

CHAPTER VIII

The Marks of Discipleship (I)

HUMILITY

THE PARABLE OF THE CHIEF SEATS

"And he spake a parable unto those that were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief seats; saying unto them, When thou art bidden of any man to a marriage feast, sit not down in the chief seat; lest haply a more honorable man than thou be bidden of him, and he that bade thee and him shall come and say to thee, Give this man place; and then thou shalt begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest place; that when he that hath bidden thee cometh, he may say to thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have glory in the presence of all that sit at meat with thee. For every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

(*Luke 14:7-11*)

THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

"And he spake also this parable unto certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at nought: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I get. But the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote his breast, saying, God, be thou merciful to me a sinner. I say unto you, This man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

(*Luke 18:9-14*)

CHAPTER VIII

HUMILITY

The Parable of the Chief Seats The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

The story of the Chief Seats is more than counsel in social deportment. Otherwise, it would have no claim to the title of parable. Under the guise of a lesson in table manners, Jesus explains that in heaven's household humility is a lovely and essential grace. Thus the final sentence is doubly final; it is an axiom of the kingdom: "For every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."¹

The story of the Pharisee and the Publican teaches the same truth in sharper etching. The same unqualified dictum (with an emphatic "I say unto you") concludes it, to make clear beyond cavil that humility is an indispensable virtue.

The Parable of the Chief Seats

Jesus "marked how they chose out the chief seats." No smallest turn in the drama of our daily life escaped Him. He "spake a parable unto those which were bidden." It was a daring parable to tell at the table of Simon the Pharisee where He has just witnessed the unseemly scramble for prominence. The story speaks, indeed, of a "marriage-feast," a more formal occasion than that at which Jesus was a guest and one demanding on the host's part a careful appraisal and acknowledgment of the rank and prestige of his guests. But if the story's setting served to coat the pill, the patient was not spared the dose. Were "social ambitions" ever more neatly punctured, or the pushings and elbowings of the place-seeker impaled on

¹ The repetition of the phrase may be the work of the evangelist. In any case it is appropriate. But there is no need to assume that Jesus did not repeat His sayings, especially those of aphoristic nature.

a shrewder scorn? The satire, kind yet keen, paints an almost ludicrous picture. See this gentleman, affable and self-important, taking a high place at the feast. Sitting there he swells with pride like Æsop's frog. See him now requested by his host, because a guest of real honor has arrived, to take a lower place. But all the lower seats are filled. Red-faced and mortified he goes to the table's farthest end. It would have been wiser to have begun at the meanest station. Then the host might have singled him out, expressing surprise and offering apologies that one so great should have been so humbled, and might have conducted him conspicuously (amid the deference of all the guests) to a place of glory.²

It is a trenchant commentary on the old proverb: "Put not thyself forward in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men: For better it is that it be said unto thee, Come up hither; than that thou shouldest be put lower in the presence of the prince whom thine eyes have seen."³ Dante and Vergil in their upward journey through *Paradiso* came to the Angel of Humility who called them to the steps of ascent and beat his wings on Dante's forehead. Then Dante heard voices singing, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and noticed that, though he was climbing, progress was easier than it had been on level ground. Why? Vergil explained that one of the seven sin marks, that of pride, had been erased from Dante's forehead by the Angel's wings, and that in consequence the other six had become much fainter. (Is not pride the deadliest foe of human virtue?) Whereupon Dante felt his brow—for true humility is unconscious of being humble. The story reads aright the mind of Jesus!

"He that is down needs fear no fall,
He that is low, no pride;
He that is humble ever shall
Have God to be his guide."⁴

"For every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled."
The dicta of Jesus play havoc with our common verdicts. The

² The fact that "that he may say" in v. 10 is not necessarily purposive does not forbid the interpretation here suggested. The glints of humor—a humor pregnant with meaning—seem to me unmistakable.

³ Proverbs 25: 6, 7 which seem to have been in the mind of Jesus as the theme of the parable.

⁴ John Bunyan, "The Shepherd Boy Sings."

Beatitudes, for instance, are forthright denials of accepted valuations. Is it blessed to be poor in spirit? Nay, surely a man must hew out his own course in a world which receives men at their own reckoning. Is it blessed to mourn? Not in an age which believes that "a good time" is mankind's inalienable right! Is it blessed to be persecuted? On the contrary, "single thought is civil crime," and persecution is proper punishment for the temerity which flouts a standardized opinion. Some one has suggested that the Beatitudes, because they prescribe an unobtrusive virtue, would not furnish in actual character any materials for a thrilling biography. The retort is obvious: The Beatitudes once became incarnate, and the resultant Biography is the most thrilling known to men. We try to forget Him and cannot. When His presence becomes too awkward, we shuffle Him off to some new Calvary. But He reappears, the world's unquiet Conscience, to Whom soon or late we must surrender. He is the curse of our orderly selfishness—and our only Peace. The Beatitudes not thrilling? If we dared to apply them they would explode like a mine beneath the careful trenches of a success-worshipping generation.

The day of Jesus did not believe that "every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled," and still less that "he that humbleth himself shall be exalted"; nor do we to-day believe Him. It is a duty, we think, that every man should strive to gain the public ear and eye. And imagine a government being humble! Imagine a nation so concerned with her duties toward other nations as to be forgetful of her rights! We do not accept His teaching, but in our illumined hours we become uneasy about our boasted civilization and surprise ourselves in the forbidden thought that perhaps He is right. . . .

For humility is not cowardice; no man is craven who dares to look first on an eternal splendor and then upon his own littleness.⁵ "The meek are they who have consented to receive the knowledge of themselves." It is a brave consent. Nor is humility mean-spiritedness, or self-depreciation, or lack of enthusiasm.

Humility has one root in a sense of indebtedness. What have

⁵ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 322, quotes Arndt in a pretty turn of phrase: "Das Wesen der Demuth ist Muth," "the essence of humility (Demuth) is courage (Muth)."

we that we have not received? The food on our table, the words in our mouth, the liberties which overarch our days are in largest measure gifts to us from invisible helpers in past or present. The cult of the "self-made man" is an unlovely and ungrateful cult. The first fact in the history of the self-made man is that a mother went down to the gates of pain that he might be born. Nor is the least portion of our debt that which comes from the faithfulness of "common" folk. "Common," in this regard, has often its first meaning: "com-munis"—"ready to be of service." There is vast cheer and goodness in average humanity (a cheer and goodness not less real, but more, because they do not flow into theological molds), and they are bestowed upon us "without money and without price." We are in overwhelming debt to life—and a man overwhelmingly in debt cannot afford to be proud!

The other root of humility is in reverence and the sense of need. The scientist confronts the æonian daring, the patience and perfection of the created world, and knows full well that his own power and learning are, as Isaac Newton confessed, but a few pebbles on the shore of an infinite ocean. The artist sees the beatific vision, and asks as he takes palette and brush in hand, "Who is sufficient for this splendor?" In his own tongue he chants with seraphim around a throne: "Holy, holy, holy; the whole earth is full of Thy glory." From this contrast between the Divine Excellence and the human frailty there flows a sense of human need and a fountain of prayer:

"And chiefly Thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for Thou know'st. . . .

. . . : what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men."⁶

It is said of George Frederick Watts: "There is always in his work a window left open to the infinite, the unattainable ideal."⁷ That open window is also in the homage of a Coper-

⁶ Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book I.

⁷ Mary S. Watts' "George Frederick Watts," i., 299.

nicus as he reads the unfolding epic of the skies. It is in the music of Mozart as he confesses:

"I heard a sound
As of a silver horn from o'er the hills. . . .

"O never harp nor horn,
Nor aught we blow we breath or touch with hand,
Was like that music as it came. . . ."⁸

It is in the prayer of Saint Francis as, with awakened conscience, he bows adoringly before the holiness of God. One who lives in face of an "unattainable ideal" cannot be proud. Neither will he be cowardly, mean-spirited or bereft of enthusiasm. He will be humble.

When we see a man inflated with pride and worshipping at the poor altar of himself (such a man as we, a drowned debtor to life and encompassed by perfection), some instinct tells us that he is an outrageous freak, a cardboard figure on stilts, who will soon be blown away by the winds of reality. The instinct is just. One who was "meek and lowly of heart" endorsed it. "Every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

The Pharisee was a pillar of the Church, an ardent patriot, and respected in his community as a citizen of highest character. The publican, on the other hand, was almost untouchable. That Jesus should tell a story condemning the one and approving the other was a staggering and unpardonable assault on accepted judgments. He committed the assault. Therein is proof enough of His conviction that self-righteous pride is as noxious a sin as penitent humility is an essential grace.⁹

⁸ Tennyson, "The Holy Grail" ("The Idylls of the King").

⁹ Dr. Montefiore has said of this Pharisee that he is "a ludicrous caricature of the average Pharisee, a monstrous caricature of the Pharisaic ideal." George Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 3, agrees; but defends Jesus on the ground that His method was that of *tour de force* and so demanded pictures bordering on the extravagant. Jesus did at times employ figures verging on the grotesque (as, for instance, that of a camel passing through a needle's eye), but it is doubtful if He ever indulged in "monstrous" travesties of human types. He was too kind for such unbridled scorn. There are enough artless hints as to the Pharisaic character scattered about the Gospels (Matthew 19: 24, 23: 6, etc.), to defend the belief that this picture is not "overdrawn" except in the minor measure necessary to sharpen the contrast between the Pharisee and his opposite.

There is nothing in the story to suggest that either the Pharisee or the publican was insincere in his self-estimate. They were not praying for public consumption or to curry public favor, the one man by exaggerating his virtues and the other by the "pride which apes humility." They had ascended Mount Moriah to the Temple of their fathers. Their prayers may have been inaudible,¹⁰ but whether audible or inaudible they were unfeigned. The Pharisee in his own eyes and by common consent was a virtuous man, while the publican by the same tests was a sinner. But—and this is the inescapable, revolutionary teaching of the story—the Pharisee's virtue was so cankered by pride that it was almost rotten, and the publican's sin was so saved by humility that it came near to the gates of the kingdom of God.

Every line is drawn to emphasize the contrast between the one man's self-righteousness and the other's penitence. The Pharisee prayed "I thank Thee," but his prayer was such only in name. He had no real thanksgiving to offer, for he was under no sense of blessings received. He had no plea to make, for he was unconscious of any lack or need. He used the word "God," but it was only a glance in the general direction of heaven to prelude a pæan of self-praise. He first congratulated himself on his virtues of omission. He was not "as all other men"—the rest of mankind! He was not an extortioner, not unjust, not adulterous, nor even "as this publican." (The poor publican, standing at a distance, is thus dragged into the "prayer" as a dark foil for the Pharisee's gleaming whiteness.) Measured by other men, he towered aloft. It had not occurred to him to measure himself by the sky. A mountain shames a molehill until both are humbled by the stars. Thomas Carlyle has a dramatic passage in which he conducts the heedless Louis XV of France to the eternal judgment-seat: "Yes, poor Louis, death has found thee. No palace walls . . . or gorgeous tapestries . . . could keep him out. Time is done and all the scaffolding of time falls wrecked with hideous clangor round thy soul; the pale kingdoms yawn;

¹⁰ The indefinite phrase "stood and prayed thus *with himself*" seems to imply not aloofness of location but rather that the prayer was spoken within himself. See v. 11.

there thou must enter naked, all unkinged. . . ." Then with sudden change of front Carlyle turns upon his readers: "And let no meanest man lay flattering unction to his soul. Louis was a ruler; but art thou not also one? His wide France, looked at from the fixed stars, is not wider than thy narrow brickfield, where thou too doest faithfully or unfaithfully."¹¹ But the Pharisee had forgotten how to look at the stars, and therefore his virtue was a "wide France" and that of other men was "a narrow brickfield."

His abstentions from wrong having been listed, the Pharisee next informed heaven of his virtues of commission. By the test of omission or commission he was equally justified. He fasted twice in the week, even though the law might have been fulfilled if he had fasted but once a year.¹² He gave tithes of everything he gained, even of "mint, anise, and cummin" which the law did not require him to tithe.¹³ Then what was wrong with him? His virtue was negative! His goodness was mummery! He lacked the essential spirit of goodness—that spirit which has as a necessary element "an humble and a contrite heart." All his righteousness was vitiated by that lack.

Every stroke in the picture of the publican deepens the impression of humility. He "stood afar off" as one unworthy to be the neighbor of a righteous man. His posture was well-nigh abject: he dared not raise so much as his eyes to heaven. He smote repeatedly upon his breast in an agony of self-condemnation. His prayer was a piteous outpouring of shame and entreaty: "God be propitiated to me, *the sinner.*" The Pharisee was self-separated from the "rest of men" by his righteousness; the publican by his own confession was infamously separated from all others by his sin. "*The sinner*"—as if the sin of others were negligible by comparison!

Then the terse conclusion of the matter: "I say unto you"—Jesus claims to know both the secrets of men and the judgments

¹¹ Thomas Carlyle, "The French Revolution."

¹² See footnote on p. 4, and an interesting comment in the "I.C.C." (St. Luke), p. 417.

¹³ For the ancient law of tithing, see Deuteronomy 14: 22. It required the giving unto God of a tenth of the yield of the cattle and of the fields. Garden produce was exempt from the tithe. See the comment of Jesus on "mint, anise, and cummin" in Matthew 23: 23. The Talmud inveighs against the Pharisaism of those "who implore you to mention some more duties which they might perform."

of God, and states both emphatically "in low, deep tones, and simple words of great authority"—"I say unto you, This man went down to his house justified rather than the other." A publican "justified"?—pronounced right by God?—forgiven? He was traitor to his country (like a Pole selling himself to the Russians in the days of Poland's dream of liberty to collect Russian taxes!). He was apostate to his church, his friends, his self-respect. Some men are traitorous in one black deed, but he was traitorous all day long and every day. A publican "justified"? Yes!—it is the emphatic word of Jesus. Not that his misdeeds were suddenly condoned, not that he was lifted by some swift magic to permanent heights of godly character, not that his struggle was cancelled, but rather that he had Humility—that lowly postern by which alone the King of Heaven comes in lowly guise.

Our precious pharisaisms appear bedraggled in this parable's merciless light. What of our pharisaism of race—that new gospel of our time, preached with invincible (?) arguments from biology, heralding the white man as the only chosen of God? (It was heaven's egregious blunder that Jesus was not born an occidental!) What of our pharisaism of class—that amazing pride which assumes that a man whose chairs are upholstered in velour can have no dealings with a man whose chairs are upholstered in plain board? What of our pharisaisms of intelligence—that arrogance which talks in terms of morons and is so blind as not to see that one super-intelligence lacking goodwill may be far more pestilential than a gross of morons honorable in motive? What of our continuing pharisaisms of religion? This parable thrusts home! Perhaps the racial, social, educational, and even theological imprimatur upon our life is a poor substitute for the justification pronounced by God.

Pharisaism has no romance, no quest for a "city that hath foundations," for it accounts its own achievement a perfect city. Pharisaism has no friends and no friendliness, for it is cursed by the inward-turning eye and looks not on "the things of others"¹⁴ except to feed its own conceit of character.

¹⁴ Philippians 2: 4.

Pharisaism has no hope, for it has already attained. It has no God, for it feels no need of God. Unconscious of defect, it raises no cry to that Completeness "which flows around our incompleteness," and thus misses heaven whose strength is made perfect only in our weakness. Concerning Pharisaism Jesus spoke two of the most desolating words that ever passed His gracious lips: "They have their reward" (the future holds no promise!) and "Let them alone," as if to say "They are beyond the help of man and God until the crash of calamity has brought their pride to ashes"!

But humility has its city of desire (a city all the lovelier that its spires are seen in far distance), because it counts itself not to have attained. Humility has friends because it looks ever on the common life with sense of gratitude and ever strives to pay its debt. Humility has God, for its very sense of sin comes of its vision of a white throne. It cries "Woe is me" just because its eyes have seen the King.¹⁵ It knows the jangling discord of its life just because it has heard sphere-music. It is cursed by unrest because it knows, if only in dim surmise, the "peace that passeth understanding." Heaven bends low to the soul that feels its need. They that mourn for their sins are comforted, and the poor in spirit are enriched by the kingdom of God.

¹⁵ Isaiah 6: 5.