The One Who Does Not Pass By

God has a single plan for those He has called: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” (Romans 8:29). The apostle Paul's exhortation must be read in the light of this plan: “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.” (Colossians 3:1-2). The things above are where Christ is. They are, in fact, the traits of His character. To seek them is to move towards likeness to Him.

What the things on the earth are

When we hear that someone is seeking the things on the earth, we think of money, houses and business. These, too, can fill the heart. But in the same chapter Paul names something else: "anger, wrath, malice, slander" and lying (Colossians 3:8-9). The things on the earth are, above all, things of the heart.

So there is a natural kind of spirituality and a spiritual kind. Both are unseen, but one comes from below and the other from above. The Lord Jesus said: “And he said unto them, Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world.” (John 8:23). Everything that comes from above bears His image; everything that comes from below bears the image of the old man. And the same deed can have two origins: two people may give the same sum to a poor man, one out of compassion, the other in order to be seen.

For the one who is born again, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The old things still come back at times, just as someone who has moved into a new house will sometimes, out of habit, set off down the road to the old one. But he no longer lives there. His life is now “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” (Colossians 3:3).

Two kinds of wisdom

James is writing to the brethren in the church, not to people of the world, and he shows them the two kinds of wisdom. The wisdom from below is recognised by “But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.” (James 3:14). Envy is the intention to hurt someone, and it needs a relationship: it grows precisely between brothers and sisters, colleagues, husbands and wives. The spirit of strife is the desire to be right at any cost, and it can even wear pious clothing. James's diagnosis is severe: this wisdom "is earthly, sensual, devilish", and where it is at work “This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.” (James 3:15-16).

The wisdom from above “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without

hypocrisy." (James 3:17). This is not a list of virtues but a portrait: it is the image of Christ, "But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:24). Whoever grows in it grows in likeness to Him.

Its hallmark is meekness. The Lord Jesus said of Himself: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." (Matthew 11:29). Meekness is not weakness. A tamed horse has the same strength as a wild one, but it has placed that strength under the bridle. That is how the Lord, who had all power, entered Jerusalem: "Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass." (Matthew 21:5). And the fruit of this wisdom "And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace." (James 3:18), just as seed grows in quiet ground, not on a battlefield.

Love instead of hatred, and mercy instead of judgement

Likeness to Christ is seen above all in the way we treat those who do us harm. Towards an enemy we can have three attitudes: hatred, neutrality or love. The natural man counts neutrality a great victory. The Lord, however, asks for more: "But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful." (Luke 6:35-36). Children are recognised by their Father's features, and we were loved "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8).

Immediately afterwards, the Lord adds: "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:" (Luke 6:37). Judging is a work of the flesh. In our minds an invisible court is often in session: we open the file, we hear only one side, we pass the verdict and we carry out the sentence in the only way open to us, by speaking ill of the other person. James stops us: "There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?" (James 4:12). Nor did the Lord Jesus come "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." (John 3:17). To the woman caught in sin He said: "She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." (John 8:11).

Discerning good from evil does not mean condemning. It is the difference between a doctor and a judge: the doctor makes a diagnosis in order to heal; the judge passes a sentence in order to punish. The disciple of Christ looks at evil as a doctor does. That is why Paul writes: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." (Galatians 6:1). The word used for "restore" described mending nets and setting a bone back in place: carefully, patiently, without movements that wound. And the one who restores takes heed to himself, because he too can fall.

The parable of the Samaritan

The Lord showed all of this in a single parable. A man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho was beaten, stripped and left half dead (Luke 10:30). A priest and a Levite saw him and passed by on the other side. They said no unkind word, but their indifference was still a form of condemnation: they saw his condition and walked on.

The Samaritan saw the same man, but what he saw did not turn into condemnation within him; it turned into compassion. It is the same compassion the Lord Jesus felt for the distressed multitudes (Matthew 9:36) and the father felt for the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). He drew near, bound up his wounds, took him to the inn and paid for him. Compassion from above costs something. And the Lord concludes: “And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.” (Luke 10:37).

In the same conversation the measure of this love also appears: “And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” (Luke 10:27). We usually have two sets of scales: a light one for our own faults and a heavy one for other people's. Likeness to Christ means a single set of scales, the same understanding for our neighbour as for ourselves.

The garment of Christ

Finally, Paul shows us what to clothe ourselves with: Colossians 3:12-14. This is the garment of Christ. A prince does not refrain from wearing rags because he has been forbidden to, but because they do not suit him. In the same way, the garment of anger and envy no longer suits the one whom God loves.

Forgiveness has the same measure: as much as Christ has forgiven us. The servant in the parable, forgiven an enormous debt, refused to forgive a small one, and his master said to him: “Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?” (Matthew 18:33).

Towards likeness to Him

All these things above, pure wisdom, meekness, peace, love for enemies, mercy, giving up judging, restoring the fallen and forgiveness, are not separate pieces. They are the features of a single image: the image of the Lord Jesus. The new man “And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:” (Colossians 3:10).

The goal may seem too high, but the command is not given to discourage us; it is given because it can be fulfilled. “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.” (1 John 2:6), and “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13). What He asks, He Himself gives.

Let us therefore set our minds on the things above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God. The more we look to Him, the more we become like Him, until the day of which John writes:

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2).

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