

### New Lessons from an Old Parable.

SERMON BY H. S. BIGELOW.

Sunday morning, June 11th, Mr. Herbert S. Bigelow delivered in his pulpit in the Vine Street Congregational Church, Cincinnati, a sermon on "New Lessons From an Old Parable." Following is an extract of what the speaker said:

"The first notable lesson in the parable of the prodigal son is found in the fact that the father acquiesced in the demand of the young man for a division of the property. Now this young man was not capable of self-government. His father knew it. Why, therefore, did he not say: 'My son, you are not fit for liberty. You would not make a good use of it. I shall keep you under my paternal authority a few years longer.' The son might have replied that he had a right to be free, an inherent right, a constitutional right, and that if he did not make a good use of his liberty it would be his own loss, but that he had no way of learning save by experience. The father might have answered that he was very sorry to take the law into his hands or to assume unconstitutional authority, but that Providence and High Destiny had placed upon him the responsibility of seeing that his boys behaved themselves, and that if he could not win their hearts and make them want to do right he would at least rule them with a rod of iron.

"What this father appears to have done, after he had exhausted reason and entreaty, was to let the boy have his own way. Freedom is God's road to development and civilization. God has not placed upon us unlimited responsibility for the conduct of our fellows. When we undertake, by force, to regulate the lives of other people, we not only exercise powers which God never gave us, and assume responsibilities which Providence has not placed upon us, but we deprive those people of that sense of responsibility for their own acts, and that power of initiative in shaping their own destiny which God Himself has not seen fit to exercise, which he has everywhere left to man, and which are the providential means of developing manhood and securing progress.

"We have a commission to preach the truth. When the truth we preach wins the loyalty of free minds we have some assurance that it is God's truth. When it can make way only by the point of the bayonet we cannot be sure whether it is God's truth or the devil's lie. When we

deny to any people the right to determine freely what their life shall be, and therefore deprive them of that means of development which comes of the exercise of that right, we subvert the constitution of Nature and substitute our ways for the ways of God.

"The next lesson is suggested by what Jesus does not say about the young man's sin. He spoke not of depravity. He had no exultant word to say about retributive justice. He spoke only of a wasted life. The young man took his goods and went off and tried to live unto himself. The hearts of men are mellowed, their sympathies are broadened, their vision of the truth becomes brighter, they are saved from excesses, their soul grows when they live in sympathetic touch with the world about them and the world above them, holding themselves responsible for the wrongs men suffer, and feeling themselves to be the servants of the truth and the right.

"The old theology was false when it divided men into the saints and the depraved. What we need is a redistribution of the responsibility for sin. We are all bound together. We are all involved in the guilt of society. We are all responsible for the fact that any of God's creatures are oppressed or debased. We must all be saved together.

"When we understand how, by our indifference to the truth which the prophets bring us, and by our narrow devotion to our interests, we become responsible for conditions that lead people into temptation and deprive them of the opportunities that we enjoy, our share in the social guilt will weigh more heavily upon us and we shall think less harshly of individual sinners. We should feel too strongly our brotherhood to look at our fellows with 'grace proud faces' or point at them the finger of self-righteous scorn. We are one of them, one with them even in their sins.

"In that picture of degradation which the simple, strong language has painted we find another lesson. It is the glory of man that he is more than the brute. He was made

To have dominion over sea and land;  
To trace the stars and search the heavens  
for power;

To feel the passion of eternity.

But this young man had at last become a fellow of the swine. He envied them even the husks they ate, and contended with them in the common trough for their swinish food. How better could the degradation of his manhood be described than to say that he had sunk to the level of the brute? And what better evidence of this could be given than the fact that he had no more right—nay, not as much right—as the swine to the means by which he must sustain his life? And what of manhood is there left to the miserable creatures who, to-day, dwell where some men would not keep their dogs and live from the garbage barrels, thus robbing the swine of their food? With what suspicion we regard these prodigal sons that beg at our door! How we hand salvation out to them at a pole's end! How we edge away from them when, laboring under some misapprehension as to the nature of the church, they bring their fumes and their rags into the sanctuary and appropriate the pews intended for the saints! Yet there is one thing the author of this parable will not permit himself to doubt. He will not permit himself to doubt the imperishable divinity of manhood, even in these men. And so the invisible hand of the angel reaches out to this fellow of the swine. The hand 'straightens up his shape, gives back the upward looking and the light, rebuilds in him the music and the dream, touches him again with immortality.' The man awakes. He remembers that he is a man. He remembers that there is enough and to spare in his father's house. What a day that will be when the men who are sitting in the filth of the sty and are content with the husks of swine, shall awake to the mighty truth that there is enough and to spare in their Father's house and that there is no need for them to live the life of brutes!

"Notice, this prodigal son, went back home and asked simply for the work and place of a servant. His father gave him more than he asked. He received him back, not as a slave, but as a son. God makes it hard for a man to throw away his life. But he is willing to meet him more than half way if he wants to reform and do right. But the elder brother was angry at this. He did not want the prodigal son back, save as a hired servant.

"In this parable Jesus meant to express His conviction that society should treat these prodigal sons and daughters precisely as the father treated his boy. But society has proven, not a loving father, but an elder brother to the weak and the erring.

"The elder brothers say that poverty is caused by improvidence and crime. If you remind them that the greatest obstacle in the way of helping men back to a better life is the impossibility of finding them remunerative employment, they will tell you that this is God's way of punishing sinners. And if you intimate to them that if their God is a forgiving God he ought to give every man a free chance to turn around and do right, they will snarl at you and ask where they are to get their reward for being righteous.

"God punishes men for doing wrong, but he does not block the way that leads back to righteousness. It is man himself who has done that. Some poverty may be the punishment which God sends upon men for their sins. But God never deprives sinners of the opportunity to rescue themselves from poverty. Human laws do that for them. When the spendthrift awakes from his debauch, he finds his pockets empty. He must work now or starve. But salvation is free, and God gives him every opportunity to go to work and redeem himself. God does not rescind his laws in order to punish the wicked. The seed of corn will sprout as readily for the tramp as for the saint. The skies do not veil their beauty when he looks at them. The flowers do not

hide their faces or withhold their perfume. The sun shines and the rain falls on the evil and the good. That is God's way.

"The elder brother cannot prevent the sun from shining on the prodigal. He cannot stop the dew or the rain. He cannot hide the beauties of nature. He cannot withhold the air. Now the land is just as indispensable as any of these things, and just as much the free gift of God. If God will not withhold the air and the sunshine from his erring children, some of us would like to know where the elder brothers got the right to withhold the land. If men had free access to the land, there could be no involuntary poverty. But if superior virtue does not entitle these elder brothers to a monopoly of the land; if it is God's way to allow His

children free access to it, no matter what their past has been, then what becomes of the assumption that poverty is God's method of punishing sinners?

"When the body is injured, Nature goes to work and does her level best to repair the injury. So when a man falls and tries to rise again there is rejoicing, not only among the angels in heaven—the earth is glad. Nature is eager to do all she can to help the man up. Nature's God welcomes him back to mother earth, where there is enough and to spare, where there is free and full salvation for him who is willing to work, and where one man's prosperity will be the gain of every other.

"But the elder brothers step in. They make land private property. They build fences about the earth. They deprive men of their right to free employment. Thus they take away from them their only hope of redemption on this earth. And then, while robbing the people of God's free gifts, they add insult to injury by declaring that their greater prosperity is due, not to a monopoly of God's gifts, but to their industry and thrift, and that the poor are deprived and poverty is a divine institution.

"God has given us every chance in the world to be men. And this would be a better world, if we had not surrendered our right to live the life of free men by permitting some to secure a monopoly of the chances which God intended for all."