

“THE RELIGION of CHRIST”

Reproduction of
An Extemporaneous Sermon by

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Feb 5, 1857 - Jan 10, 1931.

January Twelfth
Nineteen Thirty-one

Perhaps a great definition of “greatness” is contained in Basil Williams’ Preface to Lord Charnwood’s “Abraham Lincoln,” — when, referring to that wonderful personality, he said:

“He was misunderstood and under-rated in his life-time, and even yet has hardly come to his own. For his place is among the great men of the earth. To them, he belongs by right of his immense power of hard work, his unfaltering pursuit of what seemed to him right, and above all by that child-like directness and simplicity of vision which none but the greatest carry beyond their earliest years.”

¶ The mission of “The Church” is a great one—but, unfortunately, she has not always been worthy of this definition of greatness. On a gloomy January Sunday morning, five years ago, a clergyman, who then, after forty-four years “on the firing line”— starting with a

little Virginia church whereat he both preached and played the organ—was entirely “free,” extemporaneously preached a very simple, direct, “child-like” sermon. It’s worth preserving — he was kind enough to afterward dictate it as best he could. It’s reproduced here.

—Anonymous.

[I Love Thee.](#)

(Antiphon.)

8.5.8.3.

Words and Music by W. C. Bitting

1. Lord, my tasks are great and wea - ry, Driv-ing to de - spair,—
“Trust my strength, be - lieve my prom - ise; I will share.”
2. Long and lone - ly is my jour-ney, I crave sym-pa - thy.—
“I, too, know the friend-less mo - ments; Walk with me.”
3. Flow my tears, so hot and bit - ter, Melts my soul a - way.—
“I have wept. Oh, let my weep - ing Thine al - lay.”
4. Hides my se - cret bur-den heav - y, Joy is crushed by care.—
“Since a - lone I bore the world’s woe, Thine I bear.”

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| 5. My soul knows a fearful struggle;
Right withstood by ease.—
“I have fought that fight to vict’ry;
Choose my peace.” | 7. Many sins weigh down my spirit,
Make life hard to live.—
“Let my cross tell thee its message;
I forgive.” |
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6. Mine's a sorrow deep, depressing,
Gloom without a ray.—
“I, the ‘Man of Sorrow,’ change
each
Night to day.”

8. Jesus, Saviour, Friend, Redeemer,
Hear and comfort me.—
“Trust and rest. Give me thy heart's
love;
I love Thee.”

“THE RELIGION of CHRIST”

“My food is to do the will of him
who sent me.” JOHN 4:34

WHAT was the personal religion of Jesus? The very question seems strange to most of his followers, first, because his present disciples think of him as a teacher, Savior or some “far-away” being who has some “official” relation of some sort to human life. They have been mostly impressed with the function of Jesus in getting them into heaven or keeping them out of hell. He is considered to be a convenience for trouble—for the closing hours of life. The thought that he had—and lived—his own personal religion, or else he never could have had a religious value for the men of his own day, or for human beings of subsequent generations, does not occur to most of his disciples nor to those who are not his disciples.

Again, the idea of religion itself has been so mixed up with creeds, dogmas, forms and ceremonies, organizations—such as the church—that men have spent their energies in disputes about all these things, and in the smoke of their battles have lost sight of religion itself.

Jesus had, and lived, his own personal religious life. The literary records of his life easily reveal what this religion was. Any intelligent reader of the story of his life, any thoughtful student of his words, anyone who seeks to know his attitude toward men, will quickly come to the conviction that the personal religion of Jesus consisted in his filial spirit toward God.

His first recorded words are those when he was a boy twelve years old. He had gone to Jerusalem with his parents. When they were returning to their home in Nazareth, they missed the boy from their company after some days of travel, during which they had supposed that he was with the caravan. They returned to Jerusalem, and finally found him in the Temple with the teachers, who were astonished at the questions he asked them and the answers he gave to their questions. When his mother told him how they had missed him, and gently chided him, he asked them where else they would expect him to be than in his Father's house. (Luke 2:40-52.) On the cross, when he died, his last words were, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46.)

He lived in the consciousness that God was his Father. He had no other word for God. To him God was no judge, or lawgiver, or taskmaster, nor did he think of him in any philosophic way. Always, and everywhere, God was such a being as could he most accurately described in terms of his relation to men as a father. If the social position of women had been in Palestine in the first century what it is in the United States today, he would also have, no doubt, used the word "Mother" to describe the divine affection for all men. It is thus noteworthy that Jesus never tried to describe God in terms of philosophy, but in terms of human life, and, in doing this, he seized upon the parental relation—the highest known to the men of his day—as the vehicle for letting them share the secret of his own life. He told the people plainly, "As the living Father sent me, and I live through the Father; so he that eats me, he also shall live through me." (John 5:57.) By eating him, he meant such fellowship with him as he had with the Father. He had no reference to believing in creeds or dogmas, or submitting to any rites or ceremonies, or putting ourselves under the jurisdiction of any form of church government. All these things are the worn, frayed fringes of the garment of religion, or part of the embroidery that men have tried to work according to the patterns of their thinking and fancies upon that garment.

This religion of Jesus is very striking. His Father sent the rain and the sunshine, clothed the flowers with their beauty, attended the funeral of every bird that fell to the ground. His greatest story was one of a father whose son went away from home, but who was always loving his boy and daily watching for the return of the poor fellow who foolishly tried the experiment of having his own way instead of living the life of sonship to his father. (Luke 15:11-32.) Throughout his life he tried to impress upon those who lived with him and listened to him, the beautiful fact that the real religion of his own soul consisted in that filial spirit toward God, whom he thought of and acted toward as a being with a heart like that of a father.

This meant many things for him practically in his own religious life. The significance of it can never be exhausted. Some of these may be mentioned here and only sketched, because the value of each of them is inexhaustible.

He had faith in his Father. Jesus' faith did not mean his mental acceptance of any creed or dogmas. It was just such a vital, living, joyous, comforting, practical faith as a true child today has in a loving father and mother. God was his parent whom he trusted absolutely. In his poverty, his faith in God was his boundless wealth. In his temptations, his faith in God was his invincible armor. In the plan of his life, his faith in his Father was the determining element. Whatever the word "Father" meant to a child, he idealized into perfection, and gave himself up to such a faith in his heavenly Father as is

only faintly mirrored in the beautiful faith of any child in his parents.

His religion of the filial spirit meant the joy of communion with his Father. This fellowship and communion were the vital principles in Jesus' religion. He loved to study nature and to see how his Father was acting in the physical universe as it was understood at that time, and longed to live in accordance with the habits of his Father as he saw them in the sky and on the earth and in the lives of all animals and men.

His communion with his Father was in his thinking. He often talked to his Father, expressed his own thoughts, wishes and desires, but always added as the climax of all his talking to God, "Not my will but thine he done." This was his idea of praying. He never tried to tease his Father into his own way of thinking. He never begged his Father for a long list of material blessings. His one supreme joy was in his communion and sense of fellowship with his Father, and his superlative happiness was to see the will of his Father accomplished. He told his disciples that his very food was to do his Father's will. At any cost of suffering or of misunderstanding, he was true to this communion and fellowship with his Father. Every home could furnish the illustration of this fellowship of Jesus with his Father.

He wanted to do the will of his Father. This was what he meant by obedience. It was no hard, mechanical performance of certain acts to conform to commands. His obedience was his desire to carry out the will of his Father, knowing that the will of such a wise and loving Father was the best thing for his own life and for the lives of all men. He declared that he had come to this world to do the will of his Father, by which he simply meant that the one mission of his life, that summed up and included all conceptions of his career in the world, was to make men acquainted with the loving Father he had and to get them to share with him the ideals of this loving Father in their personal lives, in their characters and their relations to others.

He knew that God was the Father of men and, therefore, that he was related to them morally and spiritually, and that they were his brothers. Selfishness had no place in his soul, but he gave himself constantly to others and for them. There was never an hour when he was not at the disposal of men to lift them up and help them. Thus his religion took on the practical form of service to men. He had no ambition to be a superior. On one occasion when his unintelligent followers, not realizing the meaning of the life of Jesus, were disputing among themselves as to who should be the greatest, he declared that such a spirit was not his spirit, and also said that he did not live in the world to have people serve him, but to serve them; that the greatest person was the one who was willing to be everybody's slave. (Mark 10:35-45.) The personal religion of Jesus did not permit him to isolate himself from men, but compelled him to mingle with them and to serve them to the utmost.

It is remarkable that Jesus asked all his followers to share this religion of his life with him. He wants us, like him, to have faith in the Father, communion with the Father, the spirit of obedience to the Father, and loving service to our fellow men. All this is religion for us. Surely the religion which was good enough for Jesus, who was the best being who ever lived, is good enough for all who call themselves by his name. We can afford to ignore all the discussions about creeds, forms and

ceremonies, methods of church government, what to eat and what to drink, and other subordinate things that today divide the nominal followers of Jesus. It is natural for weak human nature to take the line of least resistance. It is so much easier to fight over our creeds, to debate over our forms and ceremonies, to contend about our systems of church government and organization, than it is for us to be simple children of our heavenly Father and genuine brothers to our fellow men.

We can hardly call anything else religion than this personal religion of Jesus. It is the only kind of religion that will bring his followers together, that will overcome the spirit of evil in our own hearts, that will banish from the world the ugly things which we vainly try to overcome by our reformatorys and our legislation. It is for making known this personal religion of Jesus that churches and church members exist. It is not to propagate economic or reformatory ideas. It is simply to live in this world the same religion that Jesus lived.

One who knows the life of Louis Pasteur cannot fail to be stirred. He will wonder whether to admire this great man most as a disciple of science with the relent-less devotion to reality and willingness to pay any cost to get it; or as a giver of all he was and knew to the welfare of humanity; or as a noble man. Whether in helping farmers, or manufacturers, or stockraisers, or the sick in hospitals, his spirit of philanthropy was consuming. He wished to help all he could serve. His life revealed those eternal qualities which made him untiring in his search for scientific reality and ungrudging in the gift of all he obtained to the welfare of his fellow men. He blessed humanity by his discoveries. He increased human wealth and decreased human suffering, and enabled us to prevent misery and pain. Fruit growers, the silk industry. stockraisers, and womankind in its highest and holiest function of maternity, children and adults hitherto hopelessly destined to death when bitten by mad dogs, and every child of man in every hospital receiving the blessing of modern surgery, and all the countless myriads of humanity, are his debtors. Every physician, every hospital bears witness to his scientific attainments and to his generosity in giving all he had to his fellow men. Here in scientific realms is a noble illustration of the essentially religious spirit of service supremely revealed in the personal religion of Jesus. Every life should be held by its possessor in trust for all humanity. In moral and ethical realms Jesus has been and ever will be supreme. In scientific realms men like Pasteur show us the essentially religious character of the unselfish spirit of self-dedication to all humanity. The same is true of men in industrial, intellectual and social realms. The spirit itself in whatever region it is exercised is essentially religious.

No wonder, then, that the first word Jesus spoke, as the very gateway to our entrance into his own life, was "Repent." You love evil and so you cannot share my filial spirit with the Father and my fraternal relations with men. Therefore, change your heart, change your mind. You are unforgiving, and yet God is full of forgiveness. You must change your heart and become forgiving, else my Father, who knows the value of the forgiving spirit, will not cast his pearls before swine and give that which is holy to dogs. If it seemed reckless extravagance to throw jewels into a sty, or to take the bread from the altar and give it to the dogs, how much more profane it is to throw the jewels of my Father's heart to the human swine, or to give the bread on which my Father lives and on which I live to the human dogs. If your life is set upon the material things of this world and they can satisfy all the aspirations of your soul, change your heart, repent. If you think you can realize the end of your being

with all of its splendid physical, intellectual and social powers by devoting yourself to what gives momentary pleasure to your physical senses, change your heart, change your mind, turn away from all such views of life. The urgency of Jesus in telling men to change their hearts and change their minds was no doctrinal device. It was a simple, common-sense necessity that he urged upon us, if we are to share his life in its filial spirit toward the heavenly Father and its fraternal spirit toward our fellow men.

This is the only religion that is worth while. It is the only religion that men can understand—and all of us can understand it.

Not long ago a business man had his wife call me on the telephone, saying that he wanted to talk with me. When I called upon him, his wife and daughter were present. The latter was a little girl, nine years old. He could not talk louder than a whisper. Just a year ago last month he felt a hoarseness. Ordinary remedies did not relieve him. His throat specialist could not help him. He was sent to another well-known physician. After careful examination, the latter told him that he had a cancer on his vocal cords, that the only hope for relief lay in an operation and the chances were “even” whether he would recover from it. When in his whisper he reached that place in his story, his wife could no longer stand it, but left the room. Then he continued in his whisper to me: “Day before yesterday I made my will. I have settled all my business affairs. I am going to the hospital tomorrow morning. I want some help in my spiritual condition. I face the unknown.”

The little girl sat on my lap, and apparently ignoring what her father had said, I began to talk to her, and said, “Mary Katherine, you look well-fed. Do you get enough to eat? Aren’t you worried about your breakfast tomorrow morning?” She smilingly said, “Oh. no, my Daddy gives me all that I can eat.”

Then I played with her dress and said, “you have a nice school dress, but some day that will wear out. Aren’t you worried about where your clothes are coming from?”

“Oh. no,” she said, “my mother makes all my dresses, and she will give me another one when this wears out.”

“You must have a good father and mother,” I said.

“There are none so good in the world as my daddy and my mother,” she promptly and quickly answered.

I then said to her, “Mary, where is your Bible?” She slid down off my lap and went for her Bible, which she had gotten at Sunday School. I turned to my friend and said, “Did you hear what Mary Katherine said?”

He was looking rather blankly at me. Possibly he wondered whether that was all I had to say to a man

who knew the seriousness of his physical condition, and whether I had no other message for him. When the dear girl came back to me with the Bible, I opened it at Matthew 7:9-11. I said, “My friend, I want to read you just a few words that Jesus spoke. It summed up his own religion, and he meant it to describe the kind that you and I should live. I am going to read these words, translating them into the language of St. Louis, which you can understand. Imagine him standing at a busy downtown corner. A crowd is around him, wondering what that man is trying to do. He looks upon the crowd, sees it composed of men and women like us, and he looks you squarely in the eye and says. ‘What parent is there of you, who, if your child asks bread, will hunt around on the street for a stone, and give your child that to eat? Or, if your own offspring asks a piece of fish, will hunt around until you find a wriggling snake, and hand that to your child to eat?’” I could see a little shudder in the large body of my friend at the very thought that he would give his dear girlie a cobblestone or a poisonous snake for food. His own father’s heart rebelled against such a preposterous thought.

Then I read the next verse to him. “If you, then, for all that you know about evil, and imperfect as you are, know how to give good things to Mary Katherine, **how much more** will your Father who is in heaven give good things to all his children.”

Then my good friend buried his face in the hair of his own little child, who nestled up to him with a child-like love and faith and trust in her father. “Of course,” he wept. Through his sobs, I heard him whisper to his child, “Precious little girl, never mind anything that I have ever brought to you. It is nothing. But who would ever have thought that you would have brought God to me!” After a minute, when he had recovered from his feelings, he looked up at me with his wet eyes, and whispered to me, “It is all right. I now know I have nothing to fear.”

I then told him that all he had to do at the hospital, and when he came out of it and entered once more into the struggles of life, was to remember, and to live every day in every event and experience, just those three words, **“how much more,”** and his own parent’s heart would tell him more about how God felt toward him than all the sermons that ever could be preached. For God had given him that precious little daughter in order that through his own parental feeling he might come to know how God felt toward him.

I had a brief prayer with him. There was nothing doleful. All was full of joy. It was the rest of faith. He looked at me with a smile on his face and said to me, **“Is this religion?”** I answered, **“That is the kind that Jesus lived—he wants us to share its joys with him.”**

Closing Hymn by W.C. Bitting

“Come Unto Me.”

6.6.6.4.

Words and Music by W. C. Bitting

1. Come, weak one, come to me, I know thy fra - il - ty;
I will be Strength to thee; *O come to me.*

2. Come with thy fears to me, Past, now, fu - tur - i - ty,
Shall hold sweet Peace for thee: *O come to me.*

3. Come, sad heart, come to me, I know Geth - sem a - ne;
I will give Joy to thee; *O come to me.*

4. Come with thy doubts to me,
Bring thy perplexity;
I am true Light for thee;
O come to me.

6. Come as thou art to me,
Whate'er thy life may be;
I Love thee tenderly;
O come to me.

5. Come bring thy sins to me,
Thou shalt from them be free;
My life shall dwell in thee;
O come to me.

7. Jesus, who callest me.
Strength, Peace, Joy, Liberty
Light, Life, Love ever be;
I come to thee.

[The sermon is in a small pamphlet, 7.5" x 5.375", given to me by my father. The front bears the date, January Twelfth, Nineteen Thirty-one, two days after grandfather died. The introductory paragraphs on greatness, which are in tiny print on the inside of the front cover of the pamphlet, also appeared in the September 18, 1926, issue of "The Baptist" and may have been authored by the editor. Of course, in "The Baptist" edition, the phrase, "five years ago," does not appear. Could it be that the seeds for this sermon, given extemporaneously in January 1926, were planted in the thoughts expressed in WCB's [final paragraph](#) of "Reminiscences of War Times"?]

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