally, elder brothers. Such more particularly represent the Lord amongst the brethren; and Heavenly comfort and advice, reproofs, etc., may at times be sent through these to their younger fellows. The dangers of ensnarement exist because Satan is the prince of this Age, and because he has the majority of mankind more or less under his influence – blinded by error, superstition, sin, etc. "The god of this world hath blinded the minds of all those who believe not." (2 Corinthians 4:4.) That Jesus did not refer to infants is manifest from the words "One of these little ones which believe in Me."

We may not suppose that Jesus would unjustly condemn or punish anybody for ignorantly or unintentionally offending His followers, His little ones. We must suppose that He meant to caution those who would deliberately attempt to deceive and ensnare, entrap, discourage, His followers, His little ones. We all have heard of instances of deliberate, intelligent plotting against the followers of the Lord; and to whatever extent this may prevail, it has indicated the Satanic spirit.

Sometimes true people of God have been thus ensnared into the service of Satan, as intimated by the words, "His servants ye are to whom ye render service." Saul of Tarsus was thus ensnared and used for a time by the **[R5445 : page 125]** Adversary; and he explains that God had mercy upon him because he did this ignorantly. Had he done it with wilful intelligence, we may assume that God would not have had mercy upon him to the extent of rescuing him by a miracle, but that he would have continued in his intelligently wicked way and that it would have been better for him that a millstone had been hung around his neck and he had been drowned in the sea.

This would be because a person thus drowned in the sea would lose merely the present life, and not the future life during the Millennium, after he had been awakened from the sleep of death. He would then have full opportunity for enlightenment through obedience and for recovery from sin and death. But those who intelligently persecute the followers of Jesus and seek to turn them aside from the way of righteousness, pervert their own conscience and so degrade themselves that it will be much more difficult for them to come into accord with the conditions of the New Dispensation beyond the grave. In a word, whoever sins against light and knowledge is endangering his own opportunities for everlasting life.

A FORGIVING SPIRIT NECESSARY

Verses 3 and 4 are apparently a part of the same discourse recorded in Matthew 18:15-22. The lesson is addressed to the followers of Jesus, not to the world. It relates primarily to their duty toward the brethren of the Household of Faith, but secondarily it has a broader application. It may at times be given this broader application; but the injunction in Matthew 18, that the counsel of brethren be brought in and that ultimately, if necessary, the matter come before the Church, proves to us that it is in reality not intended for any but the Church.

The lesson is mercy – boundless mercy. The basis of the argument is that all need mercy, Divine mercy, because all are imperfect; and in order to assist us in the cultivation of this grace, the Lord has arranged that His blessings to us, His favor, shall be dependent upon our endeavor to exercise this Godlike quality. "Be ye like unto your Father; for He is kind to the unthankful."

It seems strange that our forefathers and ourselves were so deceived by the false doctrines which St. Paul styles "doctrines of devils." (1 Timothy 4:1.) Once we thought of the Heavenly Father as absolutely unforgiving – full of hate for His human creatures, because they had sinned – instead of forgiving their sin. We insisted that the wage, or penalty, of sin must be torment, and that to all eternity. How little we understood the real character of the God of all grace, the Father of mercies!

Some of us, perhaps, endeavored to justify our error by assuming that God Himself was all goodness, kindness and love, but had behind Him an inexorable Law demanding the torture of His creatures – a Law from which He could not escape, and which bound Him to the doing of things which His own Law condemned in humanity.

Others of us deluded ourselves into thinking that all mankind enjoyed at some time between birth and death a full opportunity for turning from sin to righteousness and of becoming saints. Only of late years are Bible students becoming aware of how absurd is this position. Now we are realizing that, for four thousand years, only the one little nation of the Jews had any knowledge of God, or any promise of eternal life held out to them, or any instruction respecting sin and its penalty. And even the Jews, to whom the Law was given, Jesus and His Apostles declared were blinded by Satan. Jesus, addressing [R5446 : page 125] His Apostles, said, "Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear." The great nation of the Jews neither saw nor heard. The same is true of nine-tenths of the population of Christendom, not to mention heathendom.

Without the least warrant of Scripture, but in contradiction of it, many of us upheld the terrible theory that all who do not hear of Christ in the present lifetime and also all those who do not become saintly followers in His steps will be eternally tortured at the hands of devils. We now see that the Bible teaches that only a comparatively small class, who now have the hearing ear and the seeing eye and who enter into covenant relationship with God through Christ, can walk in Jesus' steps. For these only does the present life end all opportunity of attaining eternal life. For the remainder of mankind God purposes a future life by a resurrection of judgment.

The resurrection is not merely for the Church class – the First, or Chief Resurrection – but it is for "the just and the unjust." (Acts 24:15.) The Church class will come forth to glory, honor and immortality. The unjust will come forth from the tomb to judgments, disciplines, rewards and punishments. It is in order to give them these judgments and opportunities to obtain everlasting life that Messiah's Kingdom will be inaugurated; and it is in order that He may appoint proper judges to assist the people and to reward and punish justly that

He is now calling out the Church in the flesh. "Know ye not that the saints shall judge the world?" – 1 Corinthians 6:2.

FAITH POWER – CREDULITY POWER

A great deal passes for faith which is merely credulity. If some one were to swear to us that the moon is made of green cheese, it would be credulity to believe him – not faith. We should inquire, "Who is it that says this thing, and what does he know on the subject more than we may know?" The faith commended in the Bible is that which relates to things which God has promised. We are encouraged to be full of such faith in God – nothing doubting – not questioning that He is able to accomplish all His good promises.

Our forefathers had too much confidence in men. What they thought was faith was mere credulity. They swallowed the creeds of the Dark Ages; and the more absurd the proposition, the more faith they thought they had. On the contrary, they should have said, "Where is the proof? Where has God declared such things?" Those who defended the creeds cried out incredulously against sober faith, branded it heresy, and many times burned the truly faithful at the stake. The lesson is that we should accept by faith only that of which the Lord has assured us in His Word; and this means that we should be particularly careful that we have the pure Word of God, sifting out mistranslations and interpolations.

In our lesson, the disciples of Jesus were evidently impressed with the grandeur of His teachings, and the difficulties that must lie in the way of the accomplishment of all the wonderful things recorded in the Law and the Prophets, and told by Jesus – respecting His Messianic Kingdom, etc. They therefore asked the Lord to increase their faith. Jesus replied in words that are greatly misunderstood in our day. He said, "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say to this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you." On two other occasions Jesus made similar remarks respecting

mountains, saying that the word of faith would have been sufficient to remove them to the midst of the sea.

WHAT DID HE MEAN?

Evidently the Master did not mean to encourage the Jews to attempt to command the mountain to be carried into the sea; but rather He wished them to realize that [R5446 : page 126] if they had proper faith in the power of God, and should receive a command from God to move the mountain into the sea, and should give the command with faith, the results would follow. But God gave no such command in respect to the mountains nor in respect to the tree. Hence faith would have no basis for operation in such cases.

The colored brother had the proper thought. When asked what he would do if God told him to jump through a stone wall, he replied, "I would jump at it." In a word, we are to have absolute confidence in the Word of God, not merely to make sure that we have heard and understood His Message. Then we may go forward with mountain-moving faith to accomplish His commands. But God does not command foolish or unnecessary changes. He leaves it for human ingenuity to uproot the trees and to tunnel the mountains, and never gives commands of this kind. And if some human being told us something of the kind, we would be credulous if we believed him. God is not working that way.

NOT PROFITABLE TO OUR MASTER

Some amongst the followers of Christ, naturally progressive, are sometimes too aggressive, self-conceited. Becoming His disciples does not change these traits instantly. The old things pass away gradually, and the new take their place. A lesson for all of His disciples to remember, but especially forceful to the classes mentioned, is taught in this Study. They must remember that the work of God's grace, of which they are subjects, is His favor toward them; and that their obedience to His commands is primarily for their

correction and development, and a future life of blessing. They should remember that even their service for the Lord is a privilege – that God is not profited by their services.

We are all unprofitable servants in the sense that God could just as easily do without us, indeed, could more easily do His work otherwise than through us. He could use as His messengers the angels or the various providences of life. None of us is indispensable to His work and to His glory. Quite to the contrary, the opportunity for entering into the Lord's vineyard and laboring therein is chiefly for our own advantage. The service brings us certain joys which we could not otherwise have. It brings us certain experiences necessary to our own development and qualification for higher services beyond the veil.

As the Apostle declares, "By grace [Divine favor] are ye saved through faith." To some extent the faith is a matter of our own development. However, the Apostle hastens to add that the faith is not of ourselves, that even it is the gift of God – we have not the opportunity of glorying even in our faith. What have we that we have not received of the Lord? The elemental faith was based upon certain knowledge that God's providences brought to us, and possibly we were prepared for even that by a favorable parentage.

