

AN UNINTENTIONAL COMPLIMENT

"This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." Luke 15:2.

It was a singular group which had gathered around our Lord when these words were uttered, for we are told, "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him." As a class the publicans were a villainous set and hated by their countrymen for their notorious dishonesty and oppression. Respectable citizens would not be seen in their company. Their very presence was counted an offence. So intensely were they hated that they made friends for themselves by associating with persons of low character. In the gospels they are often mentioned in alliance with sinners and harlots, such conjunction of names being amply sufficient to indicate companionship in vice. These publicans and the very riff-raff of the society of Jerusalem gathered around this mighty preacher, Jesus Christ, in order to listen to Him. For Christ to have fellowship with them was to run counter to the ordinary customs of society. By doing so He was calling down upon Himself the calumny and misrepresentation of all the bigots and gossips of His time.

It is interesting to observe how they pressed about Christ as starving men might gather around one who is dispensing bread. It is a sight, it would seem, to thrill and gladden the hearts of the most indifferent and selfish. But, strange to say, on the outside of the throng there were those who were not gladdened in the least. They were the scribes and the Pharisees. They were filled with indignation. They went into a rage. In their anger they spit out a bitter criticism of Christ that they considered absolutely damning. They sought to blight his reputation and to inflame active disfavor against Him by playing upon popular prejudice, so they said in substance: "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them. He actually goes to the length of making the hated tax-farmers His friends. Everyone is aware that a man is known by the company he keeps. We know of what sort these people are with whom He consorts. He is no better than they are." They said of Him what they intended for a disgrace, but it was His undying honor and glory. They tried to condemn Him, but our Saviour could not have had a sentence uttered against Him which would have been more true or more thoroughly consistent with His sacred commission. He is certainly the friend of those who have failed, fallen and been unable to rise. Their bitter accusation was an unintentional compliment.

While their words, "This man receiveth sinners," were uttered in condemnation of Christ, they contain an inclusive statement of the truth concerning Him as the Saviour of men. It is not easy for us to realize the intensity of the feeling expressed in their bitter charge against the Saviour. Their utterance was most likely spoken in a high key, with special emphasis laid upon the word "sinners." However, their allegation was one that could not be denied. Christ did receive sinners. When He made His severest statements the greatest sinners crowded around Him. "Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto Him for to hear Him." The Pharisees observed that when these people came to Him He received them in friendliness and the very spirit of comradeship. One of the characteristics of Pharisees is their inordinate passion to regulate everything and everybody. They not only consider themselves righteous above others, but they somehow feel that they are ordained of God to see that everybody else measures up to their standard. Naturally, Christ stood out in bold contrast to such men. They wanted to regulate everybody, whereas He wanted to help everybody. The self-righteous type of goodness wants to dominate, but Christ's type of goodness wants to help and inspire.

Our Lord answered their charge that He was friendly with publicans and sinners in substance as follows: "Yes, your charge is true. I am friendly with lost and sinful men. And the reason I am is because I represent that kind of a God. My Father loves lost men; He searches for lost men; He yearns for their return, and stands ready to forgive and bless them when they repent." The friendship of Christ for sinners represents the holy love of God going out after sinful men, suffering for them to save them and forgiving them when they repent.

"This man receiveth sinners." Note:

I. The Person.

"This Man." He was a great Person. The text has become an Evangel because of the unique personality of the Man at Whom the Pharisees were looking. They did not understand Him. They did not understand how when He received men unto Himself, instead of being contaminated by the pollution which He received, the men were uplifted and healed by the purity which He communicated.

1. Things in which He is identified with me.

(1) He was a Man of Probation.

He was a Man Who lived His human life upon the same level on which I have to live mine.

a. He was a Man of toil.

This is an old story, full of beauty, yet it is well for us to think of it. Toil is the proper lot of humanity. God did not intend that any human being should live apart from toil. Many think that man commenced to work after the fall. But the Genesis account tells us that God put unfallen man into the garden "to dress it and to keep it." The garden of Eden was planted by the Lord God. It was filled with possibilities, and man was placed in it to bring out what God had put in it.

Man was made for toil. "This Man" was a toiler. He knew what it was to have to face a day's work in order to win a day's bread. God have mercy upon the man who does not know what that is! I care not whether it be with sweat of brain or brawn, every man should earn his living. Some of you are almost sighing as you think of tomorrow morning. Remember that "This Man" is your comrade tomorrow morning just as much as He is your Lord here and now. When tomorrow morning comes, if your calling is an honorable and holy one, you are in fellowship with Christ just as much as you are in the holy place.

b. He was a Man of temptation.

He felt the force of temptation keenly because of the perfection of His humanity. It is the strong man, physically, mentally, morally and spiritually, who feels the full force of temptation. The Perfect Man felt temptation as it came to Him through every vulnerable point of His being. He was a Man of temptation, and there is no temptation that assaults my soul but that He felt its force.

c. He was a Man of trust.

He lived a life of dependence upon God. He received His life-giving messages from God. He was a Man Who lived His life so that He could say, "I do always the things that are pleasing to Him." He was a Man of probation, living upon my level, toiling, tempted, trusting.

(2) He was a Man of sorrows.

a. The sorrow of poverty.

There are those who very glibly tell us that poverty is a blessing. But, that is not true. No one ever said that except those who live apart from poverty, and contemplate it from a distance. This Man was poor. You can tell the story of His human poverty in a very few sentences. Chapter One, "There was no room for Him in the inn." Chapter Two, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." Chapter Three, What shall we do with Him? He is dead. Bury Him in a charity grave in a rich man's garden. Do not imagine that His keenly sensitive soul was not conscious of the limitations of poverty.

b. The sorrow of loneliness.

Think how lonely a Man He was. No one ever understood Him. The rulers were interested in Him, but they never understood Him, and at last became His enemies, hunting Him to death. His mother never understood Him. Her misunderstanding was that of love, but it was misunderstanding. The souls who came into closest touch with Him were the souls of such as did the will of God. Did they understand Him? "They all forsook Him and fled." His pathway became more and more lonely, until at last there was no eye to pity, no heart to sympathize.

2. Things in which He is different from me.

(1) He was a Man of victory.

There is the difference. I have failed so often in toil. I have failed in temptation, yielding to the allurements of evil. I have failed in trust. But This Man never failed. He never failed in toil. When He made yokes in which the cattle should plow, He made them perfectly. In temptation He refused every seduction of evil and trod the lonely way of truth and uprightness, even though it was a way of suffering and of shame.

He was a Man of victory over circumstances, sin, sorrow and all the forces that were against Him, moving in quiet, kingly dignity against all difficulties, until at last He stood in the midst of a group and said, "All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth."

(2) He was the Man of atonement.

This Man was the One Who was able at last to ransom His brother, the One Who by dying entered into an experience which had no true place in the story of His life save as in it He was dying in the stead of another. He was the Man into the presence of Whose death I come and say with the old Roman centurion who saw more that day than he had ever seen before, "Truly this was the Son of God."

II. The Pronouncement.

"This Man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." This word "receiveth" in the original language is singularly expressive. It means waiteth, watcheth or lieth in waiting. Christ receiveth sinners unto Himself. He forgives them, takes them into His comradeship, takes them to His heart and loves them to the end.

Christ received Zaccheus, the publican and sinner. He was so thrilled when Jesus invited Himself to his home that his whole life was shaken to its foundations. Seated by Jesus, at his own table, Zaccheus offered half of his wealth to the poor and four-fold to all whom he had defrauded. Did the religion of the Pharisees have anything comparable to show? Zaccheus was saved by the Friend of sinners.

A woman, who was a sinner, crept into the house of Simon the Pharisee, and, unbidden, began to wash the Master's feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair. Simon knew the woman's character, that she was notorious as a harlot, and he condemned her. He criticized Jesus for permitting her to touch Him. Our Lord knew her character, but His life's work was to save such as her. He said, "Thy sins are forgiven thee; thy faith hath saved thee, go in peace." Simon was shocked at His words, but the woman went forth cleansed and radiant, with the spirit of the Lord within her to enable her to combat further temptation. She was saved from sin by the Saviour.

These men thought that if He received sinners and ate with them that He would be contaminated. The fact is He received them without dimming His white purity, but always with an ending of their scarlet corruption. He took to Himself Mary Magdalene, possessed of seven demons, embittered, worldly, evil in her temper and disposition, and she became the lone watcher through the night of His burial and the first proclaimer of His resurrection.

A woman was hailed before Christ by the scribes and Pharisees with the word that for her act Moses had commanded that she be stoned. "What sayest thou of her?" they asked. He made no reply, but stooped and wrote in the sand with His finger. When they persisted in their questioning He said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," and again He stooped and wrote. One by one her critics left. Standing upright Jesus asked, "Woman, where are they, did no man condemn thee?" She replied, "No man, Lord." "Neither do I condemn thee: go thy way; from henceforth sin no more." Thus another was saved by Him Who receiveth sinners.

"This Man receiveth sinners." Of course He did. He never denied it; indeed, He admitted and gloried in it. He did not answer the charge against Him with an apology, but by vindicating His act. He received sinners and He receives them still. What an encouragement! Unless He receives sinners none will ever enter heaven, for all have sinned. Readily and freely He receiveth sinners to mercy and pardon, to grace and guidance, and to love and friendship. Christ alone can supply all that sinners need. He calls sinners and bids them come to Him. You may be sure that He will not turn you away when you come to Him. He receives sinners when they repent and believe on Him.