

CHAPTER VII

THE CONDITIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP

THE PARABLE OF THE EMPTY HOUSE

"But the unclean spirit, when he is gone out of the man, passeth through waterless places, seeking rest, and findeth it not. Then he saith, I will return into my house whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man becometh worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this evil generation."

(*Matthew 12:43-45*)

(*Parallel passage: Luke 11:24-26*)

THE PARABLE OF THE UNCOMPLETED TOWER

"Now there went with him great multitudes: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his life also, he cannot be my disciple. Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, doth not first sit down and count the cost, whether he have wherewith to complete it? Lest haply, when he hath laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all that behold begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish."

(*Luke 14:25-30*)

THE PARABLE OF THE KING'S RASH WARFARE

"Or what king, as he goeth to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassador, and asketh conditions of peace. So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."

(*Luke 14:31-33*)

CHAPTER VII

THE CONDITIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP

The Parable of the Empty House
The Parable of the Uncompleted Tower
The Parable of a King's Rash Warfare

It is a mark of a great leader that he should clearly state the terms of his discipleship. Garibaldi offered his followers hunger and death—and the freedom of their beloved Italy! King Arthur bound his knights

"by so straight vows to his own self,
That when they rose, knighted from kneeling, some
Were pale as at the passing of a ghost,
Some flushed, and others dazed, as one who wakes
Half-blinded at the coming of a light."¹

But no leader required such "straight vows" as Jesus. Uncompromisingly He warned His followers against heedless discipleship. The cost was complete self-commitment; and they must face the cost, lest by renegade loyalty they bring contempt on themselves and on a cause too hastily espoused. Nor could the choice go by default. To drive out false masters from the soul and leave the house of personality unoccupied might be a policy of disaster. This warning is the pith of the Parable of the Empty House. The "straight vows" of His discipleship are plainly declared in the twin parables of the Rash Builder and the Warring King.

*The Parable of the Empty House*²

Can neutrality ever be dangerous? The answer of Jesus is unqualified: moral neutrality is everywhere in imminent peril.

¹ Tennyson, "The Coming of Arthur" ("Idylls of the King").

² This parable is very loosely joined to its context in both Matthew and Luke, a fact which seems to indicate that it is not merely descriptive, but originally existed in its own right as a parable.

To abstain from self-commitment is not safe; it is beset by danger. Negative virtue is not a city of peace; it is beleaguered on every hand. . . .

In Jesus' day the belief in demons was widespread. The prevalent cosmology assigned to God a realm of calm above the sky, and intervening between God's dwelling-place and man's earth was the demon-filled air. A man's most fearful foes pressed about him invisibly. Many sicknesses were but demon-possession.³ Calamities were brewed in the cauldrons of that same grim realm. Paul hints that the malice of the Cross was inspired by demonic agency;⁴ and elsewhere he declares that the Christian's hardest battle is "not against flesh and blood, but with the angelic Rulers, the angelic Authorities, the potentates of the dark present, the spirit-forces of evil in the heavenly sphere."⁵ He warns us of the "prince of the power of the air."⁶ Human life in that day was demon-ridden. *We* see the sky filled with light, but *their* sky was infested with unseen malignities. That the Christian faith could conquer the demons and drive them into oblivion is a striking tribute to its power. Jesus alludes to the exorcists who claimed control over the demons.⁷ Probably the claim was not proved. Not until He spoke did the demons flee.

The popular belief in demons provides the setting⁸ for the Parable of the Empty House. A demon is expelled from a man's life. Thereafter he wanders, a grisly presence, through "waterless places," seeking rest but finding none. (For it was supposed that exorcised spirits made their unquiet dwelling in the wilderness or in forbidding ruins.)⁹ He resolves to return

³ Mark 9: 38, and many such references.

⁴ I Corinthians 2: 8.

⁵ Ephesians 6: 12 excellently translated by Dr. Moffatt.

⁶ Ephesians 2: 2. See article on demons in Hastings' "Dictionary of the Bible," and an interesting chapter, "The War with the Demons," in Dr. T. R. Glover's "Jesus in the Experience of Men."

⁷ Luke 11: 19. The interesting phrase "by the finger of God" in Luke 11: 20 probably is an echo of a formula of the exorcists: "I adjure thee by the finger of God."

⁸ This does not imply that Jesus accepted or endorsed the belief. Our instinctive reverence for Him does not require that we attribute to Him the scientific knowledge of to-day or of a thousand years hence. Neither does it require the assumption that He shared all the superstitions of His own day. We see Him at times taking direct issue with those superstitions, as, for instance, when He contradicted the theory that blindness always came from a man's sin or the sin of his parents. (See John 9: 2, 3.)

⁹ See Isaiah 13: 21; 34: 14.

to the life from which he was banished. He still calls it "my house" (for evil yields stubbornly), and is overjoyed to find it "empty, swept, garnished." No better tenant had replaced him! Thus he takes new possession of the house; and, lest his tenancy should be again disputed, he brings seven other demons to live with him.¹⁰ With these horrible reinforcements he can defy any new attempt to dispossess him. So, says Jesus—clinging the grim story in a sharp proverbial phrase—"the last state of that man becometh worse than the first."¹¹

Could the peril of neutrality be more dramatically shown, or the folly of a merely negative virtue be more relentlessly pilloried! The Jewish nation had been "swept" clean of idolatry, and "decorated" with all the ritual of the law; but it was "empty." It could not remain empty, for human nature (as well as that nature of which science speaks) "abhors a vacuum." It was empty—like a whitened sepulcher; and demons came to live among the tombs! There was no divinely positive life, no lofty enthusiasm, no indwelling of God.

Succinctly the parable describes our frequent human course. Harried by our sins, we vow amendment. The devil of wrongful habit, tearing and befouling our life, can no longer be endured. We make short shift of our sins. Straightway we begin a careful, but still superficial reformation. The house is "swept"—cleansed of its worse defilements; "garnished"—with some attempt to make it seemly; but it is "empty"! The tragedy told by this parable turns upon the pivot of that word—"empty." An empty house, however it may be decorated, is always desolate. There are ghostly shadows at the windows. The floors creak. Every footfall echoes ominously. In the hollow distance there is the slamming of a door. Moreover, an empty house never remains empty. Spiders spin their webs, vermin claim the forsaken rooms, rats run behind the wainscoting. . . . So our house of life left empty invites undesirable tenants. Former evil habit, seductive circumstance, and weakened will prey upon it. Finally, overcome with disappointment over our failure in reform, we deliver the house to

¹⁰ Seven devils was the worst state of demondom. That was why the plight of Mary Magdalene was so desperate. See Luke 8: 2.

¹¹ Compare Matthew 27: 64.

the abandon of despair—and our last state becomes worse than the first!

The peril of neutrality is in its emptiness. Ill health must be driven out by the incoming of nature's own vitality. Otherwise, the expulsion is not permanent, and a relapse must be feared. Medicine now concerns itself, not only with the process of cure, but with the establishment and maintenance of health. Again, modern methods of child training recommend that parents should eschew the "don't do that" kind of discipline, and substitute for a wrong activity a new and proper interest. Recent psychology reiterates the truth. What is to be done with a dark memory or a cherished grudge? It must be driven out. The demon must be exorcised. To bury a dark memory (to let it remain as an evil tenant) is to spread its balefulness.¹² But expulsion of the malign presence is not enough. That conquest is merely preliminary; the obsession, bitterness, or remorse must then be "reassociated." It must be absorbed in a legitimate and more passionate purpose; it must be linked with a new and sound attitude of life. The house must be occupied by its rightful tenant!

But though many voices conspire to proclaim this truth, religion is slow to hear and heed. There are pulpits quick to indulge in orgies of denunciation but tardy to preach the positive tidings of life abundant. There are ministers' associations and reform organizations more eager to expel disintegrating forces than to engage in the less spectacular task of constructive goodwill. So ready to banish the demon—so loathe to welcome Jesus! Yet, if we would but know, when He comes to rule the demon flees of himself!

No neutrality can remain neutral. A moral issue settled by default is settled wrong. Nature abhors a vacuum. Life demands its mastery. Bobbie Burns sang blithely of

"... the glorious privilege
Of being independent,"¹³

but he knew in hours of insight that the world had him in a halter. Some men are mastered by their bodies, some by hard

¹² See J. B. Streeter's "Reality," Chapter VII.

¹³ In "Epistle to a Young Friend."

circumstance, some by gold; but others, like Paul, are "the slaves of the Lord Jesus."¹⁴ Some, boasting their freedom, are the lackeys of any trivial lordship—compelled to walk in the retinue of any passing whim or fancy! The man who "does as he likes," every time he likes, is slave to his likes, whatever may be his loud pretence of liberty.

For every man has some master! We have no choice between self-commitment or neutrality, for devils possess the home which invites no worthier tenant. Our only choice is the choice among many masters. We are compelled to serve. In the course of human history there is but one service which has proved a "perfect freedom":

Holy Spirit, right divine,
King within my conscience reign;
Be my law, and I shall be
Firmly bound, forever free.¹⁵

The Parable of the Uncompleted Tower
The Parable of the Rash Warfare

Neutrality is encompassed by dangers. Men must swear allegiance, or in the default some unworthiness will make them slaves. As for the Christian allegiance, its terms are clear! But were ever terms so startling, so harsh?—"If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple." Were ever followers "bound by such straight vows"?

Evidently the sight of "great multitudes" flocking to Him provoked Jesus to this plainness of speech. His fame had spread like a prairie fire. The inquisitive came gaping, just as they would have come to an accident or a dog fight. The self-seeking resolved to take the tide of His popularity at the flood, and ride on to fortune. Patriots, restive under the dominion of Rome, were eager to use Him as a firebrand of revolution.

¹⁴ Ephesians 6: 6.

¹⁵ Samuel Longfellow's "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine." ("Poetical Works"; Houghton Mifflin Co.)

Many were stirred to impulsive enthusiasm. A few were conscious of the brooding of the Spirit. . . .

"And He turned," and looked out over the sea of faces. They were following, but did they know what "following" might mean? He had no earthly kingdom, not even a kingdom large enough to rest His head. His way would never make Him princely in Church or State. A King? Nay, a pariah!—a crucified Man! Had they forgotten their own proverb; "Cursed be the one who hangs on a tree"? Did they understand that His discipleship meant feet cut by jagged stones, and shoulders raw from the chafing of a cross?—"Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after Me . . ." So "He turned and said, If any man *hate* not his father and mother . . ." It was a staggering word—but then, it was intended to stagger! It was a flail to sift the motley crowd. Also—it was a brave facing of realities. Jesus would not hide the sharp flint, nor gild the shadows, nor cloak the cross. If life spelt tragedy, even the Golgotha kind of tragedy, He would see life steadily and see it whole. He would insist that other men face realities with the same unflinching eyes. No man must embark on His venture without counting the cost!

Hence the twin parables¹⁶ of the Rash Builder and the Rash King. The Herods had a passion for erecting imposing buildings. Doubtless many who tried to imitate their extravagance came to grief. Pilate had begun the building of an aqueduct which, from lack of funds, was left incomplete. Perhaps Jesus was daringly hinting at notable instances of unfinished towers. Perhaps He was leading the laughter against a folly which began what it could not end! For a tower which begins in challenge to the sky, and ends as the poor stub of an abortive venture, is always a target for general scorn. So, also, is an extinguished enthusiasm! Therefore Jesus demands that His followers shall count the cost. Can they build a tower accord-

¹⁶ G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 244 ff., again draws a sharp distinction between these twin parables. The story of the Tower Builder (he says) points to the soul's essay for saintliness, while the story of the Rash King concerns the altruism of the Christian life. The distinction is based on the claim that "architecture always represents that" (i.e., the struggle for saintliness) "when used as a type of the spiritual." The claim is too uncertain to be made the line of cleavage between two parables which are so clearly conjoined. The difference between them is in the simile. Life (individual and social) may be pictured as a building and also as a warfare. Each figure is rich in suggestion.

ing to the blueprint of the "Sermon on the Mount"? Can they live by a higher law than the law of retaliation? Can they endure the hostility of their kinsfolk?—the ostracism of the church? Can they complete the building? Failure will only give occasion for such taunts as are always flung at apostate vows. "This man began—and was not able to finish."¹⁷ That bitter scorn, having struck the man, glances from him to discredit his deserted cause!

The other simile is as pungent. For the age was one of reckless warfare no less than of reckless building. Herod the tetrarch, having divorced his first wife, the daughter of Aretas, king of Arabia, was attacked by Aretas and soundly defeated. A wise king counts the cost, appraises the odds, and does not rush headlong into battle. Even so, a wise disciple will not venture heedlessly upon the Christian warfare. He will face the disparity of forces, and consider "whether he is able with *ten* thousand, to meet him that cometh against him with *twenty* thousand" lest the campaign end in irretrievable disaster. (That Jesus should so state the odds of battle is further proof of His challenge to the heroic!) He does not mean that it is better never to begin, than to begin and fail—for no one dealt with failure more tenderly than He. But He *does* mean that it is better (both for the man and for the cause) not to begin, than to begin in the jaunty heedlessness that invites defeat. The conditions of His discipleship must be understood and pondered—and then courageously espoused.

The conditions are clear. They remain vividly focussed in the word "hate." That word must not be whittled down. On the other hand, we must not explain it in bald literalness. Renan declared that Jesus is here "trampling under foot everything that is human—blood and love and country" . . . "despising the healthy limits of man's nature" . . . "abolishing all natural ties." But Galilean fishermen could be trusted to interpret Jesus better than the learned critic! They were not afraid of a startling paradox. In their minds, one word sternly spoken in stern purpose would not distort His truth uttered winsomely in every deed. *He* bidding them hate their parents,

¹⁷ Notice the satirical force of "this man" in the Greek version.

Who taught them to love their enemies? *He* advocating treason to their country Who Himself wept in compassion over Jerusalem? *He* recommending that they count their brethren as detestable, Who had taught that the spirit of anger is a kind of murder.¹⁸ *He* counselling a disregard for little children, Who Himself took children in His arms to bless them? Nay, they knew Him better! One of them preserved this saying in a form which robs it of its paradox: "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" . . .

Plainly stated, the condition of discipleship is this: *Jesus must come first*. It is an amazing claim! In regal humility He confronts the race of men: "My spirit is to be your law and your life. You will be wise to die, if need be, for My name's sake." What is equally amazing is the fact that it does not occur to us to question either His sanity or His lowliness. We look on Him, and know His claim is just. We know that genuine love for parent, wife, child, or comrade, will never conflict with our love for Him. We know, by some unerring intuition, that if it *does* conflict—if there is a clash of claims—the human love by that very token is unworthy! The earthly must exist within the heavenly (such is the condition), or it must be renounced as if we hated it. If it does exist within the heavenly, it gains such radiance, such depth of joy, as to be itself transmuted to a thing divine. Did not Jesus renounce His home, and thereafter wander homeless?

John Galsworthy with consummate art has shown us the heartbreaking confusion caused by our conflict of loyalties.¹⁹ In a dramatic play of character and circumstance he portrays one man true to his race, another true to his social group, and others, in their respective challenges, refusing to be faithless to profession, home, wife, or child. He shows that these various fealties do not cohere. Their issue is tragedy. The conclusion is stated with sudden, poignant insight: "Prejudices—or are they loyalties—I don't know—criss-cross—we all cut each other's throats from the best of motives." At the play's end comes the terse comment. A suicide's letter says, "A pistol

¹⁸ Matthew 5: 21, 22.

¹⁹ In the play, "Loyalties." (Charles Scribner's Sons.)

keeps faith." Whereupon one reading it remarks, "Keeps faith! We've all done that. It's not enough." The chaos of our lesser loyalties cries aloud for some regal loyalty to rule them. Oh, for some transcendent passion—as pure as purity, as loving as love—to gather all other worthy passions beneath the healing of its wings! "If any man cometh unto me, and, in the conflict of allegiances, will not hate the whole world for my sake . . ." Is He—the Galilean Carpenter—the rightful, only King? Is love for Him the regal passion that can bring order in the troubled realm of our lesser loyalties? If we "kept faith" with Him, would that be "enough"?

Such is the amazing claim He makes! The twelve disciples, even on such absolute conditions, were constrained to follow. What of their homes, their parents? We do not know—except that they left all and followed. They followed this Galilean who presumed to lay His law upon the world, this Fanatic who kissed little children, this Idealist who, deeming His *ideal* the only *real*, suffered real nails to be driven through His hands! . . .

We may say that His conditions of discipleship are preposterous. But if we refuse to accept them, what of the alternative? Did He not state it in words that writhe?—"Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and asketh conditions of peace." Is that the alternative?—the surrender of the soul's honor, before our enemy is even near?—an unworthy peace on terms dictated by the foe? Is that the alternative?—that we enthrone Him in unquestioned regnancy, or that we live in the haunting sense of a coward's compromise? It is well that we should "count the cost," not only of His discipleship, but of that other choice! "So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all he hath, he cannot be my disciple."