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THE TEACHING OF JESUS.

I. THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF THE JEWS IN THE TIME OF JESUS.

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The ideas the background of Jesus' teaching.—The Jewish doctrine of God and its practical effects.—The Jewish doctrine of righteousness and its twofold danger illustrated from gospels and from Paul.—Jesus teaching of God faith, and the person and work of the Messiah.—The latter contrasted with Jewish Messianic hopes.—The conflict of Jesus with the Jews both as Messiah and teacher.

Recent writers on the teaching of Jesus have justly emphasized the importance of studying the religious life and thinking of the Jews in the time when our Lord lived upon earth. These ideas form a background upon which his teaching is set, and the study of them throws no little light upon his own words. Sometimes we find a noticeable likeness between his ideas and words and those which were current among the Jews in his time. We should expect that he would often take up expressions and forms of thought that were common among his people; this he does, but he generally fills the old words and phrases with new and deeper meanings than they had for the Jewish mind. But in studying the religious ideas of Jesus' time we are more struck by the wide difference between his thoughts and those of his contemporaries than by their resemblance. The similarities are rather incidental than fundamental; they concern rather the form than the substance of his teaching.

These statements any careful reader of the Bible can illustrate and verify for himself. The religious notions of the Jews, in all essential particulars, can be learned from the New Testament itself; but the researches of scholars in the later Jewish literature have added greatly to the clearness and completeness of the picture of Jewish teaching which the New Testament presents.

This teaching I shall now illustrate in some important points, in respect to which the reader of the Gospels should always compare the conceptions of Jesus with those which were common in his age.¹

Take, in the first place, the Jewish idea of God. The idea of God's exaltation above the world was carried so far by the Jews that he was almost separated from the world altogether. God was thought of almost entirely as a judge or governor. His relations with men were conceived of in a legal, rather than in a moral way. God was an accountant who exactly credited all good deeds and with equal exactness estimated and punished all transgressions of his law. It will readily be seen how the extreme development of this idea would tend to exclude the truth of God's grace from the minds of men. The very idea of God's grace is that he treats men better than they deserve ; that he deals generously, benevolently with them and not in mere naked justice. The possibility of forgiveness lies in the grace of God. If he should with unsparing strictness mark iniquities, the Psalmist teaches, no one could stand, but there is forgiveness with him.

This notion of God exerted a most important influence on practical religion. The God who was far away in the heavens had made a revelation of his will in the laws and ceremonies of the Pentateuch, and religion consisted, to the mind of the Jew, in strict obedience to all the requirements of this ritualistic system. In all this the Jew was by no means wholly wrong ; the law did contain the great principles of love and service which Jesus declared to be the sum of all goodness. It was a one-sided view of God and his requirements which led the Jewish mind astray. The main emphasis was laid on the externals of religion as being a means of pleasing God and winning his favor. Had God been conceived of as a moral Being who cares most for the moral state of men, that is, their inner life, their motives, feelings and principles, the Jews would not have been likely to fall into those errors respecting religion which made it consist mainly in outward observances and rites.

¹ The reader will find popular Jewish thought more fully illustrated in Wendt's *Teaching of Jesus* and in Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus*.

There were some important elements of truth in the popular Jewish idea of God. What is called by theologians God's "transcendence"—his independence of the world and superiority to it—was strongly emphasized, but the complementary truth of God's constant presence in the world was correspondingly obscured. And with this "transcendence" were associated ideas of arbitrariness, legal strictness and harshness, rather than ideas of moral excellence or love. So perverted an idea of God's nature and relations to the world could only lead to superficial conceptions of his will and requirements. One has but to read the allusions which Jesus made to the religious ideas of the Pharisees to see what popular religion had become. It was a round of ceremonies and observances most of which had nothing to do with the state of the heart and life—a tithing of mint, anise and cummin, while judgment and the love of God were forgotten.

We are thus led to the consideration of the current idea of righteousness among the Jews in contrast to that which Jesus presents. Their idea of righteousness grew out of their conception of God and of his revelation. It consisted in obedience to commandments, and these commandments were looked at in quite an external way. The rich young man who came to Jesus asking what he should do to inherit eternal life is a good concrete illustration of the view which the Jews took of the commandments. He said that he had kept them all. He evidently considered that to refrain from doing those evil deeds—stealing, lying, Sabbath-breaking, and the like—which the commandments forbade, was to keep the commandments perfectly. Only a superficial conception of the import and bearing of the commandments could underlie his claim that he had kept them all from his youth. The same faulty notion of the real moral requirements of the law lay at the root of the pride and self-righteousness of the Pharisees. They thought themselves righteous only because they measured themselves by an imperfect standard, an inadequate idea of the demands which the law made upon the inner life.

It would not, of course, be correct to suppose that all the Jews supposed themselves to have kept the law perfectly. On

the contrary they invented various devices by which they believed they could make good their personal deficiencies. Specially great sufferings and meritorious works, such as almsgiving, were thought to have an atoning efficacy. The extraordinary merits of one's ancestors or friends might avail to supply defects in obedience. But the personally righteous life consisted in the observance of all the rites and ceremonies prescribed in the law and in refraining from all the acts which the law forbids.

No one would claim that this idea of righteousness was wholly wrong; it was rather one-sided and defective. It placed righteousness too much in externals and too little in the state of the heart. It exaggerated the ritual features of religion and overlooked its deeper spiritual requirements upon conduct and life. Either one of two results might flow from this externalism in religion—results which would be equally detrimental to a healthy religious life. On the one hand, if one supposed himself to have done all that was required, he would easily fall a prey to spiritual pride, for had not he achieved this lofty height of goodness by his own exertions? On the other hand, if a man felt that he had failed to do the divine will and to win acceptance with God, he would naturally become hopeless and despondent. We accordingly find that the religious life of the Jewish people, to a great extent, oscillated between self-righteousness and despair.

The former of these tendencies of the system in question is amply illustrated in the pages of the New Testament. The hypocrisy and self-righteousness of the Pharisees which are so clearly depicted in the Gospels are examples of the first result, which was, no doubt, the more common one. But I believe that we have in the New Testament a striking example of the other result, although it is not always understood in the way in which I shall explain it. I refer to the description by the apostle Paul in the seventh chapter of Romans of a certain conflict between the reason or conscience and the power of sin. This conflict he describes in the first person, thus indicating that he had himself experienced it. Let us examine his account of the experience more particularly, beginning at the seventh verse.

The apostle states that he became conscious of his sin because the law came to him and forbade him to do certain deeds. The law revealed him to himself; it acted like a mirror into which he looked and saw himself. Moreover, it called out his native sinful tendencies into expression. "I was alive apart from the law once," exclaims the apostle, "but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." His meaning is that he was living on in fancied security and self-satisfaction until he saw the high and holy demands of God's law; thereupon all his pride and selfishness perished — that is, morally speaking he was slain. What, then, was it in him to which the divine law was so strenuously opposed? Paul answers that it was sin, and then he enters on a description of two forces, or elements in his being, one of which consents to the law and would obey it, and the other of which is hostile to it. The former of these powers or dispositions Paul calls the "inward man" and "the law of his mind;" the latter is sin which dwells in his members and so dominates his will that he cannot do what he would. This inward man, or reason, is, no doubt, what we should call conscience. The result of this conflict is that the better part of the nature in which it goes on is worsted and that the man exclaims in despair: "Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?"

What can this picture be but a description of Paul's experience as a Pharisee when he was seeking to find peace with God by works of righteousness which he would do? We could have no more vivid a portrayal, I think, than this of the natural effect of the popular view respecting salvation by the law upon the mind of a man whose heart and conscience had been awakened to something like an adequate sense of what the law really demanded. When the high ideal of the law was seen, as it was by Paul, the real helplessness of weak and sinful human nature appeared, and where there was no other idea of salvation except that of acceptance by merit, despair was the inevitable result.

Now when Jesus came, he presented a very different idea of the way in which men were to find acceptance with God. He taught that trust or faith was what God required. "This is the work of God, that ye believe on the name of his Son," he said.

This teaching opens a way of salvation on which anyone, however weak and sinful, may enter. It is not necessary to climb up into God's favor by meritorious works; nor is it possible, since the power of sin is so great in unrenewed human nature. In substituting faith for works Jesus gave quite a new character to religion. He opened the way to real repose of soul because in faith we do not rest upon our own achievements, but in God's mercy. We have a secure ground of hope in the goodness of God.

But faith, in our Saviour's teaching, is not a mere passive principle; it involves love and obedience. Real trust in God implies living fellowship with him. Thus faith sets man in his true relation to God because it both opens his life to the divine grace and also calls forth his own best aspiration and effort after likeness to God. Christ's teaching, therefore, replaces self-righteousness by humility, and substitutes confidence for despair. Its whole idea is that of a vital, loving relation with God.

The teaching of Jesus presents a great contrast to the Jewish ideas of his time in regard to the person and work of the Messiah. The popular Messianic idea had been formed from those prophecies which represented the Messiah as a Prince or King. These representations were taken in a literal or worldly sense. The Messiah was to be another David who should restore the monarchy to power and glory, subdue hostile nations and rule the conquered world in unsurpassed majesty. When, therefore, Jesus appeared, claiming to be the Messiah, and yet did nothing which the Jews expected the Messiah to do, it is not strange, in one point of view, that they rejected his claim. And, especially, when he began to teach that he must suffer death, were his contemporaries offended at his claim to be the Messiah. Even his disciples found it hard to overcome their Jewish prejudices respecting Messiah's person so far as to see how their Master could be destined to suffer death: "Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall never be unto thee," exclaimed Peter on one occasion when Jesus had been saying that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things, and at last be put to death.

The Jews of our Lord's time did not hold the doctrine of a

suffering Messiah. The Old Testament passages which describe the suffering Servant of Jehovah, such as Isa. 53, they neglected or ingeniously explained away. According to one explanation there was to be a preparatory Messiah, the son of Joseph, who was to suffer and so fulfill the prophecies concerning the suffering Servant. The Jewish Messianic ideal was too much associated with thoughts of earthly power and glory to permit of reconciliation with the notion that the Messiah should die an ignominious death. In every essential respect, therefore, did Jesus disappoint the expectations of the Jews in regard to Messiah's work and kingdom. When he rode in triumph into Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophecy that the King of Zion should come in meekness, sitting upon an ass (the animal which symbolizes peace, as the horse represents war) he was indeed acknowledged as the Messiah by a multitude, but the nation as a whole was as hostile as ever.

The rejection of the messiahship of Jesus by the Jews was, therefore, natural. With their ideas and prejudices they could not see their long-expected Messiah in a humble, spiritual teacher and, especially, not in a "man of sorrows." But this blindness by no means excuses the Jews for the rejection of the Christ. It was their selfishness and worldliness which had blinded their eyes to the deeper spiritual meaning of their own Scriptures. Jesus told them truly that they did not hear the voice of God which spoke to them in Sacred Scripture. They searched the Scriptures, thinking to find eternal life in them, but they did not find it because they searched with such perverted judgment and with such carnal hopes. If they had studied the Old Testament rightly they would have found himself as the Christ there and thus would have found the true messianic salvation in the life of love and of fellowship with God.

There are many illustrations in the New Testament of the fact that Jesus' disciples found it very hard to adopt his idea of the kingdom of God instead of that which, as Jews, they had been accustomed to cherish. They once asked him: "Wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" and after his death, on the way to Emmaus, they sorrowfully refer to their

disappointed hope that he should have redeemed Israel. Jesus had often to remind them that his kingdom was spiritual: "My kingdom is not of this world," he said.

An inevitable result of the ideas of salvation, righteousness, and the kingdom of God which we have noticed, was that the Jews regarded themselves as the special favorites of heaven. To them God had given his only revelation, and to them he had restricted his saving mercy. The Old Testament had presented the idea that God had bestowed peculiar privileges upon the Jews in order that they might be the bearers of true religion to the world. They, on the other hand, considered their privileges as destined for themselves alone. The favors of heaven should stop with them and be their exclusive possession. This attitude of mind involved the great perversion of Israel's history. By failing to receive Christ and his world-wide conception of salvation, they broke with the sublime purpose of God in their own history, and failed to attain the true goal of their existence as the theocratic people.

The illustrations of Jewish ideas which I have given will serve to show how uncongenial to the spiritual truth of Jesus was the soil in which he must plant it. To the thought of his age God was afar off, his service was a round of rites and observances, righteousness was an external, and largely a non-moral, affair, and the great hope of the nation was to subdue, by divine intervention, the surrounding nations and to obtain supremacy over the world. With all these ideas and hopes the teachings of Jesus came into the sharpest collision. He aimed to show men that God was near to them and that they could live in fellowship with him. He taught that all outward rites were valueless in themselves and that God cared most about the state of the heart. For him righteousness consisted in Godlikeness, that is, in love, service, and helpfulness.

How great were the obstacles which Jesus encountered in securing a reception for his truths among men! A few, however, accepted them and believed on him as the true Messiah and Saviour. But this acceptance was often mixed up with misapprehension of his truth and work, and faith was, in many cases,

very defective. But in most faith was, at least, sincere and was strengthened by strong attachment to his person. As time went on that faith matured and came to rest upon deeper and more adequate grounds. Under what difficulties, and with what small beginnings, was the great work of Christianity begun!