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A DISCOURSE
ON THE
SERVICE OF GOD,

DELIVERED BY

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AT THE

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THE
SERVICE OF GOD.

“O Lord, truly I am thy servant. I am thy servant, and the son of thy handmaid. Thou hast broken my bonds.”—Psalm cxvi. 16.

RELIGION has a long history. It is perhaps as old as human nature. At every time it reflects our moral and intellectual state. It is barbarous in our barbarism. It is puerile, while our intellects are immature. It becomes more manly with our manlier thoughts, pure and tender with our more refined morals. The rude or savage man, who discovers in the vast world Powers greater than himself and older than the solid globe, easily believes that some gods are kindly and others cruel. The God who gives genial harvests and healthful seasons is the good God; but the power who wields the hurricane and the lightning seems to be a demon. We know, as a fact, particular tribes to have argued frankly, that it is not necessary to concern ourselves about the good God, who is sure to be kind. The only matter of importance (they said) is, to propitiate the evil demons, and avert their anger. Thus, as a matter of *policy*, demon-worship is put forward as the cardinal task of religion.

But wherein does this worship or service consist? It is assumed that the mighty Being who sometimes crushes feeble man, crushes him through malevolence and cruelty. Such a Being is likely to be proud, vain, jealous; easily affronted, but appeased by submission, by gifts and by flattery. Therefore the service of the god becomes like to that of an earthly tyrant. Worship paid to one somewhat lower in

morals than ourselves is degrading to the votary and demoralizing. No one can say into what depths of cruelty to man such fantastic service may descend, if once the ceremonies of worship are systematized and receive traditional sanction from national usages and law.

Thus, in order that worship or service to God may be healthful, rightful, elevating, ennobling, the first essential condition is, that we believe God to be *better* than ourselves; not merely more powerful, but better, in every sense in which we can understand goodness. It needs no high effort of thought, no especial power of insight, to establish as a sure foundation, that, if a Supreme God have any moral character at all, his morality must be nobler than ours. In any case our petty vices are in him simply impossible. He cannot be irritable, jealous, thinking of his own honour, capricious, malignant, fickle, fantastic. He does not need offerings of food or of flowers, roast flesh or honey-cakes, garlands of leaves, nor crowns of gold. He needs no house built for his dwelling-place or sleeping-rooms. He will not wear robes of State, though they be woven for him of fine purple and edged with gold brocade. What then can we do to *serve* such a Being, who wants for himself nothing at our hands?

It is within the compass of the humblest intellect, so soon as man or woman thinks freely and definitely, to make sure, that if God desire us to *serve* him, it is not for his advantage or comfort or pride, but for our benefit. We ought to revere him; why? Because we are the better for revering him. But again, why so? Because reverence intrinsically befits us, if he indeed be supreme in goodness and wisdom, as well as in duration and power. For one who is still a child to look up with admiration to a loving father, is always good, because a mature man is far higher in wisdom and goodness than a child;

but reverence of one man for another man is not, as such, intrinsically good, and may be pernicious. Reverence rightly directed, towards one who unquestionably deserves it, softens, chastens, and confirms moral character, and has no element of servility in it. To have no object whom we revere generally belongs to self-conceit, flippancy, shallowness of heart. "To be Reverent is Wisdom," says a philosophic Greek poet; and the voice of mankind classes irreverence among vices. Yet (as above said) to revere a God, to whom we attribute mean vices, is evil and not good. That religion may be beneficial, it must be pure; that it may be pure, criticism of it must be free; no worship of false gods is endurable to true piety. If it be *possible* sincerely to adore a being morally below us (which may greatly be doubted), such worship is at best a galling slavery. But when the worshipper discerns that his God is supremely good, and deserves to be loved with all the heart and soul, his chains drop off, and he may justly cry: "Thou hast broken my bonds. Thy service is perfect freedom. Oh tell me what I am to do. Speak, Lord! for thy servant heareth. Blessed are they who do thy commandments. Lord! teach me thy statutes. Oh that I could hear thy voice!"

But no voice from heaven is heard in reply to such aspirations. The wisdom of God draws out our own powers, and, to do this, never dictates as an earthly preceptor, but works on our hearts and intellects by many an inward experience and many an outward event. That elementary religion which we call Pagan can hardly now be recognized by us as religion at all. We may contemptuously call it "carnal ordinances," so long as it is external and corporate. But from the day that religion is treated as no longer a corporate affair to be transacted by a priest or a church, but a matter internal to the individual soul,—thenceforward it is nearly true to say that each of us has to

earn his own religious beliefs. Morals are dictated to us by the human race in the most critical matters ; but neither mankind nor any individual can profitably dictate on spiritual religion. At most one may confidentially tell to another his inward convictions, and how his doubts and difficulties were removed ; but different minds are liable to (what may be called) different *diseases*, and are relieved by different remedies. It is lovely and truly hopeful when, in opening youth, ardent hearts aspire to dedicate life to the service of God ; yet nothing is commoner than for the worshipper, after a glow of zealous devotion, to lament that his earthly heart cannot keep it up. Then he inquires, " Is there any means of sustaining religious affection, so that I may always *feel* that I love God, as I did feel for a little while ? Is it a sin that I am cold and dead, when I know that I ought to rejoice in his supreme goodness ? " This is but one of many ways in which sincere hearts are disquieted ; yet a few words may here be in place.

We must not mistake religious emotion for religion. Reverence implies a definite position of the understanding and the moral judgment. This ought to be a permanent state, which shows itself whenever the thought of the Most High recurs to the mind. But every emotion is transitory. Each is most healthy when most spontaneous. To excite feeling artificially is unhealthful, and tends to increase deadness. It suffices to have the conviction deep in our understandings that God deserves to be loved ; we cannot always have love to Him active and sensible. But to say this is not to say half of what truth seems to demand. The religious affections are good in their place ; they are right (as above said) because they intrinsically befit us ; in greater or less intensity they are necessary to religion. But as we must refuse to believe that God, like a weak, vain man, is jealous for his own honour, so must we beware of the stealthy

idea that he resents coldness or exacts gratitude. The religious affections are not the service of God. Religion itself is the true *service of God*, and it is exhibited mainly in right conduct towards MAN. This, in my apprehension, is the cardinal doctrine which the Church of the Future has to make prominent, and, as it were, bear aloft upon her flag. It certainly has not been duly prominent in the past, and is very often flatly denied. As the Hebrew prophets represented Jehovah saying, "I need not your sacrifices of bullocks and rams: if I am hungry, I will not ask food of you," so must we now insist that God is not benefited by our psalms and hymns, nor is less glorious or less blessed, if defrauded of our praise and gratitude. On our own account it is good to draw near to him and worship inwardly; but to make the service of God *consist* in this is, at bottom, the same error as to identify the useless and selfish life of a hermit with religious life.

That-wise religion has its highest and ultimate goal in right behaviour towards our fellow-men is not distinctly expressed in the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures; yet (I think) is often implied by Christian Apostles and by Jesus himself; also in the celebrated passage of Micah, which sums up man's duty to God in justice and mercy, and humility or sobriety before God. It seems impossible to find books richer in urgent exhortations concerning outward conduct than the Apostolic Epistles and the three first Gospels. Nevertheless, all the books of the New Testament are so overlaid with notional matter that the historical Christian Church was seduced into making doctrines and creeds paramount. In consequence men, celebrated as eminent philosophers, have imagined that in Christianity practical virtue is disesteemed. That ceremonies may and do choke and bury true religion is a familiar thought to all who honour the name Protestant. That theories, doctrines, controversies,

religious emotion and efforts to kindle emotion may be mischievous in the same way, many Protestants are not duly aware. Theology, as science or art, is but a *means*; our social perfection is the *end* which theology ought to subserve. To attain *such* perfection as men and women *can* attain in their mutual relations is the highest service of God.

A misconception of this statement is more than possible, and must be carefully guarded against. Misconception may arise out of the common distinction between personal vice and crimes or offences against society; also between personal virtue and social virtue. We must not mistake *such* outward action as alone the law of the land can *command*, or even such as alone society can *claim* from us, for the substance of religious life. Every personal vice, in truth, makes us worse citizens, nor do any virtues *so* redound in blessing to society as purely spiritual virtues. The earliest scientific treatise on morals known to the Western world maintained that justice included all virtue, for to be defective in any virtue was a fraud on society. Justice, strictly interpreted, was identical with righteousness. There is truth in this.

To do an act of kindness is acceptable to our neighbours, but to do it ungraciously may destroy all pleasure from it and nearly all its value. It is not the outward act only which kindles gratitude or affection, but the act as indicating the temper of the doer. The dullest of us is, after all, a spiritual being; we love men for their goodness, even more than for their usefulness to ourselves. If destitute, we covet supplies necessary to life; but man does not love for bread alone. We wish for respect, for good-will, for friendliness. We are quick to discern when another is contemptuous, proud, selfish, ungoverned, grasping. All vices, however internal and hidden away, are disagreeable to us; and, if they abound in our neighbours, lessen our happiness and even our sense of

security. Sensual vice, it need hardly be insisted, is manifestly pernicious to others as well as to the vicious person. A drunkard is a bad husband, a bad father, a bad son, a bad citizen in general. The seducer of female virtue is pernicious in the highest degree; the man of impure life is a centre of corruption and a propagator of misery. Gluttony is the greatest cause of disease, and variously incapacitates us. Those who make their gain by encouraging vice are among the very worst citizens. To foster hatred *within*, of that which would degrade us *without*, to simplify our habits so as to be contented with little, may seem at first purely personal virtues, yet without them we are not armed against temptation, nor competent for warfare with social misery. Hence a Christian Apostle regarded spiritual virtues collectively as the weapons and armour of God, for battle against the wicked spirits who domineer in the world. In this noble combat we need to put on not only tender mercies, patience, and universal good-will, but also those virtues of the soldier—hardihood and self-denial, frugality and bravery. Paul is represented (in substance, I doubt not, correctly) as leaving with the elders of Ephesus his last solemn charges, and, as it were, his dying words: "I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel: yea, ye yourselves know that these hands have ministered to my necessities and to them that were with me. I have showed you that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and remember those words of the Lord Jesus,—It is more blessed to give than to receive." Some one has said that Jesus kindled on earth an enthusiasm of humanity. To me it is clear that through the whole book, which we call the New Testament, there burns an enthusiasm for moral perfection. Our task in this later age is to cull the noblest flowers of Christian precepts, just as did the Apostles from the Prophets and Psalmists who had preceded them, avoiding the errors incident to the

earlier era, and adding whatever wisdom the long lapse of time has bequeathed to us.

Is then *the service of God*, as interpreted by Christian Apostles, quite identical with that to which we now ought to exhort one another? Not quite identical, I think. They believed that King Messiah would return in the clouds of heaven, to set up a rule of righteousness on earth. They saw the gross injustices of princely power and institutions founded on conquest; but to defeat iniquity enthroned in high station seemed to them far too hard a task for any one but the Lord from heaven. To behold the kingdoms of this world under the reign of God and his Christ was the sight for which their hearts ached; but the only work for others to which they believed themselves called, was, to prepare the elect,—a small remnant of mankind,—for entering into God's kingdom. We cannot blame them as weak in faith, because they despaired of overthrowing organized violence without miraculous intervention. In fact, the primitive gospel or good news announced, what long experience has convicted as an error;—namely, that the Lord Messiah himself would very shortly descend from heaven with innumerable angels and a trumpet sound, to claim his rightful royalty over earth, and trample down the wicked princes who ruled by the unseen might of Satan, God's arch enemy. Then would come the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord; then righteousness would flourish, and all the prophecies be gloriously fulfilled. Reluctantly, slowly, and by necessity, Christians at length resigned this splendid vision, and learned that to leave political affairs to the management of bad men was not the part of wisdom and duty: but alas! forthwith arose an insatiable ambition to invest Church Officers with the wealth, power, and prerogatives of Pagan princes. Out of this has flowed a total perversion of Christianity, and, for 1500 years,

incessant conflicts which abounded with misery and innumerable moral evils; yet probably were inevitable in some other shape, if they had not come in this shape. From her more than millennial agony Christendom emerges far stronger and far wiser. We now discern what has been the error. True religion ought to *consecrate* all our worldly action, not to disparage, to decry, and to *desecrate* the world. Herein is the pivot of our new departure. We need to revert to an older wisdom, which taught* that "God hath granted to us on this earth a small plot; and this is that which we must cultivate and glorify." Religious action does not consist in propagating religious opinions, nor even in cherishing religious emotions; but in *being* good and *doing* good. To desecrate the word *secular*, is akin to desecrating *marriage*; each should be ennobled, not disparaged. This world is not to be abandoned to men selfishly greedy and ambitious, but is to be defended and rescued from them by the concordant efforts of God's true servants. Unjust and corrupting institutions, evil laws, reckless government, are not to be left unmolested. Since bad law is of all bad things most widely and deeply efficacious for evil, while good law is of all good influences the mildest and most effective for good; therefore, to purify laws and institutions is a primary mode of establishing the kingdom of God on earth. In no other way can the *roots* of moral evil be torn up. It has often been said, that three days' drunkenness, fostered by ambition to aid electioneering intrigues, undo the work of three years' preaching. This is but one illustration out of fifty, and not at all the strongest, denoting how futile is a moral crusade, if it will not attack political villainies. Hitherto, among Protestants, all national progress in morals has been retarded, just

* Σπάρτην ἔλαχες · ταύτην κόσμει.

in proportion as they have recalled from the first Christian ages the doctrine that the saint is not a citizen of this world; that the kingdoms of this world are incurably wicked; that the devil and his angels are to be left in possession of political principality; that Christians have nothing to do with making the national institutions just, and the law moral. The doctrine of Geneva, of Scotland and of the English Puritans, took a course which avoided this rock of offence, but ran upon another, nearly as Rome has done,—a rock which we mis-call Theocracy: but the Lutherans, and the Anglican Evangelicals, the Moravians, the Quietists, and other sects, with many estimable persons, in striving to recover the original position of the Christian Church, overlooked both our vast differences of circumstance, and the glaring fact that that Church erred in expecting the speedy overthrow of political wrong by a miraculous intervention. Without full self-consciousness or any clear knowledge of the past, all the Churches of England are now waking to their duty of purifying the fountains of our daily life. Herein lies the germ of a new religion; new to us, if in some sense old. There are those who believe that this new religion is what Jesus meant to teach (but his words, say they, have been garbled),—that when from human sympathy one man relieves another, who is a captive, or sick, or hungry, or naked, *though he do it without dreaming to serve God or thinking of God at all*, yet the Supreme Judge recognizes it as service done to himself. This is neither place nor time for inquiring into the truth of the interpretation. Suffice it to say, that goodness is amiable, with or without religious thought; that man needs our services, and God does not need our love any more than our flattery, and that in affectionate, dutiful or merciful acts towards our fellow-men we best become joint-workers with God. This is the earliest religion

possible to childhood, the only religion which can commend itself to the barbarian conscience.

Will any one call it a poetical fiction, that all the universe, inorganic, brute or barbarian, is doing the work of God, obeying his command, fulfilling his *service*? alike the suns and planets, the elements and seasons, the beasts and birds, tribes of savages and ignorant masses of men? God makes the very wrath of man to praise him, out of discord bringing harmony. How much more ought we to recognize as *his servants* that vast army of mute toilers, the poor of every nation, prevalently simple and ignorant, and despised as "the herd of mankind," though often nobly unselfish and gloriously heroic? The same may be said of the patient inventors and perfectors of mechanical and other civilizing art. Let no man despise man; for we are all of one blood, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Adam acknowledge us not. The love of God embraces us all; therefore it is very fit, right, and our bounden duty, to study the benefit of this human family as our highest service to the common Father. Serving man we best serve God; he that will be greatest among us, let him be the servant of all. In that service is love and joy; love, which is forgetful of self; joy, in the lofty faith, which is sure that Right must triumph.