

Courting Martyrdom

Cincinnati, O., Sept. 27, 1903.—"The Folly of Courting Martyrdom." This was the subject of a sermon delivered this morning by the pastor of the Vine Street Congregational church, Herbert S. Bigelow.

Text: "Be not righteous overmuch."

These words, said Mr. Bigelow, are found in the seventh chapter of Ecclesiastes. They have been a puzzle to students of the Bible. How can a man be too righteous? Jesus said, "Be ye therefore perfect." We have been accustomed to regard with greatest reverence the men who have sacrificed most for the right as they saw it. Hence it is rather astonishing to find this advice: "Be not righteous overmuch."

Not many sermons are preached from this text. Who is there that needs such a warning? Reflecting upon the lives of men and women about us can we find any who seem to need to be urged to relax their efforts for the right? Jesus said: "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness." Our text seems to be in conflict with the lofty idealism of Jesus. One critic explains away this seeming conflict by regarding the utterance as ironical. Another critic thinks that the passage teaches that good sometimes comes out of evil and that a man ought not to be too squeamish to do a little wrong on occasion for the Lord's sake.

To me these words suggest a wholesome truth and one which is not infrequently disregarded. This text is a plea for moral equipoise. It is a word to those who have "zeal without knowledge." It deprecates that unthinking devotion which suffers sacrifice to no purpose. It deprecates that lack of sanity which harms the cause it seeks to aid.

For us this is timely advice. Noble-minded people, in greater numbers than ever before, feel a sense of re-



sponsibility for the degradation and the poverty of their fellow-men. In their confusion of thought, they are more than likely to feel that only through surrendering some of their privileges and suffering a personal sacrifice, can they escape their share of the social guilt. There is a noble soul in St. Louis who has inherited land made valuable by the development upon and around it of a great city. He reasons with faultless logic that, if he accepts rent for this land, he is accepting the fruits of other men's labor and is really the beneficiary of a special privilege. As all law-made privileges are methods of legalized stealing he refuses to touch this income, but asks that the city shall take it and use it for a public purpose. I honor that man, though some call him insane. Such unselfish devotion always strengthens our faith in man and God. Yet, notwithstanding his lofty spirit, I think, speaking in the language of our text, that he is righteous overmuch.

This man makes the mistake of trying to remedy a social wrong by a personal sacrifice. He does not appreciate the fact that social wrongs can be righted only by increasing the intelligence and morality of public acts. Golden Rule Jones rightly says: "I cannot practice the Golden Rule alone."

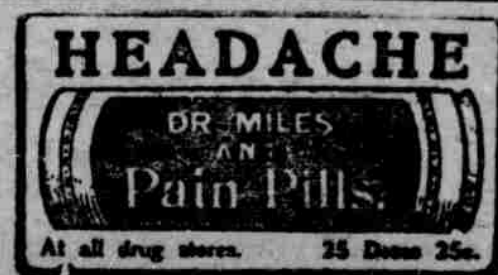
"This man may ease his conscience by refusing to take unearned land values. This would be a virtuous act if sacrifice were in itself meritorious. But the paramount duty of every man is not to make his conscience easy, but to contribute as best he can to social progress. It is not enough that he should be clean. It is necessary that his brothers should be free. Indeed, if his conscience were educated, it would not be quieted by any such sacrifice. He ought not to be satisfied

to do less than his utmost to hasten the progress of the race. It may be of some service for the landlord to give the world an example of self-sacrifice. But it would be far better for him to devote himself to the work of showing people how to free themselves without waiting for the whole tribe of monopolists to become martyrs.

The editor of the Cincinnati Times-Star seems not to have duly considered this principle. In a recent editorial he says:

"Of course, when Rev. Mr. Bigelow subscribed unequivocally to the part of the democratic platform denouncing special privileges, he included the exemption from taxation of the Vine Street Congregational church. By a special privilege, the church, valued for taxation purposes at \$100,000, pays no taxes, which at two and one-half per cent would mean \$2,500 a year. Here would be an elegant opportunity for Mr. Bigelow to place his ideas in execution by taking this sum up to the county treasurer's office and handing it in and thus sincerely proving that he is opposed to special privileges."

If this church were to act on the suggestion of the editor, it would be giving the world an example of "overmuch righteousness." It is quite true that the \$2,500 which we do not pay is collected by overcharging others. We believe in just taxation. We will speak and vote for a law that will put all churches on the same basis and make them all pay. We want that principle applied to street and steam railroads and lighting and telephone franchises as well as church property. If we are injured by the application of a just principle, it will prove that we have been the beneficiaries of injustice. We are willing to suffer the injury resulting from the application of a just principle as a blessing in disguise. But



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we are not willing to put ourselves at a disadvantage with other churches by volunteering what the law does not require of them. We will dedicate our money to the work of remoulding public opinion and thus in time changing the law.

The great thing to be desired is not that the county treasurer should have this money. The great thing to be desired is that the people should learn how to take it. Then they will not have to wait for churches and steam railroads to volunteer to pay their taxes.

I am constrained to mention the name of Tom L. Johnson as the one man who, more prominently than any other in this country, exemplifies this principle or ideal of social service. If he were to spend a goodly portion of his fortune in charity, the same papers would praise him which now condemn him for devoting his fortune to the overthrow of monopoly.

He would have been, as it seems to me, overmuch righteous if he had declined to make money because social conditions were not just; or if, having made money, he had given it

away because he had come to see that much of this wealth was due to the unwise and unjust laws of the land.

He acted as any honest man might, when he took advantage of the unjust tariff laws which, as congressman, he had voted against.

Now he is acting as any high-minded patriot should, when, instead of squandering that wealth in useless charity, he uses it to help bring about a juster social order in which there shall be less need of charity.

* Almost a century ago Shelley wrote a stanza setting forth this ideal. Those who know the Cleveland mayor, know that he is a perfect embodiment of Shelley's thought—

"Or turn their wealth to arms, and make
War for thy beloved sake
On wealth and war and fraud, whence they
Drew the power which is their prey."

The Independent acknowledges receipt, at the hands of W. H. Jennings, this city, of a copy of the semi-centennial edition of the New Hampshire Patriot (Concord).