Psalms - Commentaries by Walter Thomas Turpin

Occasional Papers, “One Thing”

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Mark 10:17-27; Psalm 27:4-6

The connection of these two scriptures is exceedingly interesting, because of the occurrence of the same words in them: “One thing.” Whilst in the young man in Mark 10 there was one thing that was lacking, with the saint, as in the Psalmist, there was, on the other hand, one thing that was commanding his whole moral being. It is of these two things that it is impressed upon my heart to say a word to you this morning.

In Mark the scripture is important to us, in that it comes in in that part of the Lord’s instructions in which He upholds that which God had set up at the beginning, and which the Lord Himself therefore always maintains. The Lord always vindicated everything which God originally formed—all that which we sometimes say “belongs to the old creation,” whereas we ought to say, I think, more properly, the former creation. Everything that was instituted by God then, was always upheld and honored by the Lord Jesus Christ, as we find it here in respect of the marriage tie and of children. It is beautiful the way in which He, as God’s servant upon earth, upholds all that is of God.

But then comes in what is exceedingly solemn for us: the cross is brought in as a test for the heart.

Three things are distinctly grouped together in this chapter. First, natural relationships; second, the law; and third, the word of Christ. This young man wants to do some good thing—his natural heart desires it; and this desire is met, first, by the law, and then by the cross of Christ. It is striking to see the effect of these things on this young man.

Now we must notice that the law never tested this young man’s heart at all. As far as man could see, and before man he had kept it. No doubt it was merely an outward, exterior obedience, but still he had rendered this outside obedience; and as a creature of God it was beautiful, and it was appreciated by the Lord Jesus Christ as such. He had rendered obedience to the law in an outward way; he could truly say, “All these have I observed from my youth”; and this entitled him to the credit of having walked in its precepts. The Lord does not bring him in as not having done it. He beheld him and loved him. There was that which God could love.

But then the probe comes in: the cross. It is, “Come, take up the cross, and follow me.” He had that which in nature is in itself beautiful; it was not bad things; it was all that was attractive. But—and I do not know anything more solemn—it will not go at all with Christ. The best side of man counts for nothing here. Have we all accepted this? The thing that is beautiful, the thing that is excellent, the thing which the Lord did love, which He could fully own and recognize, that thing in its creature excellence, will not go with Christ.

And the instant the cross is brought in, the man is manifested in his true light and colors. “One thing thou lackest,” says the Lord; “go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved.” He was priding himself upon keeping the law; but when the Lord says to him, “Go, sell what thou hast, and come and share my path of shame and scorn and despicability on the earth, and follow me,” he departs sorrowful and disappointed.

The highest way to see the truth is to see it as a revelation from God. To see it in the lives of people on earth is not the same thing. When it comes direct from God, His word carries all its authority and weight to our souls. I may then see the effect of it coming out in different instances, and in the lives of men upon earth, but I have learnt it from God Himself. Still, if you have to do much with souls, you will find often this very same thing. You will find that, whilst there are many who accept Christ’s work as securing them from coming judgment, yet, if you press upon them the cross of Christ, they shrink from it in great dread. This is what marks professing Christianity in the present day, and I think we are all in danger of being ensnared by it. God has opened out to us an immense amount of truth, but the more we know of truth, and the more truth we have, the more the devil seeks to draw us from it. It is not to be wondered at when a person who does not know the truth presents inconsistencies in life and walk, but it is a serious thing when such are found in one who does. Of such it can be said, as it was of Israel long ago, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you.”

In marvelous ways I believe God, in the present day, is calling His people back to Christ’s path through this world. It is now a question of abnegating ourselves in every direction. It is, “One thing thou lackest; sell that thou hast; take up the cross, and follow me.” “Oh, I know that scripture very well,” people say; “but what does it mean?” Well, to my mind, it is the most solemn utterance that can be.

In Luke 12 we find a similar passage. He first brings in God’s care for His people: “Your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.” And, when He has thus secured the allegiance of the heart for God, He says, “Sell that ye have,” for only now they can afford to do so.

This young man came to ask the Lord what good thing he could do. He believed man was capable of doing a good thing. He saw in Christ all that was excellent, all that was good in a creature; for he did not go beyond the fact of what He saw in Him outwardly; he did not see that He was the Christ of God. He saw the superlative degree of what goodness in man was in Christ; his thought was, Good Master, you are the best specimen of it that I can find upon earth. He was not like the Philippian jailer: he did not want to be saved, he wanted to do some good thing; he had not got to the end of himself; it was creature excellence that was filling his mind, and he thought he possessed that himself. So the Lord takes him on his own ground, and says, “One thing thou lackest.” But to lack that one thing was to lack everything—it was to lack all that can be conceived.

And this is not a question that touches merely one or another of us, I believe it relates to every one of us. That which the Lord states here should be the moving principle in every one of our souls, based on the knowledge of having found treasure in a new region altogether, so that we can afford to let all here go. I do not know anything more wonderful than to see a person who can afford to turn his back entirely on the

world. Our hands and our feet may be called to do certain work here, but I say, Is your heart in it? Your hands may be, and your feet may be, but where is your heart? Never was a more solemn instance of it than the one we find here. He could not break with it. If it be a question of getting rid of all this in order to be a follower of Christ, then he could not be one.

I have thought lately that we limit that word “covetousness” in a way that scripture does not. What is covetousness? It is the love of possession, from the smallest desire that can be conceived to the greatest possible thing. I believe covetousness is a very common thing amongst us. And why? I will tell you. It is because we want something here. It is not necessarily money. If I want a place here, a portion here, of any kind, it is covetousness. So this young man. “He had great possessions,” and they clogged his heart.

We are, most of us, little aware of the moral state of the age in which we live, and perhaps it is well for us that so many of us do not know. I may now say it will be found that the whole drift of what is pressed in the popular books of the present time, and in an attractive way too, is the utter break- down, the practical failure of Christianity in representing the walk of Christ upon earth. And the principle is worked out too in a way that is exceedingly insidious to hearts. The false thing is built up and established by the break-down of the saints of God in walking in Christ’s path upon earth.

As to ourselves, I fear that there has not been a maintenance of the practical thing as a whole, and that is the reason the truth has such a slight hold of our hearts. We have not practiced it. How can I go into the battle, said David, with armor that I have not proved? I do feel that the Lord has a special voice to His people on this point; for, if principle and faith do not characterize us, we are the most contemptible people on the earth. With all the truth we have, the more condemned are we if devotedness to Christ is not there. What a path is Christ’s path! “Follow me.” I repeat it, What a path! Take up your cross, and follow Me. Whom? An outcast! One who was scorned, who was hated, who was despised; who had but a manger at His birth; a cross between two thieves at His death; and a borrowed grave. Followers of Him? And then we say, so readily, we love Him. Love Him? I shrink from saying it.

Natural respectability, natural amiability, natural loveliness, will not do for Christ. So the disciples are astonished out of measure, and ask, “Who, then, can be saved?” And He Himself answers, “With men it is impossible.” Man would never be in heaven by-and-by, nor follow Christ now, if he were left to himself. Here is presented to us the very best sample that could be found of nature. He ran to Him, he kneeled to Him, he called Him “Good Master”; he showed Him the most perfect respect and appreciation. Surely he was a wonderful specimen of man at his best. But he lacked this “one thing,” and his heart was in his possessions and riches.

Now let us turn for a moment to the other scripture that we have read. Here we find another “One thing”; and this is the bright side of it. Thank God there is a bright side to every picture, as well as a dark one. In this Psalm we find in picture the longing desire of a heart that is set free by having tasted in some measure the blessedness of that spot where Christ is.

It is a great thing if any of us can say we have only one desire, one wish. You know Jacob had only one wish: that he might see Joseph’s face, and then he could die. It is a wonderful thing what the power of only one thing in a person’s soul is. It is marvelous what a path of light it leads the saint along in this world. I see the beauty of this scripture more and more every day.

But there is a kind of desire that never comes to anything: “The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing.” I have known people who had great desires, but who still never came to anything. There was no bottom, as it were, to the soul, no foundation so to say. There was no saying, I will make this the one simple purpose of my life. I think the reason that we know so little of the Lord is because there is so little purpose to know Him. If a man of the world purposes to have a future here, do you think he dreams his life away? In proportion to the earnest-ness of his desire to attain his object, is the earnestness of his pursuit of it. Why, it is wonderful what a man of the world will do and suffer to attain the object of his heart. And yet the saint, who has a far higher object set before him, an object passing anything that the natural mind can conceive, is too often found lazy, idle, purposeless in his soul. “Seek the Lord while he may be found,” we often say to sinners, but I believe we ought rather to say it to ourselves. I long to have deeper acquaintance with Him—to seek Him. As the Psalmist says, “One thing have I desired of the Lord; that will I seek after.”

Oh, you say, but that is the Old Testament! Well, do we not get anything like it in the New? In one passage which does not take us as high as seated in the heavenlies in Christ, it says, “Seek those things which are above.” You are brought into risen blessedness; now seek out the treasures that are your own there.

But you will make souls legal, if you press this, it is said! I can only reply that I do not believe it. And if you call that legality, I must say it would do people great good to have a little more of it. I feel that there has been so much of a dreamy kind of speculation in God’s things, so much unreality, so much of what one cannot grasp. But when you come to the plain, practical thing, to the every-day carrying out of the truth, where is it?

Let us look a little at the details of this Psalm. Of course it is cast in a Jewish mold, as we find in the words, “That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple.”

To “dwell in the house of the Lord” is the desire of the soul. Some are quite satisfied with the thought that they shall be in heaven by-and-by. But do I not want to be there now! The subjective side, too, is what the apostle prays the Ephesian saints might have; “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith”; and here we get the same thing in picture as it were. I want to dwell in the house of God all the days of my life. I want to dwell there now, and to have that as the spot from whence I can come out now—that spot on high where I am privileged to dwell with Christ.

And for what, is this desire to dwell there? “That I may behold the beauty of the Lord.” Oh, how blessed, to desire to be in heaven for the sake of being with Christ! People often say, “How I wish I was delivered out of this scene of trial and difficulty, out of this world of sin and sorrow!” But if you were at home up there now, you would be able to go calmly through all the storms here. You will never know how to live on earth until you have been up there to learn how. I go there to see Him, to behold His beauty. What a charm it is to get even a little sense of this in our souls! There is such a fearful amount of selfishness in every one of our hearts. We say, “He has paid our debt; He has made our peace with God.” Yes, truly, but that is not all. It is far more than that—it is boundless riches. When the two disciples of John followed him, asking, “Where dwellest thou?” He answered, “Come and see.” There was not a word said as to the place. There is not a doubt it was a humble spot, but there is not a word said about it one way or the other. It was Himself; alone with Him, they wanted {needed} nothing else. It is wonderful

what the company of an intimate friend is amid paths of sorrow; and that is what we have. We have His company as we go through this world. He said, “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.” I do not believe that is by the Holy Ghost; nor do I believe that it is only on the first day of the week. I believe it is the special manifestation of Himself that He gives to His people. He is with them, as in Psa. 23. It is His company, His presence; this alone can light up everything. I want to behold His beauty. That will be our occupation through all eternity. How do you think we shall spend eternity? By being for ever with and beholding the matchless beauty of the Christ. Oh, to begin it now! and thus to find all below distanced to us.

But there is more than this; “And to inquire in his temple.” I believe the force of these words is given to us in the word meditation. One reason why things have such little hold over our hearts is, that we meditate on them so little. If there is to be any real appropriation of truth, there must be the sitting down quietly in private, and meditating on it. I am sure God does meet His people wonderfully in a little passing verse or line of scripture; but this is not like meditation; neither will study make up for meditation. It is meditation that forms the affections of the heart.

And now look at what follows. In the next verse there is a touch of the most exceeding blessedness. “For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion.” Now tell me anything comparable to this! You desire to dwell in the house of God; trouble comes, and He hides you where you have dwelt! There is not a word about me, or what I do; but He hides me. Where? Where my heart dwelt before!

In some little measure we have witnessed this. We have seen saints going on with God, desiring to learn more of Him, desiring to dwell with Him. Then a stroke of trouble comes, and God hides them, so that they positively pass through, not unfeeling, yet unruffled. There is all the spiritual desire to seek, but when trouble comes there is nothing but quiet repose; then God interferes for us. How many have long had this as the comfort of their soul, that, when their heart makes Christ its object, He makes the trials and difficulties of their life His concern. He does not say you shall not have trouble; but He does say, When it comes I will hide you.

Now these are the two things that were in my heart on which to say a word, for I do feel that we need more to be people of one object. There is a simplicity, an evenness, an unhindered moving on, in the person who has one object. Do you think it would unfit you for things here? I do not believe it. On the contrary, I believe it would fit you marvelously to be for Christ in everything; for instead of doing it for yourselves, you would do it for Christ. I was shocked the other day by hearing it said of a Christian that he did his business for himself, but his religion had to do with Christ; that he did his business as a man of the world, and his religion as a Christian. But I say there is no Christianity in such a thought or statement as this at all. Once a Christian, always a Christian, and never anything else. Once a follower of Christ, always a follower of Christ, and in everything a follower of Christ.

The Lord, in His grace, give our hearts the simple one desire of the Psalmist: “To dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple;” to find a home there of unspeakable blessedness, in glory with Himself, the firstborn amongst many brethren; while, as to the earth and all that is below, that may be true of us which is expressed in the lines –

“We are but strangers here, we do not craveA home on earth which gave Thee but a grave; Thy cross has sever’d ties which bound us here, Thyself our treasure in a brighter sphere.”

This is the real truth. Christ our treasure in heaven, and only His cross on earth. The more deeply you search into the subject, the more full you will find it in every way. The glory is the place of our treasure, and the cross defines our path on earth. May our hearts be encouraged to press on; it is only for a little while; the darkest moment is that immediately preceding the dawning of the day. We have, through His grace, two blessed realities to sustain us here: as a present reality we are the objects of the Father’s love even as it rested on Christ; He Himself is the witness to it: “Hast loved them as thou hast loved me.” And then, as to the future, we have the bright and blessed hope of being perfectly like Him:

We know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

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