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John Gifford

The Education of the Conscience.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE CHAPEL OF

S. PETER'S COLLEGE, RADLEY,

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(For S. Peter's Day.)

BY THE

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A Sermon, &c.

PSALM xxvii. 9.

“My heart hath talked of Thee, Seek ye My Face: Thy Face, Lord, will I seek.”

YOU have not time, you have not thoughts, to spare for many words on a Festival-day. And yet, just because it is a Festival-day, you look to have some words spoken to you: and your Festival would not be complete without something of a sermon.

For a Festival-day gathers up into itself for joy and gladness the life of the place where it is kept: and you wish, somewhere in the day at least, to touch upon, and glance at, the things which lie beneath all the holiday and hospitality; which give a reason to our Festival, because they give a reason for being glad that our school should be, and flourish. And you rightly look to Chapel for this: for nothing in human life is truly explained or justified until it is explained or justified by something which can bear to be brought into God's sight, or to be spoken in the Name of God.

And so, just because it is your Festival, I think I may boldly claim your hearing, boys as well as visitors, for a few minutes, while I ask for you this simple question,—Why we are glad that such a place as this St. Peter's College should be? If we know the answer to that, we shall know better how each

should use it, and what each may do to make it flourish from year to year increasingly.

Now there is only one test which we can put to a place like this. It undertakes a great work, and a great responsibility: for it undertakes some hundred or more of those who will be men, during the years in which they grow and learn and are formed; and we cannot ask of it less than this: Does it fit them to reach their fullest manhood? does it help them to grow to their fullest growth? does it train them to fill their places in the world to the utmost of their own best?

So, then, we have to take a man, that which each boy is growing to be, and see what sort of creature he is, and how he will need to be trained. And first we get on quite simply. There is his body; and for this his school does well: it gives him wholesome and sufficient food (for which, I hope, when he thinks of the poor white, puny, underfed children in the slums, he sometimes not only 'says grace' but *gives thanks*); it has its games, its gymnastics, its fresh-air life, its bathing, its careful arrangements, such as modern science has brought them to be, for all that ministers to health. Yes, it will train these young growing bodies into strong and active men. And then their minds and wits. Here, again, the school does well for them: it has its careful system, working up from form to form, from the grammar and repetition at the bottom, to the study of the deeper laws and delicate distinctions of language, and of the great works of human thought, at the top; it has the competition for prizes and promotion which quickens zeal and brightens wits; it has the intercourse out of school of boys with boys, of masters with boys;

of which we may say, as it is said in the Bible, that "as iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend ^a."

I shall pass quickly by other things which a school does, other mighty powers which it wields, to train its sons, and draw out of them all that is in them to be drawn out; such, for instance, as its *esprit de corps*, that sense of membership in a great institution, with a history and a future and a reputation to be maintained, which has no small power to put life into both work and play: or that standard of honour and of manners, of what is courteous or upright or honourable in society, which puts a public school-boy so far on his way towards being a true and high-toned gentleman. Truly a public school-boy, and those of us who have been public school-boys, have much for which to say grace and give thanks, in the fact of having belonged to places so well fitted, so carefully by the experience and growth of years and centuries and the care of wise and earnest men elaborated, to fit the young for their work in life.

But now beside all that I have spoken of in the school, besides the bodily training and the teaching of the mind, there is a great deal else,—there is its Christian purpose, its chapel services: among its masters it has clergymen: out of its time something is taken to prepare you for Confirmation, to teach you the Bible, to collect you here for worship. What can we say for this? Is this right? Will this meet the same test, the test namely of providing that, and only that, which makes human nature grow as it should grow to be what it should be? If so it must be be-

^a Prov. xxvii. 17.

cause in each of us there is, besides the body to be fed and trained, and the mind to be cultivated and taught, somewhat else, which in its turn needs to be strengthened and tended and trained. And so surely there is. When we have described man or boy by his body, and by his mind, we have hardly half described him. We have said nothing of his heart, with its feelings and affections, its changes of hope and fear; nothing of that which bounds and leaps in us on a glorious summer's day; that which vibrates to music and song; that which warms at the thought of home, and of some who are there; that which is knit in strong affection to school-friend; that which kindles with admiration at a high example, a pure character, an unselfish deed; that which loathes, and that which loves; which mourns and is comforted; which is wounded, and broods or forgives. But also we have said nothing of that other mysterious wonderful thing in us which bids and forbids, which distinguishes right and wrong, which from early childhood shadows our heart with an uneasiness of pain and gloom, like a cloud creeping over a bright sky, when we have done wrong, and again makes our heart sparkle and spring up when we have done right, or confessed our fault. This mysterious and wonderful thing—conscience we call it—must not this be trained? and must not our school train this and help it to grow, as well as the body and the mind?

Think how it begins: simply the child's knowledge "this is right," "this is wrong:" and then "it is happy and good to do right;" "I may not, I must not, do wrong." There is the first call, the first obedience. Happy are those who in childhood and in boyhood so obey: 'it is right, it shall be done:' 'it is

wrong, and, though it cost me pain, I will not do it.' They do not understand, they cannot explain what right is, or why they should do it: they only know; and as they know they do in simplicity and trust and patience: so it is with children; so, perhaps, it remains with some men, and they have a share in the blessing of those 'who have not seen and yet have believed.'

But it is not every one who can do this: and I do not think it is what we are ordinarily meant to do. The mind grows and asks questions: What does conscience mean? Why is good good, and evil evil? And then we begin to make answers. "Honesty is the best policy;" "to be good brings happiness in the long run;" "see the sad consequences of what is wrong: bodies weakened, or fortunes wasted by indulgence, lives made unhappy by ill-temper, homes divided, hearts soured." And all this is true: it all helps and encourages us to do right, but it does not satisfy us, it is not enough, is it? We did not begin to do right for what it would bring, but because it was right, and right was right for its own sake: there was something in right which laid a sort of awe upon our hearts, and made us obey, or again moved a sort of love in our hearts so that we could not refuse it. This is what we wish to understand, if we may, more clearly. And we begin to understand it if those who are caring for our bodies, and guiding our minds, care for us in this way too; and teach us to understand that conscience is so strong, and right is so awful and yet so lovely, because conscience and right are only names and forms for the voice and the will of a great Being, 'One God, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,' holy and im-

mortal, just and true, before whom all creation bows, in whose service all creation is happy, in whom we "live and move and have our being^b." The world is His world, we are His creatures; therefore it is right and happy to do right: therefore it is awful and disastrous to do wrong. Goodness is obedience to a good God.

So conscience gets its first reason from religion. But then it asks for more: and there is more to come. If there is such a Being, God, can we know Him more? And is there nothing better than obedience? Slaves obey; we are made for liberty. You can obey and fear; we are made to love. And even the child when he did right felt light and *free* in doing it, none the less that he had to put force upon himself: and in his heart *loves* doing right, even though pleasure or temper or indolence leads him to do wrong. May not this continue? May we possibly find in God one whom we can not only fear and obey but love, so that we may gladly do His will, and "run the way of His commandments^c," and find His "service perfect freedom," even as it is always happy and free to please one whom we really love?

So the conscience is ready for the next lesson: and that lesson comes through Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, first, God is made known. He is not merely a Mysterious and Awful Being, though He is that, though no one can see Him and live, though "His footsteps are not known^d," though "the heaven is His throne, and the earth His footstool^e," yet He can be known, for He has made Himself known: "He that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father^f." He "hath

^b Acts xvii. 28.

^c Ps. cxix. 32.

^d Ps. lxxvii. 19.

^e Isa. lxvi. 1.

^f St. John xiv. 9.

spoken unto us by His Son^g." In that human nature which from the first was made "in the image of God"^h God has appeared. 'Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and was made manⁱ.' In Christ by true being, and by likeness in all that is Christ-like in men, we can know God.

And then, again, in Christ we learn that God is not merely a Law Giver, a King, a Master: for we have seen His Son, and we learn that He is a Father. "My Father and your Father^j," Christ says: a Father to all His children; a Father in love, in protection, in care: and so from the earliest days of Christianity, those who became Christians were taught to say, what they were not allowed to say before, the prayer, "Our Father, which art in Heaven." Christ had made them know God as their Father.

Is there any stride in education greater than this, by which the growing man comes to learn the real meaning, the inner mystery of Right? Is there any piece of training to be compared with this which makes the right, the good—morality as we sometimes drily and coldly call it—into something to which a full-grown man can give all the strength and passion, all the force and fear of his nature. For observe in learning to look through Right to a God of love, to a Father self-revealing through a perfect Son, we not only find what satisfies conscience, but what satisfies the heart. All our admiration for strong or sweet characters, all our tender affection for those we love, all our reverence for what is beautiful and noble in them; *all this* is satisfied, is explained: for this too points to God: it is God's image in them which we love, reverence, and admire: and through

^g Heb. i. 2. ^h Gen. i. 27. ⁱ Nicene Creed. ^j S. John xx. 17.

them "whom we have seen" we learn to love "God whom we have not seen^k," but in whom is perfect all that even in the midst of human imperfection moves us so deeply and wins us so tenderly.

And so our question has found, I trust, its answer. The Christian teaching, the religious life, of your school, is not something taken out of, or added on to, your education. They contribute a necessary and a magnificent part of it: that which satisfies and strengthens your conscience, that which satisfies and purifies your heart. They carry on the grammar of the first lessons of right and wrong which you had in the days of childhood, and work them out into a true science of goodness, whereby goodness in us is understood in its true light as the glad and free homage and the loving imitation, which a glorious and perfect God, a holy and loving Father, asks and receives from His children.

How differently will those who have profited by such education go forth into life: how far more proof against temptation than those who see nothing in goodness but what is a fortunate habit, or a way in their family, or a custom of good society, or an irksome and unintelligible law: with how much keener and burning a purity: how much more ready and eager to bear a part, and lend a hand, in the cause of goodness, on the side of right, as the cause of God and the side of Christ: with how much happier and deeper an understanding of the real meaning of our short and changeful life on earth: with how much surer a sense that this whole life is itself only an education for an immortal being, and that our fullest and highest lessons in goodness here are

^k 1 John iv. 20.

only as the grammar of the knowledge of it that shall be when we see 'face to face'¹ the God whom we have loved!

One more point by which Christ educates the conscience, and without which all were worse than incomplete.

The earliest simple voice of conscience was two-fold: it not only pointed to goodness, but it told us that goodness was for us. And what becomes of this last, when a man is educated to see what goodness really is, and knows it to be the glory of a holy and jealous God? What can he do with it? Can he draw near to it, can he make it his own, can it be to him anything but that which puts him to shame, and confounds him, and humbles him to the dust? Can he only say, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts^m;" "Now mine eye seeth Thee, wherefore I abhor myselfⁿ?" Is goodness to be to him for ever nothing but a baffling or even a blasting vision? No, this one lesson more is given to you here by Christ and in Christ: you repeat it again and again in those familiar words, "through Jesus Christ our Lord:" the same teaching, the same Scriptures, the same sacraments which reveal God to us in Christ, reveal to us in ourselves the power of drawing near to God through Christ. In Him "we have access with confidence^o" to God. For He who teaches us to trace goodness up to God teaches us that God is love. He who brought the goodness of God down to men, did so not "to condemn

¹ I Cor. xiii. 12.

^m Isa. vi. 5.

ⁿ Job xlii. 6.

^o Eph. iii. 12.

the world, but that the world through Him might be saved^p." He who being God became man, did so that in Him man might be lifted up to God. He in whom was revealed the perfect claim of goodness, which is God, made also the perfect answer to that claim on behalf of man: and out of the perfect offering of that Human Life which cancelled our rebellion there sprung a new life which we can share. Therefore He formed a Church in which being enrolled and sanctified men might rise to God: therefore He gave us sacraments through which a life and strength greater than our own might lift us heavenwards.

And so the full glory of such an education as is permitted to you here is of this twofold kind, that it first reveals to you the end of your whole being, and then the means and possibility of reaching it. Both are found in God, revealed by Christ, ministered to you through the Church.

^p S. John iii. 17.



