

Mr. Bryan's Bible Talks

THE OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH

By WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN

BIBLE TEXT—LESSON FOR JANUARY 7

(Luke 13:10-17)

And he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity 18 years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself.

And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity.

And he laid his hands on her; and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God.

And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day.

The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, does not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?

And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?

And when he had said these things, all his adversaries were ashamed: and all the people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by him.

What more appropriate text for our thoughtful consideration, as we start the New Year than one which focuses attention upon one of the most important of religious subjects—the observance of the Sabbath? Luke, in the 13th chapter, records an incident in Christ's ministry which aroused discussion then, and the dispute has not yet been settled.

Christ was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath day, as he was wont to do, "and, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity, 18 years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. And when Jesus saw her he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God."

In many cases in which Christ exercised His healing power the sick came to Him or were brought to Him by friends of the sufferer, but in this case Christ did not wait for an appeal. He was touched by the sight of this poor woman, who for 18 years had been so afflicted that she could not lift herself up.

The text does not disclose the precise character of the disease; it is enough to know that it differed from the ordinary disease that comes upon one suddenly, reaches its crisis in a short time and then either disappears or proves fatal. The woman had been in bondage for nearly two decades; she was bowed together so that her affliction was as apparent to others as it was enslaving to herself, but it did not keep her from attendance upon the synagogue.

CURVATURE OF THE MORAL NATURE

This poor woman's example furnishes an excellent text for the minister when he desires to upbraid those of his congregation who allow themselves to be kept away from the house of worship by inclement weather or Sunday sickness.

If one who for so long a time stooped beneath the weight of a seemingly incurable disease could be faithful in attendance upon the sanctuary, the robust Christians who permit trifling indispositions and Saturday night dissipation to keep them in bed on Sunday morning ought to be shamed into renewed zeal for God's house.

As the woman in this case was rewarded by the touch of the Saviour and loosed from her infirmity, so many a Christian might be spiritually rewarded and "made straight" by the influence that pervades the house of God if his zeal were equal to this poor woman's.

If curvatures of the moral nature were as easily discernible as curvatures of the spine, if the disease of the soul were as painful as the diseases that twist up our bodies, our religious gatherings would be as crowded with sinners as are the halls occupied by those who manifest power to save us from the aches and pains of the flesh. And yet what physical afflictions can compare with sin?

It would be hard to believe that the gracious

and sympathetic act of Christ in loosening this sorely afflicted woman from her distressing infirmity could have excited criticism if we did not know the extent to which the Jewish authorities had carried formality.

In other places we read of the minute details with which they enforced obedience to the letter of the law while they ignored the spirit of the law. Jesus on many occasions gave proof of His thorough understanding of all that was written and frequently used the ordinances to answer the authorities, disclosing by comparison their misrepresentation of God's will and word.

So here, when the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Christ had performed an act of healing on the Sabbath day, admonished the multitude that there were six days for work and that they should come to be healed during these days and not on the Sabbath, Christ rebuked him and those who joined in the protest:

"Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?"

CHRIST'S SOLICITUDE FOR HUMANITY

This was an illustration that struck home. According to Alexander MacLaren, "the Talmud has minute rules for leading out animals on the Sabbath. An ass may go out with his pack saddle if it was tied on before the Sabbath, but not with a bell or yoke. A camel may go out with a halter, but not with a rag tied to its tail. A string of camels may be led if the driver takes all the halters in his hand, and does not twist them, but they must not be tied one to another."

And, yet, with all this solicitude for the beasts of burden, they seemed relatively indifferent to the sufferings of a human being. An ox or an ass could be led to water lest it might for a few hours endure slight sufferings from thirst, but a woman, who had borne her affliction for 18 years, must wait until the next day for her cure.

As in many other instances, Christ used the argument—one of the strongest in the realm of reasoning—from the less to the greater.

Comparing the ox and the ass with the human being and the brief suffering of the animal with the woman's many years of pain, Christ asked:

"And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan had bound, lo, these 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?"

THOSE WHO LIE IN WAIT

Christ's question contains a thought which is sure to furnish an opening to those who lie in wait for an opportunity to question the justice of God.

In most communities there are those who, claiming a superior sense of justice, seize upon such a passage as "Whom Satan hath bound" to indict the Almighty on the charge of cruelty. "Why," they ask, "should a loving God permit Satan to afflict an innocent woman for, lo, these 18 years?"

It is easy to ask questions. A five-year-old child can ask questions that no grown person can answer. There are questions that require for their answering infinite knowledge and are therefore beyond the range of a finite mind. Only an infinite conceit can make a human being question the wisdom of an infinite God.

As the child at maturity understands many things that were mysterious to it in its youth and, understanding, is grateful for a parental love that ignored the ignorance of childhood, so the Christian, as he walks the upward way, grows in knowledge and appreciation of God's wisdom and love, but he may never in this life be able to satisfy all his questionings. He knows enough to trust until his knowledge is complete, and that trust is strengthened by this incident.

It not only proves the tenderness and the power of the Saviour, but it has given hope to many sufferers. They have been able to bear their afflictions—whether they have come from conscious disregard of the rules of health now known or from causes still unexplainable—buoyed up by the hope that their petitions may be heard and that the Great Physician, who straightened up the bowed form in the synagogue, may yet speak the healing word.

Two questions suggest themselves. What is

it proper to do on the Sabbath day? And how can proper observance of the Sabbath be secured?

The first question is easily answered—Christ answered it. Matthew records an instance in which the question was asked directly and Christ answered, "It is lawful to do well on the Sabbath day."

The word "well"—or "good," as the revised version has it—may need interpreting, but there should be little disagreement among those who include the spiritual in their estimation of human life. That is "good" which contributes to the highest welfare of self or others.

The body needs rest; it cannot work unceasingly without inviting premature decay. Experiment has proven that a certain amount of rest is daily needed and that, in addition to the daily rest, periodical rest is necessary to keep the body up to its maximum in producing power.

Eight hours in 24 is the normal daily requirement for rest and one day in seven has been proven to be necessary. Besides the daily rest and the weekly rest, there should be an annual period of rest and recuperation. And the tendency now is to add a half holiday on Saturday or at the middle of the week.

Experience has also shown that the mind's need of rest is as imperative as the body's, and the daily, weekly and yearly suspension of intellectual effort is even more of a custom than the supplying of rest to the body. Children have their play hours while in school and their summer vacations, not to speak of the Christmas holidays and the rest days at Easter. Teachers quite generally recognize that health requires the systematic suspension of the work of instruction.

It would be well for society if as much attention were given to spiritual needs as is given to the demands of the body and the requirements of the mind. Few will, upon reflection, deny that spiritual control of the body is essential if its powers are to be prolonged and its enjoyments are to be raised to their maximum. Spiritual supervision of the mind is just as essential to the highest and best use of our mental faculties.

How, then, can the need of a Sabbath be disputed? There are few in the world who are without some form of religion; is one day in seven too much to devote to that which must exert the largest influence upon every well ordered life?

Disputes in regard to the proper observance of the Sabbath arise over methods proposed more than over the abstract question of religious needs. Little opposition will be made to persuasive efforts and these, of course, must furnish the basis for all Sunday legislation.

Legal enactments are but the crystallization of public sentiment; the cultivation of that sentiment naturally and necessarily comes before any legal enactment. The church must lead in the teaching of Sabbath observance because it leads in the teaching of religion, and religion is the largest factor in Sabbath observance, but religion finds powerful allies in industry and in education.

The Christian will observe the Sabbath because he is commanded to observe it. It will not be necessary to prove to him that observance is either a physical, a mental or a moral need. If he accepts the Bible as authority, he will obey without waiting to reason it out—just as a child obeys the parent without fully comprehending the reasons therefor. But the Christian has no difficulty in bringing into co-operation with him those who speak with authority in the labor world and among the intellectual.

AN INDEFENSIBLE SITUATION

There is certain legislation to which there should be no opposition whatever: the law should provide that no employee shall be denied time for rest and opportunity for worship. Any employment that is continuous to the extent of denying time for rest and opportunity for worship is indefensible in our land and age.

This will be accepted by most people as the least that can be done, and yet Rev. Charles E. Jefferson is quoted as saying that "two million people in England are obliged to labor seven days out of every week and that 300,000 men in Greater New York have no day of rest."

Surely there is need of legislation if such conditions exist in two of the leading Christian nations.

If a day is to be designated for rest, it is proper, as well as natural, that the day selected should be the day generally observed, care being taken to protect the rights of those who as a matter of conscience observe another day.

As legislation can only be expected to carry out a definite and permanent sentiment, so-called

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