

CHAPTER X

The Marks of Discipleship (III)

PRIVILEGE AND DUTY

THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE

"Now there were some present at that very season who told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered and said unto them, Think ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they have suffered these things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and killed them, think ye that they were offenders above all the men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

"And he spake this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit thereon, and found none. And he said unto the vinedresser, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground? And he answering saith unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well; but if not, thou shalt cut it down.'

(*Luke 13:1-9*)

THE PARABLE OF THE BONDSERVANT

"But who is there of you, having a servant plowing or keeping sheep, that will say unto him, when he is come in from the field, Come straightway and sit down to meat; and will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank the servant because he did the things that were commanded? Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do."

(*Luke 17:7-10*)

CHAPTER X

PRIVILEGE AND DUTY

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree
The Parable of the Bondservant

A fruit-tree's reason for existence is to bear fruit. It has no claim to live if, exacting man's labor and the soil's fertility, it yields no harvest. Responsibility is the price of privilege. Such is the teaching of the story of the Barren Fig Tree.

The story of the Bondservant carries this caveat to its ultimate limit. The discipleship of the kingdom sometimes wears the harsh aspect of duty unrelieved by privilege. Then duty must be the disciple's watchword and his sole reward.

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

The life of Jesus sometimes seems to us idyllic in its simplicity, and Palestine a land of pastoral calm. But Jesus often moved through turbulence. Experience for Him was of a complicated and sometimes broken pattern. Roman legions were a sore provocation to the Jews. On occasion the yoke chafed until it became unendurable. Then the goaded compatriots of Jesus would hurl themselves vainly against an iron foe, and reap straightway the savage penalty. An echo of that troublous time is heard in the report brought to Him concerning certain Galileans "whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." There is no other record of this incident, but Josephus cites many such and it is doubtless trustworthy. The rebellious were attacked by the legionaries in the midst of their religious rites. Animal blood and human flowed in one stream.

The reporters of the outrage apparently hoped to receive

from Jesus an endorsement of their conviction that the victims had induced this violent death by their sins. It was a current doctrine that misfortune was the nemesis of transgression.¹ Job's comforters earned their satirical title by enlarging on that doctrine to Job in the midst of his calamities. The theory is inviting—at least to those spared by adversity, for it exempts them from the pain of sympathy and reckons them among the virtuous. No form of self-complacence is more noxious.² Jesus meets it with ruthless truth: "Think ye these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." To secure the reply against misunderstanding *He* proceeds to quote to *them* an example of disaster fresh in their memory, a disaster which occurred not in Galilee³ but in Judea. Eighteen workmen, engaged perhaps in building Pilate's aqueducts, had been buried beneath the falling of a tower at the Pool of Siloam. "Think ye that they were debtors⁴ above all the men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

This comment is not to be construed as a denial on Jesus' part that wrongdoing has tangible consequences. Sin's aftermath of misfortune is too conspicuous to be gainsaid, and Jesus often recognized it in sadness.⁵ But He flatly refused countenance to the theory that calamity is *necessarily* induced by the sins of its victims. Of an instance of affliction so directly traceable as blindness His remark was categorical: "Neither did this man sin, nor his parents."⁶ He recognized nature's ap-

¹ Cf. John 9: 2.

² Joseph Addison takes issue with it and remarks wisely: "There is no calamity . . . supposed to have happened as a judgment to a vicious man, which does not sometimes happen to men of approved . . . virtue." (*The Spectator*, September, 1712.)

³ Josephus writes that the Galileans were industrious and brave. They were particularly restive under Rome's dominion. The Judeans affected to disparage them because their blood was partly admixed through heathen marriage, because they were less orthodox, and because they spoke in a harsh and sometimes almost unintelligible dialect. Cf. Matthew 4: 15 ("Galilee of the Gentiles"), John 7: 52, and Matthew 26: 69, 73. (See footnote, Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 348.)

⁴ It has been suggested that the word "debtors" is used in this connection because the workmen were being paid by Pilate from the Temple treasury, *i.e.*, from money considered as sacred to God.

⁵ When, *e.g.*, He said to the man sick of the palsy, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." See Matthew 9: 2.

⁶ John 9: 3.

palling impassivity which makes her seemingly careless both of vice and virtue:

“O mother, praying God will save
Thy sailor,—while thy head is bow'd,
His heavy-shotted hammock-shroud
Drops in his vast and wandering grave.”⁷

Yet He bade us have confidence in the irrefragable love of God. The apparent strife between God and nature He did not explicitly reconcile. That strife remains. Along with the mystery of sin and of sin's havoc among the innocent it constitutes the heaviest odds of faith. Jesus met those odds at their most diabolical—and conquered. “Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world.”⁸ But having asserted a realm of misfortune not ascribable to sin, He asserted also the fact that sin carries with it the seeds of grim consequence. All affliction is not due to wrongdoing, but all wrongdoing brings affliction: “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” The very self-complacence which prompted His informants to detail a calamity visited on others would bring a similar calamity upon them. Could they but see, the times even now were ominous!

Such is the setting which Luke supplies (from actual occasion or from striking sense of fitness) for the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree. The tree was planted in one of the irregular patches of a vineyard.⁹ It was on a sunny slope. No other trees cast shade upon it or crowded its branches. It rose above the garden. The sky was all its own. Doubtless it received the individual and painstaking care which the vinedresser gave to his vines. But it bore no fruit: for three years it had been barren. What right had it to live? “Cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground?” We are to notice that word “also.”¹⁰ It implies recognition on the owner's part that the barrenness of the fig tree was not the full extent of its unfitness: it “nulli-

⁷ Tennyson, “In Memoriam,” Canto VI.

⁸ John 16: 33.

⁹ Bruce suggests that a vine is a more winsome emblem of Jewish national life than a fig tree, and that Jesus in employing the latter symbol was intent to lower the pride of His hearers. (See Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 431.) But the force of the symbol seems to point rather to special privilege.

¹⁰ The word “also” is omitted mistakenly from the Authorized Version but is restored in the revisions.

fied" the soil. It robbed the vines of sunlight and sustenance. On every count it was self-sentenced to destruction.¹¹

Clearly Jesus had His own nation in mind. Jewry had prospered on a sunny hillside of God's favor, not indeed in worldly bounty or in political dominion, but in the richer blessing of prophetic guidance. What other nation had been blessed by so noble a succession of lighted souls? Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, John the Baptist—and Jesus! No land great or small, in ancient or modern times, can match that galaxy of inspired leadership. Their insight is still the chart and compass of our voyaging world. But this intensive privilege had produced no good result in character. Nor was Israel's barrenness the end of her mischief. Privilege might have been bestowed upon another nation to good purpose. Israel had nullified the soil of earth. Year after year she had impeded high achievement.

The wonder arises how Jesus would fare nowadays if He came in flesh and spoke in such untrimmed language to a modern nation. "Jeremiad!" would be the smallest taunt flung at His message. Speakers at luncheon clubs would tell Him to "throw away that hammer and buy a horn," or would offer advice equally fatuous. Self-appointed custodians of other people's patriotism would call His loyalty into question and place His name on a black list! Fashionable churches would dismiss Him as a gloomy crank peddling a gospel of calamity. But we may be sure that He would insist as of old that uselessness in nations or men invites disaster. He would declare with undiminished zeal that to be unserviceable is not merely a negative good but a positive ill: it nullifies life like a blight. . . .

Each tree must bring forth its *own* fruit. Each nation has its genius—Judea with a monotheistic and most holy faith, Greece with a quickening sense of beauty, Rome with a mind for ordered government—and must yield from its fiber its

¹¹ It has been suggested that this parable is the origin of the miracle of the withering of the fig tree. (Cf. Matthew 21: 18-21, Mark 11: 11-14.) But the latter incident is described so circumstantially that the suggestion seems arbitrary, as the "Century Bible" (Luke, p. 212), and the "I.C.C." (Luke, p. 430), rightly maintain. Those who find grave difficulty in the miracle in question (and there are many) must delete it on different cause.

appropriate contribution to the commonwealth of nations. Each man has his distinguishing trait and gift, which, with the manner of his opportunity, will determine his tribute to mankind's stock of goodness, beauty and truth. Copernicus sweeping the sky and discovering a vaster music of the spheres, Millet fleeing Paris for a village plainness to show us how haunting beauty can live in sepia, Captain Scott dying like "a very gallant gentleman" in Antarctic snows, Thoreau regarding the passing show of business and pleasure with unenvious eyes because he chose to live beneath the face of eternity—each spoke in his own tongue and bore fruit after his own kind. If any one of these had been untrue to his own word, to that measure he would have failed. A fig tree is not expected to produce grapes. Each life is under fee to bring forth spontaneously its inherent treasure.

The barrenness may run for three years,¹² but still the worthless tree has its intercessors. "Let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it." The law that uselessness induces death is savingly entangled with a deeper law of pitying grace. At least the tree is green. Its rich foliage is a sign of the fruit it might have borne. Perhaps the spade of varying experience digging about it (thrust through its roots, perchance, in merciful harshness), and the fertilizing strength of high example will make it fruitful. Thus the intercession was raised—as Abraham interceded nobly for Sodom,¹³ and Moses offered his own life with strong tears and utter self-abnegation for his idolatrous people.¹⁴ So Jesus Himself (even while He spoke stern warning) made ready to carry His Cross and by His righteous death to plead the cause of an unrighteous people.

Beneath the simple rigor of the story there is the throb of an intense emotion. Would this little land, so headstrong yet so

¹² The allegorizers have been very busy with the "three years." They represent, according to Augustine, the dispensations respectively of natural law, written law, and grace. According to Theophylact they hint at Moses, the Prophets, and Jesus or (in the individual) at childhood, manhood, and old age. (See Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 354.) We may accept the three years as part of the verisimilitude of the story. Similarly we need not follow Bruce (*op. cit.*, p. 433) when he draws conclusions from the "one year" of grace and claims that this "indicates Christ's own sympathy with this Divine rigor."

¹³ The noble story in Genesis 18: 22-33.

¹⁴ The nobler story in Exodus 32: 30-32.

dearly loved, justify His plea to God? Would it heed His admonition of approaching doom? "One year more!"—for grace cannot brook perpetual fruitlessness. Leaves of ritual and vain oblation cannot indefinitely serve as substitute for fruitful deeds. "One year more!"—thus the story ends, hurling its challenge! Never was inconclusiveness more dramatic! It has left us with a philosophy of history and a rationale of life.

We wonder if the men who brought tidings of that Galilean tragedy were trapped in Jerusalem when Roman battleaxes flashed in the streets, and when the Temple fell like that tower at the Pool of Siloam? We wonder if our modern world with all its facility for reading laws of nature has read the deeper law that requires fruit of useful living—doing justly, loving mercy, walking humbly with God—at the penalty of destruction? "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

The Parable of the Bondservant

There are sayings of Jesus that strike the ear harshly. Frequently they concern the terms of His discipleship. "Follow me; and leave the dead to bury their own dead."¹⁵ . . . "If any man cometh to 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."¹⁶ There was a terrifying quality in His character. When He set His face like a flint to go to Jerusalem "they that followed were afraid."¹⁷ The fierceness of His own struggle is reflected in the peremptory and inflexible demands which He made on His disciples.

Jesus is never more severe than in the story of the Bondservant.¹⁸ God is a slave-driver, and man is a slave whose work

¹⁵ Matthew 8: 22.

¹⁶ Luke 14: 26. See Chapter VII of this book.

¹⁷ Mark 10: 32.

¹⁸ The parable is unrelated to the verses which precede it. Vv. 1, 2 (Luke 17) speak of the sin of causing others to sin; vv. 3, 4 of the duty of forgiveness; vv. 5, 6 of the power of faith. Matthew and Mark give these precepts in different connections. (See Matthew 18: 6, 7; Mark 9: 42. Also Matthew 17: 19, 20; Mark 11: 23.) These fragments throw a most interesting light on the manner in which the Gospels were compiled. Godet says of Luke 17: 1-10 that it is composed of remnants found "at the bottom of the portfolio."

is endless. Though he has toiled a full day in the field ploughing or tending sheep, when he reaches the homestead footsore and weary he must gird himself and serve at his master's table. Can he expect to eat in his master's company? Can he satisfy his hunger before his master is fed? Can he plead his flagging strength? No, he is but a slave! Acknowledgement is not due him, still less thanks. When he drags his tired body to his couch, only this can he say: "I am but a slave; I have done no more than my duty."¹⁹

The story is not to be interpreted as a full picture of God. The Father of mankind is not a slave-driver. The story is a story, and its appeal is to human custom and not to the Divine Nature: "But who is there of *you*." . . . Nevertheless it is doubtful if Jesus could have told it except under a sense of the awe and majesty due to God. He is "our Father," but not an indulgent or doting Father. He is also our "great Taskmaster." The heaven "is His throne" and the earth "is the footstool of His feet."²⁰

"Know that the Lord is God alone,
He can create and He destroy. . . ." ²¹

Man cannot bring anything into being—his creations are from materials given to his hand. Man cannot cause anything to pass out of being, for if he blow a mountain into dust, the dust remains—he can only change its form. But God can create and destroy. We are the creatures of His might.

"Wide as the world is Thy command." ²¹

But, lest we should wrench a truth out of due proportion, this also is true:

"Vast as eternity Thy love." ²¹

The whole scale of Deity cannot be sounded in one story, but only a dominant note. So with the scale of human life.

¹⁹ The word "unprofitable" seems to be used in a literal sense. In II Samuel 6: 22 it means "vile," but here it means "leaving no margin of profit or merit." The emphasis is on the noun which means not "servant" but rather "bondservant" or "slave."

²⁰ Matthew 5: 34, 35.

²¹ Isaac Watts' noble hymn to which the tune "Old Hundredth" seems fitly wedded.

Our experience does not always make us bondservants, but sometimes it does come in the guise of a taskmaster.²² The parables of Jesus sprang directly from His reflection upon our human lot which He intensely shared. Were there not days and moods when He felt His work was never ended? Toil as He might with a recalcitrant earth, there were always tasks as stern awaiting Him! He never overtook the kingdom's demands. At the end of the day He must gird Himself as if the day's toil had just begun. When such a mood possessed Him, He flung the brave challenge: "A man must do His duty. He must toil and toil while it is day. When the hours are a treadmill he must repudiate the mocking insinuations of doubt; and ask, if need be, no other reward than the sense of duty done." This story is an echo of His brave soliloquy. So regarded its message is clear.

It is a challenge to endurance. The disciples fondly hoped that hardship was only for a season; then they would sit on thrones. An arduous kingdom now made them as despised slaves, but soon angel hands would wait on them. "No!" said their Master, "it is an unending labor!" Even in the lengthening shadows they must still toil. Even when the flesh became darts of weariness they must gird themselves as in the morning hour. The kingdom would brook no sluggard mood, no effeminate self-pity, no hankering after silks and crowns. They must be as slaves—in the kingly spirit that knows no servitude! . . .

Such a recruiting never fails of volunteers!—

"God, if this were enough,
That I see things bare to the buff
And up to the buttocks in mire,
That I ask nor hope nor hire,
Nur in the husk,
Nor dawn beyond the dusk,
Nor life beyond death:
God, if this were faith? . . .

"To thrill with the joy of girded men,
To go on for ever and fail and go on again,
And be mauled to the earth and arise,
And contend for the shade of a word and a thing not
seen with the eyes:

²² The attempts of Grotius *et al* to invert the story, *i.e.*, to find in it a condemnation of the servile religion of the scribes, need not be followed. The teaching of Jesus is as fluid and varied as life itself—and as true!

With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night
 That somehow the right is the right
 And the smooth shall bloom from the rough:
 Lord, if that were enough?"²³

We can imagine that courage sang within many a heart as Jesus told this story. Let a bugle sound the crusade with a coward call: "We must seek the city. Its spires are just beyond the hilltop. Soon there will be banqueting and song"—and few will follow. But let the bugle say: "The city is far, the way hazardous, and we may die before we see it"—and there will be an instant upstarting of heroes. Jesus always sounded the heroic call. . . .

For strong souls duty is a sufficient recompense. The doctrine of works of supererogation has no standing in life and therefore no standing with Jesus. The ideal flames down upon us. We cannot match its splendor, much less surpass it. If we *could* match it, we would no more than fulfill its demands; we would do no more than "that which was our duty." Is the work of him who seeks a purer social order ever finished? Politicians still shuffle their greasy cards, the demagogue still trades upon the credulity of the mob, and there is no gain save through eternal vigilance. Is the ascent of him who seeks the white peaks of character ever complete? If one range is conquered, another gleams above him! The kingdom grants no respite. Sometimes it seems to yield no reward except the reward of duty done. Let that be recompense enough! Hardy spirits will ask none better! For them the spoils of battle will be inward—they have kept faith with life's inflexible demand! Therefore they seek no golden isles: they have done their duty! Duty—

"Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
 The Godhead's most benignant grace;
 Nor ask we anything so fair
 As is the smile upon thy face. . . .

"I myself commend
 Unto thy guidance from this hour;
 O let my weakness have an end!

²³ Robert Louis Stevenson, "If this were Faith." ("Poems," Charles Scribner's Sons.)

Give unto me, made lowly wise,
The spirit of self-sacrifice;
The confidence of reason give;
And in the light of truth thy bondman let me live." ²⁴

Without this story the message of Jesus would not have been full-orbed. Here is His antidote for the disease of self-pity and the conceit of merit. Let a man be at the beck and call of the ideal life! When he has toiled until limbs are cramped and the sunset beckons to rest, let him gird himself to bear new burdens through the dark! And when he has done all, let him know himself but a poor slave of heaven and say: "I am but bondman of the truth. I have done no more than duty!" So shall he prove his royal blood!

But, since duty does not always wear an inexorable mien, the story holds but a partial truth. There is a fragment of another parable of Jesus which is this parable's twin brother with a brighter face. It tells of a master who in gracious heart girded himself and, bidding his slaves sit down to the feast, came and served them: "Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching; verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them sit down to meat, and shall come and serve them." ²⁵ If His command is as wide as the world, then vast as eternity His love!

²⁴ William Wordsworth, "Ode to Duty."

²⁵ Luke 12: 37.