



SERMONS WORTH READING

Helpful Discourses for the People.

THE SECRET OF CHRISTIAN GROWTH.

A Sermon Preached in Clarendon Street Baptist Church, Boston, by Rev. A. J. Gordon, D.D. Text: Rom. 2: 7, "To them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality—Eternal life."

ONE cannot fail to notice the frequency with which our Lord insists upon our abiding in right conditions and appointed duties, as the means of attaining to the highest rewards of discipleship. It is not enough that we be in him; we must abide in him. It is not enough that we know his truth; we must abide in his truth. The word which is generally translated abide is also frequently rendered continue. So that whichever translation is favored, the thought is the same. The highest attainments and rewards of discipleship depend upon our steadfast abiding, our patient continuance. Let us consider at this time some of the things in which we are to continue. In the first place then I exhort you to

I. Continuance in grace. In the 13th of Acts we find Paul and Barnabas persuading the Jews and Proselytes "to continue in the grace of God." I do not know that the persons thus addressed were actually Christians; but they had come under the influences of the Gospel, and the apostles urge them to continue therein. To begin to be a disciple of Christ is one thing; to be a disciple is quite another thing. Thousands stop with the first condition. Therefore Jesus uses this solemn warning. "No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." He does not say "no man turning back," or "no man going back," but no man "looking back." The eye is

The Weather-vane of the Soul.

Mark which way this turns and you can know the tendency of the life. If you have made a move toward following Christ, then I beg you do not even look back; for it may be the crisis of your life. That is the point of the Saviour's warning, "Remember Lot's wife." He is speaking of that momentous scene of the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven. It won't do to take even a backward glance then, lest the opportunity be past. It was so in the day of Sodom. "Up, get thee out of this place, for the Lord will destroy this city," was the warning. And Lot's wife when starting to flee, cast a longing look behind her and was turned into a pillar of salt. As an old preacher stated: "In this critical moment Lot's wife looked back and God never gave her an opportunity to look forward." There are times when the Lord bears with our wavering and indecision, forgives our half-heartedness over and over again. But when the crisis of our destiny comes and we falter, then the hardening follows when we are petrified—not into the salt which is good, but into that which has lost its savor and is henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden. It is to me the most solemn and most sorrowful fact in human destiny that when one's opportunity comes and is allowed to slip by unimproved, it often turns into a condemnation. Very vivid and serious is the exhortation of the apostle to the Hebrews. "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip." The words mean exactly "Lest at any time we should float past them." Christ by his death and resurrection has taken us out from the law and brought us under grace. The promises of grace are ours if we will embrace them by faith; the rewards of grace are ours if we will seize them by patient continuance in good works; the victories of grace are ours if we will overcome by prayer and spiritual warfare. And here we are, borne on the stream of time, like a swimmer in the current of Niagara. There is the opportunity of grace, like an overhanging bush or twig. Look out that at the critical moment when you should have lain hold of it, you fail, and float past it into death and doom. There is such a thing as falling from grace, for the

apostle himself uses the expression in his letter to the Galatians. I do not say that those who have been born again can ever be unborn, and from the position of sons of God, fall into a condition of hopeless orphanage. But from the doctrines of grace we may fall, into that cold and self-confident morality that has no need of Christ; from the opportunity of grace we may slip away so that we shall get beyond hope. "Christ is become of none effect unto you whosoever of you is justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." So writes Paul. And have we not seen this text exemplified in our own experience? One who has seemed to take hold of Christ, letting go, and returning again to his own morality as the ground of acceptance. One who has been convicted by the spirit and made sincerely sorry for his sins, returning to his sins and reliving the life which he had been moved to forsake—this is to fall from grace and to turn away from Christ to self. I exhort you therefore who hear me that you will persevere in the grace of God. Stand fast in the decision for Christ which you have once made; retract not the confession of Christ which has gone forth out of your mouth; turn not from the service of Christ upon which you have once entered; be a disciple as well as begin to be a disciple, and you may be prepared for my next exhortation.

II. Continuance in Knowledge. "If ye continue in my Word, then are ye my disciples indeed." (John 8: 31.) To be a believer is one thing, to be a disciple is quite another thing, and the difference between the two may be the difference between the babe in its mother's arms, and the graduate of the university with the highest honors on his head. A single glance at Christ can save the soul: it takes a lifelong gaze at Christ to satisfy the soul.

Our Lord was speaking to those who had already believed, when he used this language. To believe is to be born of God, but there are many

Venerable Babes

in the Church; old in years, but infantile in spiritual stature. And, I doubt not, the God grieves over dwarfs in his family, even worse than we should if we had such a misfortune in our family. And what is the remedy? He replies: "You have believed the Gospel and so been begotten again by the incorruptible Seed of the Word," continue to feed upon this Gospel so that ye may be disciples or students of mine. Feeding upon Holy Scripture, that ye may grow up in all things into him who is the Head. This is God's method of spiritual development. But as for man, he has sought out many inventions. Thousands of Christians depend for their religion on the reciting of the creeds and resting in the confessions of the Church. And what are confessions? The Bible is the sincere milk of the Word and confessions are condensed milk of the Word: the Gospels are the fruit of the tree of life; and creeds are the canned fruit. A what is the objection to making these creeds and confessions the staple of our religion? The objection is that God does not want to live on canned fruit. It is not so healthful and nourishing as that which is gathered daily. In the Bible we have the tree of life, "which bears twelve manner of fruit and yields her fruit every month." Think of that; what variety and freshness, twelve kinds and twelve crops in a year. This is not a question but if you will pick your basket full every day and eat, you will find the Scriptures always sweet and refreshing that you will not have to complain of the lack of relish in reading the Word of God.

It is here, as with other books. The student would make any real progress in knowledge who should flit from page to page in his studies: picking here a sentence and there a sentence, here a line, and there

a line? Diligent pursuit and patient continuance are absolutely essential to any real growth in knowledge. "If ye abide in my Word then are ye my disciples indeed"—living in it, growing from it—"Ye shall be my disciples"—mastering my secrets, knowing my will, re-living my life and manifesting forth my glory. Be not content, my brother, to be a sinner saved merely; claim and appropriate your privilege of being a disciple sanctified.

III. Continuance in love. "As the Father hath loved me so have I loved you; continue ye in my love." (John 15: 9.) Nothing is here said about continuing in our own love. Now that God has opened his heart to us and given us access to all its fulness he does not set us to pumping affection out of the empty well of our own heart. Here is the mistake of Christians, that they reckon their standing by the warmth and fervor of their own love, instead of resting in the love of God. Christ had one disciple, Simon Peter, who tried three times to tell Jesus that he loved him, and only barely succeeded in doing so. He had another disciple—John—who five times calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved," and found no difficulty in doing so. It is an easy thing to bask in the sunshine, but it is quite another thing

To Manufacture Sunshine,

and God does not require the impossible. Under the law we hear him saying: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." He waited for centuries without finding a solitary one who had kept this commandment. Then he spoke to the world in grace. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." As though he had said: "Since you cannot love me with all the heart, I will now love you with all my heart." As the contrast between the old covenant and the new, is that the one demands doing and the other believing, so here. The decalogue of Sinai says: "Thou shalt love;" the decalogue of Calvary says: "Thou shalt be loved." "We have known and believed the love that God hath for us," says John. Oh! wretched man is he who feels the claims of divine love, but has nothing but his own sinful and selfish heart with which to meet them. Nowhere is "the weakness and unprofitableness" of the commandments more strongly revealed than here. To do, with only the lame hands of helpless human nature with which to work were bad enough, but to love with only the fountain of a cold and loveless heart to draw from, were even worse. And God pitying our helplessness, has ceased from this demand; and in Christ Jesus he has given his own love to be the fount and source of ours. There is an old proverb, "Love is the mother of love." I know not that the proverb ever really found its interpretation till Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not," starting from the cold stones of Sinai never won the affection of a single human heart so far as I know. For affection cannot be commanded: love cannot be legislated. But when on Golgotha in the fleshly tables of our Redeemer's heart, the new decalogue was written: "God commendeth his love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us;" another method was henceforth adopted for

Winning Men.

The new covenant reads: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins." This is the law by which human hearts are now to be won for Christ. What an exposition of this law there is in that story of the missionary David Cargill's conquest fifty years ago on the Fiji Islands. When savage cannibals with clubs and knives and spears, advanced to meet him, he spoke with the only two or three words of their language which he had mastered: "My love to you! My love to you!" With this talismanic sentence, he won their attention, disarmed them of their weapons, and in half a century Fiji has become Christianized. Dr. McAll met the embittered and church-hating Communists of Paris with the only two phrases of French he had mastered. "I love you," "God loves you." And behold what twenty-five years of such preaching wrought! Here is our refuge as believers, here is our weapon as warriors. "But ye, beloved," says Jude, "keep yourselves." Ah! apostle, we cannot keep ourselves; that trinity of foes "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life," is too strong for us! Yes; but hear the whole injunction, "Praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God." I cannot keep in my love to God. Alas! for my unfilial heart! I cannot keep

God's love in me. But I can keep myself in the love of God. I can rest there. I can rejoice there. I can trust there. Lord Jesus, weary and dissatisfied as we are with our own love, we will continue in thy love.

IV. Continuance in prayer. "Continue in prayer and watch in the same with thanksgiving." (Col. 4: 4.) Here is the open secret of spiritual growth and victory. For prayer in its deepest sense is communion—the having in common with God. His strength for our weakness; his life for our death; his love for our selfishness. Therefore the real success of prayer depends upon its unbroken continuance. I think the greatest trouble which beginners in the school of prayer have, is in the fact that the person to whom they speak is unseen, and the power which they invoke is invisible. Oh, that I could see him and hear his voice! How easy then it would be for me to make intercession with the Lord. But because we have neither seen his shape nor heard his voice, we fall into doubt about the reality of this exercise.

Now I believe that in the triumphs of modern science God has taken pains to give us great object-lessons on this point. Look out upon the avenue yonder at what is constantly occurring. Just above the street there is a current of what we call electricity. Nobody knows what it is, or whence it comes. But there is a car on the track that waits to be moved. It lifts up a long arm and with its finger-tip it touches the trolley-wire, and lo the car starts off as though the strength of some mighty giant had suddenly seized it. The power which is laid hold of is invisible, but very real. "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you," says Jesus. There is the energy that moves the Church! Oh, Christian! Reach up to it! Touch it with the finger of faith! It will move you; it will inspire you; it will lift you! But what is the condition? Unbroken communion! The moment the connection with God is broken, then we begin to feel a slacking of the pace, a weakening of the energy,

A Failure of our Life-Forces.

Amid all the doctrinal defections now apparent in the Church, I contend that the greatest trouble is in the life, not in the creed. Heart-failure is what the Church of God is dying of, not head-failure! And yet there is no need of this weakness; for the heart of the Church is in heaven, and if we only keep our communion with that heart through prayer, we may have the vigor and impulse of the living Christ constantly imparted to us. I believe that it is the breaks in our Christian life, which are the source of our greatest weakness. When it is a question of growth, let us remember that the continuous hold of a child is more effectual than the intermittent grips of a giant. Jesus has wrapped up the whole secret in this principle: "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done for you." Great spasms of prayer, violent storms of intercession at the gates of heaven, followed by long stretches of cold and barren praying, this is not the method by which we are to win great riches of grace and glory. The prayers that remain rooted in one place are the prayers that prevail. This petition for blessing fixed here like a plant in the garden of the Lord, to be looked to and tended daily, is the kind of praying which truly enriches the Christian life. I know not why it is, but it does not seem to be God's way to open the door of heaven at the first knock of intercession. If he were to do so, the privileges of the mercy-seat would become so cheapened that they would bring little spiritual enrichment to the soul. So it is, perhaps, that God perseveres in his silence, that he may train us to persevere in seeking. But "our God shall come and shall not keep silence," if only we show him that we are so desperately in earnest that we cannot take denial. Therefore, let me exhort you, my brethren, to renewed watchfulness at this point. "Backsliding always begins at the closet door;" if the sources of spiritual life are neglected, the stream must certainly dry up. Let us not forget it, that our life is not in our own veins and arteries. Our life is hid with Christ in God. Every answered prayer is a pulse beat of the heart of Jesus. Live then in him constantly; pray in him unceasingly. Thus by patient continuance, shall you attain unto eternal life. This is the goal which is set before us. "He that believeth on the Son hath life" indeed; has it in principle, in germ. For this very reason are we exhorted "to fight the good fight of faith and lay hold of eternal life," that as life is now in us in its beginnings, we may enter into life in its fulness.