Titus - Commentaries by James Lampden Harris

Bible Treasury Papers, Truth Which is After Godliness, The (1:1)

We are insensibly led by the spirit of the age in which we live; and that which characterizes our own age is a craving desire after the improvement of existing things. Much of the desire for the improvement even of religions communities is nothing more than this very principle, which is acting in the world, carried into them. The result doubtless will be the manifestation of that lawlessness which is expressly foretold as marking these last days: for self-will (and self-will is lawlessness), in the church is not less sinful than it is in the world. But while the spirit of the age is undoubtedly working unto this end in religious communities, it is no less true that the Spirit of God is working very markedly in the saints: and it may be profitable to notice the order according to which He works, lest we should be confounding a reckless spirit of innovation with the awakened desire of the re-assertion of the unchangeable holy principles of God's order. It is written, "God made man upright, but he has sought out many inventions." And still are man's powers being put forth on the same materials, moral or physical, to try to produce comfort and happiness from them. At this time his object appears to him more near of attainment than at any period heretofore; for never were his energies so unhindered, or the field so open before him for the trial. Now the spirit of this age is characterized especially by this -the expectation of something that never yet has been: but where the Spirit of God is at work, it is in the humbling sense of the loss of that which has been, and in the earnest striving after its recovery. Wherever God works He at once shows absolute perfectness: in man, on the contrary, perfectness, which after all is but relative, is always of slow growth. Thus in the church as originally constituted of God there was the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness. Any alteration of this would in fact be deterioration.1 The faith was only once delivered unto the saints: and the truth is ever the same, because Jesus, Who is the center of all truth and the great object of faith, is the Same yesterday, to-day, and forever. Now it is the recognition of an unchangeable standard which will alone prevent our being carried away by "divers and strange doctrines." The faith may be departed from, and the truth which is according to godliness be unacknowledged; but neither the one nor the other can progress either with the mind or with the condition of mankind. Amidst all revolutions the doctrines and laws of Christ must remain stationary. They are superior to improvement: to suppose them otherwise would be to impugn the perfectness of the work of God. It is surprising how slow our minds are in recognizing so simple a truth; and how much of real learning as a disciple of Christ is unlearning what one has been taught even as a Christian. "The truth" sternly refuses any admixture with error: it is most exclusive in its character. "He that gathereth not with" Jesus according to it, "is scattering abroad." He is not laboring for gathering wheat into God's garner, but only for chaff which will be burnt up with unquenchable fire. Jesus being the truth, we are enabled to discover what man really is in the sight of God. And what is the great lesson thus taught, but that where God sent forth One in Whom He was pleased -one man acting in consistency with Himself -He was found a singular character, the righteous One, to the exclusion of all others, the Holy One of God. In Him we see the truth which is after godliness: and God's estimate of man now is his consistency or inconsistency with Jesus. And into what an awful position does infidelity plunge a man! Man may deceive himself as to his not having sufficient evidence, but it is not so before God; he places himself before God as choosing himself in preference to Jesus; and forces, as it were, God to judge between the two. But the truth specially taught by the manifestation of Jesus to the world was the total failure of man -the utter profitlessness of the flesh. It was put under the greatest advantages: -the Son of God for its teacher, and the power of Him felt and acknowledged so much that even devils were subject unto the disciples in His name; -yet, after all this instruction, when the hoar of trial came, it failed completely. "They all forsook Him and fled"; and the one to whom special revelation had been made concerning the dignity of Jesus, was the one to deny with an oath that He knew Him at all. Surely the flesh, that is, human nature -man, simply as man, had never been placed under advantages so great; and, until this last trial, the truth was never brought out into demonstration, "that the flesh profiteth nothing." Now this is the fundamental point, the very starting point of Christianity: the faith of God's elect is grounded on it: real godliness has no existence at all until this truth be acknowledged, that man, as the creature of God's hand, endued with intelligence, man, as a moral being put under the discipline of God's own most holy law, has entirely failed of sustaining his standing. Now what have all the attempts of human wisdom effected, but the demonstration of the truth, by making the failure more signal. It is most important to recognize that there can be no godliness but as connected with the truth; and that it is the truth which leads unto godliness. There may be much zeal, but if it be not of the truth, the result will be either most unwarranted expectations, or such a spirit as would call down fire from heaven on those who receive us not. There may be much of religious sentiment, but it becomes superstition where the truth is not acknowledged. There may be busy activity in service, but it may really tend to strengthen the power of Satan's delusions; because the truth is our especial power against him who is a liar from the beginning. The first principle therefore in Christian ethics is, that Jesus is the truth, and real sanctification is through the knowledge of Him. "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy word truth." Before we move a step in Christian morals, that is, in real godliness, how much is necessarily assumed, I mean recognized by faith, which hence becomes the medium of producing this godliness. "Sanctified by faith that is in Me." There is the total failure and ruin of man: -there is God's most righteous judgment on the old man in the cross: there is union with Jesus as risen so as to become a branch in the true vine: there is the Holy Spirit constantly supplying from the fullness which is in Jesus wisdom and strength unto the new man: and hence the grace of God which bringeth salvation is alone able to teach us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age.

Here is another important feature of the truth, that the age or world, in which Christians are placed, never changes its character before God. The great blessing is to be kept from the evil of it: and while man is using his power in order to mitigate or keep down the evil of it, the believer knows of a present deliverance from it, through Christ's having given Himself for his sins; and thus, though in it, he walks, through the power of grace which the world knows not, as being not of it. Now it is here especially that Satan works by his power of blinding; hiding the evil standing of this present world before God, and causing the improvement of it, instead of deliverance from it, to be proposed as the object of endeavor. There can be no godliness when the goodness of the world is the assumption, because there is no truth in it: and if God be looking at the world in one light, and we in another, how can our relation to it and our conduct in it be according to His mind'? Now if the truth be that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever; and that He has not altered His relation and standing since His ascension: if God be still exercising forbearance and long-suffering towards the world, the sentence of whose judgment was passed at the

rejection of His Son: if the world be recognized as only evil unto the end of the present age if man's condition before God as a lost and ruined sinner, remains the same: if this be the truth, then godliness and improvement of the world are not the same thing. It is true that the grace of God will teach us to live soberly and righteously, as well as godly, in this present world. But the ever-inventive genius of man to remedy his own evil, would still believe that the evil condition of himself and of the world are susceptible of a remedy short of the mighty one of our Savior God in His grace that brings salvation. And it is one of the present characteristics of the present age which must alarm the soul which is sensible of the value of truth, that many Christians are using the gospel as a mere platform for erecting a moral machinery of their own, and thus at once (unintentionally perhaps) overlooking its present blessing and its object. Its present blessing is peace through the blood of the cross: its object, to be thereby secured, is holiness unto the Lord. "He gave Himself for us that He might deliver us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people zealous of good works." Now the necessary effect of going back to schemes for improvement is to take the soul away from acknowledging the truth which is according to godliness, end to substitute moral restraint in the place of the grace of God. If there be one thing that the saints have need to guard against in the present day, it is this; for truly the blessed gospel is in much more danger of being neutralized by such means than by the most open attacks of infidelity: and real liberty, real obedience, and real service are all alike hazarded. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," and there only; unless it be the fearful liberty of self-will. But real liberty is the liberty of truth: "if the truth shall make you free, then shall ye be free indeed:" and this alone is the portion of the disciples of Christ (John 8:31, 32). This alone is real deliverance from the dominion of sin; and the turning back from this to moral restraint is going back to bondage.

The attempt which is now being made to substitute moral restraint for the liberty of truth, is very clearly manifested in a series of tracts published by the Temperance Society, designated the teetotal series, with the text, "Let your light shine before men." The tract No. 7, is an appeal to Christian principles in behalf of total abstinence, &c., addressed to mechanics who are members of Christian churches. Now, while the Temperance Society professedly stood on merely philanthropic ground, it might, as it made no pretensions to be considered Christian, have been suffered to pass unnoticed, soon to yield its testimony to the failure of the combined force of self-interest and moral restraint against the evil which is in man. But since it has come to tread on the hallowed ground of Christianity, and to propose itself as subsidiary to, if not a substitution for, the grace of God, such attempt, whether in ignorance or intentional, to subvert the truth needs a plain exposure. And in this one tract there is hardly a precious truth left untouched. The invitation is to Christian friends. "We are anxious to obtain your support: and when we assure you that our sole object is Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, and good will to men,' we are sure you will attend while we urge a few reasons why you, as Christians, should come forward in this glorious work. Statesmen have legislated for the suppression of this awful vice; ministers of Christ have exposed the sin and its awful consequences; and benevolent men have exerted their influence in public and private life, to stem the torrent; but all has been in vain." Now the first question is, was the object of God in the incarnation, and the cross, and the resurrection, to reform drunkards? Was this the glorious work which God proposed to Himself in this marvelous display of His own wisdom and power? Assuredly not: -it was to bring, through this mighty means, man, who had fallen, into a degree of blessedness even higher than that from which he fell -even into fellowship with Himself and His Son, by virtue of the blood which cleanseth from all sin, and through the in: dwelling of the Spirit. It is quite true that the drunkard, or the whoremonger, or the covetous man, who knows the power of this redemption, and is brought to know this glorious work, is thereby delivered from his iniquity, and, through grace supplied, is kept from relaxing into it. This assuredly includes reformation; but reformation is not salvation. And if every drunkard in the world was to put himself under total abstinence, it does not follow that God would be glorified, or that there would be peace to the soul, or that God would rest in complacency upon him: -but if Christ be received these results do follow. And surely it is well nigh approaching to the giving of God's glory to another, to lower the whole work of Christ to the reclaiming of a drunkard or of any other sinner The angels who sang that song saw a much mightier result -a result which leaves moral attainment far, far behind.

Again, it is said, "Ministers of Christ have exposed the sin and its awful consequences." And this surely they should do, showing that the drunkard cannot inherit the kingdom of God; but they do not stop here, but they go on to the root of all sin, even the heart; and while they show the necessity of a perfect cleansing from all sin, as well as the absolute necessity of renewed will and affections, they leave not man to his own power to effect this, but hold up God's most effective remedy -the blood of the Lamb and the promise of the Spirit. What fearful presumption then is it to assert that the ministers of Christ have failed! and that now man has found something more powerful to produce reformation than the ministry of reconciliation! Surely, if this statement be made soberly, it amounts to the assertion, that moral restraint will effect that which the grace of God and the foolishness of preaching cannot effect. The Lord Jesus has said, "He that gathereth not with Me scattereth abroad." He is now, by the ministry of reconciliation, gathering fruit unto eternal life; and whatever may now be the apparent success of other means, all will appear in that day to have been but scattering.

There is another paragraph in this tract which seems to destroy the foundation on which the whole of redemption rests; and it needs to be set in its true light that Christians may be aware of the principles which many of them are ignorantly advancing. "We shall cordially agree with you that a remote cause of drunkenness lies in the natural depravity of the heart. Here doubtless is the source of all human misery. But this is not all. The natural depravity of the heart alone could never make a drunkard. The moral cause requires some physical one as a medium through which to operate: and this medium is intoxicating drink. Without this the depravity of man would never make him a drunkard; and you will at once see that by abolishing the use of those liquors we should cut off the spring of a stream which has flowed for ages." How simply does one word of our Lord expose all this sophistry. "There is nothing from without a man that, entering into him, can defile him: but the things which come out of man, those are they that defile him." "If any man have ears to hear let him hear (Mark 7:15, 16)." And again, "a good tree bringeth forth good fruit; and a corrupt tree, evil fruit." The Lord says the source of the evil is within, the philanthropist, that it is without. The Lord begins with the heart -"make the tree good, and its fruit will be good": {the} philanthropist would remove the had fruit and be content to leave the tree just as it is. It is one of the most refined delusions of Satan to make sin appear an accidental or circumstantial thing, rather than the corruption of the whole moral constitution of man -the very law of death. And when once this is affirmed; the atonement, regeneration, and resurrection are necessarily surrendered. Sin may be dormant, but it is still sin; and if a man were in the desert all his life long, and never saw anything but water, drunkenness would exist in embryo in the sin which is in the heart. The cause of one sin and of ten thousand sins is one and the same -sin that dwells within. It will be apparent to all who know the truth of God, that every attempt to make sin to consist only in the outward act has led to the nullifying of the atonement and to the substitution of morality for Christian holiness.

As might be expected, these statements are followed by anecdotes of the falling away of Christians, in order to make out a case against the sufficiency of divine grace to keep a man, without the adjunct of self-imposed restraint. But what saith the scripture? "How shall we who have

died to sin live any longer therein” -invariably bringing in the judicial act already executed in the cross as involving and conveying the utmost moral power. Again, “Sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under law, but under grace.” Surely to be under law is to be under that very restraint under which this Society would put a man: yet man would still be left before God under the dominion of sin. It is confessedly true that there has been a great failure in Christians in this respect, in their not having more plainly exhibited a mightier power in action than moral restraint, even the power of grace. “Be strong in the grace which is in Christ Jesus.”

We have surely to be deeply abased for having given so tortured a picture of Christian grace. The end proposed has often been merely the maintenance of the standard of worldly decency even in Christian communities, and the principle too often acted on in them has been the summary righteousness of the world, rather than the reclaiming power of grace. Christians have not sufficiently recognized that while godliness is the guarantee for morals, it is something much higher, -something leading the soul into association with God in all things, judging God’s judgment on them, and walking in them according to that judgment. The apostle says, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in truth.” This is the great point, a walk which necessarily presents the daily recognition of all the fundamental doctrines of the gospel: a walk which necessarily leads into separation from the world: in -other words, a “walking with God,” walking in the light as He is in the light, and thus exposing or convicting the unfruitful works of darkness. The attempt to make Christianity subserve worldly morality is a special product of the craft of Satan at this present day, in order to obliterate the distinction between the church and the world. It is doing that in practice which he so early attempted in doctrine, to cause men to turn again unto the weak and beggarly elements of the world. He does not now deny the value of the cross; but he completely nullifies its power where he succeeds in making it to be thought that a certain something has been effected for all, which still throws us back upon moral restraint for security. Until the cross is known as the actual power of present deliverance from the world and sin and Satan, and as the introduction of the Life in the Spirit, there is not the acknowledging of the truth which is according to godliness. But where these truths are practically acknowledged, the unwilling confession is forced even from the world, that our principles are not the same as theirs. Let indeed the light of Christians so shine before men as to prove the utter failure of their righteousness and the scantiness of their morality. Let it be with well doing that they put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. And let them show that liberty and obedience are to them, strange as it may appear, one and the same thing. They are “led of the Spirit” and “are not under the Law.”

The Bible Treasury 16:91-95.

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Bible Treasury: Volume 16, Truth Which Is After Godliness, The (1:1)

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We are insensibly led by the spirit of the age in which we live; and that which characterizes our own age is a craving desire after the improvement of existing things. Much of the desire for the improvement even of, religious communities is nothing more than this very principle, which is acting in the world, carried into them. The result doubtless will be the manifestation of that lawlessness which is expressly foretold as marking these last days: for self-will (and self-will is lawlessness,) in the church is not less sinful than it is in the world. But while the spirit of the age is undoubtedly working unto this end in religions communities, it is no less true that the Spirit of God is working very markedly in the saints: and it may be profitable to notice the order according to which He works, lest we should be confounding a reckless spirit of innovation with the awakened desire of the re-assertion of the unchangeable holy principles of God's order. It is written, “God made man upright, but he has sought out many inventions.” And still are man's powers being put forth on the same materials, moral or physical, to try to produce comfort and happiness from them. At this time his object appears to him more near of attainment than at any period heretofore; for never were his energies so unhindered, or the field so open before him for the trial. Now the spirit of this age is characterized especially by this—the expectation of something that never yet has been: but where the Spirit of God, is at work, it is in the humbling sense of the loss of that which has been, and in the earnest striving after its recovery. Wherever God works He at once shows absolute perfectness: in man, on the contrary, perfectness, which after all is but relative, is always of slow growth. Thus in the church as originally constituted of God there was the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness. Any alteration of this would in fact be deterioration.1 The faith was only once delivered unto the saints: and the truth is ever the same, because Jesus, Who is the center of all truth and the great object of faith, is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. Now it is the recognition of an unchangeable standard which will alone prevent our being carried away by “divers and strange doctrines.” The faith may be departed from, and the truth which is according to godliness be unacknowledged; but neither the tone nor the other can progress either with the mind or with the condition of mankind. Amidst all revolutions the doctrines and laws of Christ must remain stationary. They are superior to improvement: to suppose them otherwise would be to impugn the perfectness of the work of God. It is surprising how slow our minds are in recognizing, so simple a truth; and how much of real learning as a disciple of Christ is unlearning what one has been taught even as a Christian. “The truth” sternly refuses any admixture with error: it is most exclusive in its character. “He that gathereth not with” Jesus according to it, “is scattering abroad.” He is not laboring for gathering wheat into God's garner, but only for chaff which will be burnt up with unquenchable fire. Jesus being the truth, we are enabled to discover what man really is in the sight of God. And what is the great lesson thus taught, but that where God sent forth One in Whom He was pleased—one man acting in consistency with Himself—He was found a singular character, the righteous One, to the exclusion of all others, the Holy One of God. In Him we see the truth which is after godliness: and God's estimate of man now is his consistency or inconsistency with Jesus. And into what an awful position does infidelity plunge a man! Man may deceive himself as to his not having sufficient evidence, but it is not so before God; he places himself before God as choosing himself in preference to Jesus; and forces, as it were, God to judge between the two. But the truth specially taught by the manifestation of Jesus to the world was the total failure of man—the utter profitlessness of the flesh. It was put under the greatest advantages—the Son of God for its teacher, and the power of Him felt and acknowledged so much that even devils were subject unto the disciples in His name—yet, after all this instruction, when the hour of trial came, it failed completely. “They all forsook Him and fled;” and the one to whom special revelation had been made concerning the dignity of Jesus, was the one to deny with an oath that He knew Him at all. Surely the flesh, that is, human nature—man, simply as man, had never been placed under advantages so

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