

Occupy till I come

Luke 19: 11-27

Few portions of Scripture contain fuller instruction as to God's present ways than this parable. Its object is disclosed in the opening verse, where we learn that Jesus spoke it "because He was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear." Just afterwards, as he entered Jerusalem, His disciples hailed Him as King, saying, "Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord." (v. 38.) They expected, as the two disciples on the way to Emmaus declared, that He would at that time "have redeemed Israel" (Luke 24: 2 1), and that the kingdom of God would thus be manifested. We see, indeed, from Luke 17: 20, 21, that the kingdom had already come, but it was not yet with outward show or "observation." It was even then "among" them, but neither then, nor now, as a visible kingdom, recognizable by the world. The real "children of the kingdom" may recognize it in its present hidden form; others in Christendom may acknowledge it as a kingdom in word, but with no true sense of God's sovereignty. The rest of the world can see in it nothing but a religious profession, with no character of a kingdom about it.

While, then, the kingdom of God, in the veiled form in which it now exists, had already come, it had not then, nor indeed has yet, appeared, or been manifested, and it was to check the eager anticipations of the disciples as to its immediate appearance that this parable was spoken. In it, therefore, the Lord details what is to happen before that appearing for which they were looking should take place. He Himself, seen here under the figure of the nobleman, was to go into a far country — in fact, to leave the world for heaven — there to receive the kingdom, and having received it, to return. Meanwhile, those who denied His rights — the Jews especially, but also the world as a whole — not only rejected Him in person while here, but "sent a message after Him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us." (v. 14.) Such a message was the stoning of Stephen, and the persistent refusal to hear the testimony of the apostles and of the Holy Ghost after Christ's departure. This is, and has been, the attitude of the world as a whole, and of the Jews in particular, towards Jesus since He "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;" and this will be their attitude as a

nation till He comes again. He will then return, having had the nations given Him as His inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession; and those who would not that He should reign over them will be dealt with in judgment.

But between His departure and His return there is, besides the citizens who rejected Him, another class of persons called His servants. These, though left among the citizens, are clearly of a different class. They are in the city to care for their Lord's things entrusted to their charge. While the citizens reject Him as their King, these own His authority; while the citizens have no thought of His return, these occupy till He comes. These servants, then, represent Christendom, those who, in name at least, acknowledge the authority of the rejected Lord. Is it not startling to contrast this picture of the responsibility of the Christian professor with the thought which even true believers commonly cherish as to their place in the world? What is spoken of here is no limited class, specially set apart as ministers or servants. The responsibility pointed out is the common responsibility of Christendom; and surely it is impossible to look at Christendom in the light of the responsibility here disclosed, without a sad sense of its utter failure to execute the charge with which it has been entrusted. Nevertheless, the responsibility of the professing "Christian world" is to occupy for Christ till He returns; and according to this responsibility it will be judged.

By the mass indeed of nominal Christians the charge is simply disregarded. If the pound is not thrown away, or the very name of Christian abandoned, this is all that can be said. Hard thoughts of God are entertained; His gifts forgotten or despised; His demands regarded as unreasonable exactions. He is looked upon as "an austere man," taking up what He had not laid down, reaping what He had not sown. And yet man, with his usual inconsistency, while judging God as exacting more than is due, has taken no pains to earn, as it were, anything for Him. He is therefore judged out of his own mouth, and condemned as an unprofitable servant.

Leaving, however, the sad case of mere professors, let us ask to what extent we answer to the view here presented of the believer's responsibility. To how many

true Christians is the thought present, "I am here for Christ, in charge of His interest in the scene where He has been rejected"? What would the world appear to one who had this conception of the place he was called upon to occupy? The cross, as the means by which sins were put away, is of course valued by all real believers, and in this sense they can and do glory in it. But Paul gloried in it for another reason, and saw in the death of Christ another aspect. To him that death was not only deliverance from sins, but deliverance "from this present evil world." To him that cross was not only the place where sin had been judged, but the means by which "the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." He saw in the death of Christ the death of all, "and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again." What complete separation from the world, what complete devotedness to Christ, do we see here! And yet this is only what becomes one who, in the light of Christ's own words, realizes the place he is responsible to occupy in this world. For must there not be a complete separation of heart and feeling between the servant who is truly occupying for Christ, and the world which has rejected Him? "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?"

It may be urged indeed that the citizens here do not represent nominal Christians who constitute the world around us. This is true; but if nominal Christians have become just as much "of the world" as the heathen, if Christ's lordship is just as little practically admitted among them as in the rest of the world, is the call for separation any the less urgent? Is the world any more allowable because it takes the name of Christ, while practically it disowns and rejects Him?

If there is one rule of separation in Scripture more stringent than another, it is the separation from those who, while called by Christ's name, are walking in an ungodly fashion. If there is one scene over which judgment is impending with more fearful gloom than over any other, it is over this very Christendom which, on account of the privileges it has enjoyed, and the sad use it has made of them, is held as especially guilty in God's sight. The principle of separation, therefore, applies even with greater force to the believer in the world of Christendom around him at present than to the believer in the midst of Jews and heathen.

What the Lord desires in His people is wholeheartedness for Himself. This does not imply separation from the ordinary occupations of the world. But the question is, whether these occupations entangle the heart and become our objects? or whether, while pursuing these occupations, the heart is still free for Christ? Is getting on in the world what fills our thoughts? or are we, while providing things honest in the sight of all men, really living among men and before men as those who are not their own, but bought with a price — as those who, being constrained by the love of Christ, are seeking, however feebly, to live, not

unto ourselves, but unto Him who died for us and rose again? Few, of course, are called upon to preach Christ, but all are called upon to live Christ. And to live Christ involves taking His place in relationship to the world. "They are not of the world," He said, "even as I am not of the world." It is easy to put imaginary cases, and to ask where the line is to be drawn. The heart that is in communion with Christ, though it may not know how to lay down principles, will distinguish readily enough what will suit Him, and what would grieve His Spirit. Indeed it is only Christians who are anxious to mix with the world that have any difficulty in the matter. The world quickly enough discerns what is consistent and what is inconsistent in a Christian, and estimates without difficulty the value of the testimony given by a worldly believer. If the heart is really true to Christ it will unconsciously bear witness to Him, and separate from the world which knows Him not. The spirit and objects of the world cannot have a place in the soul that is filled with Christ. The pursuits and riches of the world will appear worthless to him whose affections are set on things above.

The character of the true servant will show itself in various ways. If to serve Christ is really the object, His own word and directions will be the rule of service. Who could suppose the servants of the absent Lord taking counsel with the citizens that had cast Him out, as to how they should care for His goods? Is it any better when believers go to the world, or resort to worldly principles, worldly wisdom, and worldly alliances, in the hope of furthering the cause of Christ? The power is of God, who does not need our wisdom as to the mode of carrying on His own work, but who does demand our obedience as servants. No truth is more needed at the present moment than that of the all-sufficiency of the word of God. Whatever, under the name of service, is not built on this foundation, is not service such as the Lord owns. There may, of course, be earnestness and truth of heart, which the Lord does own, even where much is added which He could not sanction; but in these cases His blessing is on what comes from Himself, not on what comes from the flesh and the world.

There is another thing which will mark the true servant. He will be waiting for the coming of his Lord. If the heart is really estranged from the world and set on heavenly things, what expectation will bring such blessedness as the thought of the Lord's return? The idle servant, whose heart was full of hard thoughts about his Lord, could of course entertain no bright hopes in connection with His coming again. To him the thought must necessarily be unwelcome. But what joy would the prospect bring to the heart of the faithful servant who had been living and labouring for Him during His absence! Are our hearts thus waiting and longing? Are we occupying for Christ during His absence, seeking to act in obedience to His word, waiting in joyful anticipation for His return?

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