

The Last Farthing

by George MacDonald

George MacDonald's sermon 'The Last Farthing' explores the necessity of understanding and acting upon the teachings of Christ regarding justice and righteousness.

Scripture: Matthew 5:25, Matthew 13:14, Luke 15:17, Romans 6:23, 1 John 3:7

Topics: "Repentance And Forgiveness", "Righteous Living"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the profound and often misunderstood nature of parables, emphasizing that they are meant to stir the conscience and will, not just the intellect. He highlights the importance of understanding and doing the teachings of Christ rather than merely interpreting them, as theologians have often obscured the gospel. MacDonald delves into the concept of righteousness, duty, and the necessity of paying our debts to God and others, illustrating the consequences of refusing to do so. He paints a vivid picture of a soul in the final prison of self-loathing and isolation, emphasizing the hope and necessity of repentance and returning to God to become His child.

Transcript

'Verily I say unto thee, thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou have paid the last farthing.'--St. Matthew v. 26.

There is a thing wonderful and admirable in the parables, not readily grasped, but specially indicated by the Lord himself--their unintelligibility to the mere intellect. They are addressed to the conscience and not to the intellect, to the will and not to the imagination. They are strong and direct but not definite. They are not meant to explain anything, but to rouse a man to the feeling, 'I am not what I ought to be, I do not the thing I ought to do!' Many maundering interpretations may be given by the wise, with plentiful loss of labour, while the child who uses them for the necessity of walking in the one path will constantly receive light from them. The greatest obscuration of the words of the Lord, as of all true teachers, comes from those who give themselves to interpret rather than do them. Theologians have done more to hide the gospel of Christ than any of its adversaries. It was not for our understandings, but our will, that Christ came. He who does that which he sees, shall understand; he who is set upon understanding rather than doing, shall go on stumbling and mistaking and speaking foolishness. He has not that in him which can understand that kind. The gospel itself, and in it the parables of the Truth, are to be understood only by those who walk by what they find. It is he that runneth that shall read, and no other. It is not intended by the speaker of the parables that any other should know intellectually what, known but intellectually, would

be for his injury--what knowing intellectually he would imagine he had grasped, perhaps even appropriated. When the pilgrim of the truth comes on his journey to the region of the parable, he finds its interpretation. It is not a fruit or a jewel to be stored, but a well springing by the wayside.

Let us try to understand what the Lord himself said about his parables. It will be better to take the reading of St. Matthew xiii. 14, 15, as it is plainer, and the quotation from Isaiah (vi. 9, 10) is given in full--after the Septuagint, and much clearer than in our version from the Hebrew:--in its light should be read the corresponding passages in the other Gospels: in St. Mark's it is so compressed as to be capable of quite a different and false meaning: in St. John's reference, the blinding of the heart seems attributed directly to the devil:--the purport is, that those who by insincerity and falsehood close their deeper eyes, shall not be capable of using in the matter the more superficial eyes of their understanding. Whether this follows as a psychical or metaphysical necessity, or be regarded as a special punishment, it is equally the will of God, and comes from him who is the live Truth. They shall not see what is not for such as they. It is the punishment of the true Love, and is continually illustrated and fulfilled: if I know anything of the truth of God, then the objectors to Christianity, so far as I am acquainted with them, do not; their arguments, not in themselves false, have nothing to do with the matter; they see the thing they are talking against, but they do not see the thing they think they are talking against.

This will help to remove the difficulty that the parables are plainly for the teaching of the truth, and yet the Lord speaks of them as for the concealing of it. They are for the understanding of that man only who is practical--who does the thing he knows, who seeks to understand vitally. They reveal to the live conscience, otherwise not to the keenest intellect--though at the same time they may help to rouse the conscience with glimpses of the truth, where the man is on the borders of waking. Ignorance may be at once a punishment and a kindness: all punishment is kindness, and the best of which the man at the time is capable: 'Because you will not do, you shall not see; but it would be worse for you if you did see, not being of the disposition to do.' Such are punished in having the way closed before them; they punish themselves; their own doing results as it cannot but result on them. To say to them certain things so that they could understand them, would but harden them more, because they would not do them; they should have but parables--lanterns of the truth, clear to those who will walk in their light, dark to those who will not. The former are content to have the light cast upon their way; the latter will have it in their eyes, and cannot: if they had, it would but blind them. For them to know more would be their worse condemnation. They are not fit to know more; more shall not be given them yet; it is their punishment that they are in the wrong, and shall keep in the wrong until they come out of it. 'You choose the dark; you shall stay in the dark till the terrors that dwell in the dark affray you, and cause you to cry out.' God puts a seal upon the will of man; that seal is either his great punishment, or his mighty favour: 'Ye love the darkness, abide in the darkness:' 'O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt!'

What special meaning may be read in the different parts of magistrate, judge, and officer, beyond the general suggestion, perhaps, of the tentative approach of the final, I do not know; but I think I do know what is meant by 'agree on the way,' and 'the uttermost farthing.' The parable is an appeal to the common sense of those that hear it, in regard to every affair of righteousness. Arrange what claim lies against you; compulsion waits behind it. Do at once what you must do one day. As there is no escape from payment, escape at least the prison that will enforce it. Do not drive Justice to extremities. Duty is imperative; it must be done. It is useless to think to escape the eternal law of things; yield of yourself, nor compel God to compel you.

To the honest man, to the man who would fain be honest, the word is of right gracious import. To the untrue, it is a terrible threat; to him who is of the truth, it is sweet as most loving promise. He who is of God's mind in things, rejoices to hear the word of the changeless Truth; the voice of the Right fills the heavens and the earth, and makes his soul glad; it is his salvation. If God were not inexorably just, there would be no stay for the soul of the feeblest lover of right: 'thou art true, O Lord: one day I also shall be true!' 'Thou shalt render the right, cost you what it may,' is a dread sound in the ears of those whose life is a falsehood: what but the last farthing would those who love righteousness more than life pay? It is a joy profound as peace to know that God is determined upon such payment, is determined to have his children clean, clear, pure as very snow; is determined that not only shall they with his help make up for whatever wrong they have done, but at length be incapable, by eternal choice of good, under any temptation, of doing the thing that is not divine, the thing God would not do.

There has been much cherishing of the evil fancy, often without its taking formal shape, that there is some way of getting out of the region of strict justice, some mode of managing to escape doing all that is required of us; but there is no such escape. A way to avoid any demand of righteousness would be an infinitely worse way than the road to the everlasting fire, for its end would be eternal death. No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it--no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather! Neither shalt thou think to be delivered from the necessity of being good by being made good. God is the God of the animals in a far lovelier way, I suspect, than many of us dare to think, but he will not be the God of a man by making a good beast of him. Thou must be good; neither death nor any admittance into good company will make thee good; though, doubtless, if thou be willing and try, these and all other best helps will be given thee. There is no clothing in a robe of imputed righteousness, that poorest of legal cobwebs spun by spiritual spiders. To me it seems like an invention of well-meaning dulness to soothe insanity; and indeed it has proved a door of escape out of worse imaginations. It is apparently an old 'doctrine;' for St. John seems to point at it where he says, 'Little children, let no man lead you astray; he that doeth righteousness is righteous even as he is righteous.' Christ is our righteousness, not that we should escape punishment, still less escape being righteous, but as the live potent creator of righteousness in us, so that we, with our wills receiving his spirit, shall like him resist unto blood, striving against sin; shall know in ourselves, as he knows, what a lovely thing is righteousness, what a mean, ugly, unnatural thing is unrighteousness. He is our righteousness, and that righteousness is no fiction, no pretence, no imputation.

One thing that tends to keep men from seeing righteousness and unrighteousness as they are, is, that they have been told many things are righteous and unrighteous, which are neither the one nor the other. Righteousness is just fairness--from God to man, from man to God and to man; it is giving every one his due--his large mighty due. He is righteous, and no one else, who does this. And any system which tends to persuade men that there is any salvation but that of becoming righteous even as Jesus is righteous; that a man can be made good, as a good dog is good, without his own willed share in the making; that a man is saved by having his sins hidden under a robe of imputed righteousness--that system, so far as this tendency, is of the devil and not of God. Thank God, not even error shall injure the true of heart; it is not wickedness. They grow in the truth, and as love casts out fear, so truth casts out falsehood.

I read, then, in this parable, that a man had better make up his mind to be righteous, to be fair, to do what he can to pay what he owes, in any and all the relations of life--all the matters, in a word, wherein one man may demand of another, or complain that he has not received fair play. Arrange your matters with those who have anything against you, while you are yet together and things have not gone too far to be

arranged; you will have to do it, and that under less easy circumstances than now. Putting off is of no use. You must. The thing has to be done; there are means of compelling you.

'In this affair, however, I am in the right.'

'If so, very well--for this affair. But I have reason to doubt whether you are capable of judging righteously in your own cause:--do you hate the man?'

'No, I don't hate him.'

'Do you dislike him?'

'I can't say I like him.'

'Do you love him as yourself?'

'Oh, come! come! no one does that!'

'Then no one is to be trusted when he thinks, however firmly, that he is all right, and his neighbour all wrong, in any matter between them.'

'But I don't say I am all right, and he is all wrong; there may be something to urge on his side: what I say is, that I am more in the right than he.'

'This is not fundamentally a question of things: it is a question of condition, of spiritual relation and action, towards your neighbour. If in yourself you were all right towards him, you could do him no wrong. Let it be with the individual dispute as it may, you owe him something that you do not pay him, as certainly as you think he owes you something he will not pay you.'

'He would take immediate advantage of me if I owned that.'

'So much the worse for him. Until you are fair to him, it does not matter to you whether he is unfair to you or not.'

'I beg your pardon--it is just what does matter! I want nothing but my rights. What can matter to me more than my rights?'

'Your duties--your debts. You are all wrong about the thing. It is a very small matter to you whether the man give you your rights or not; it is life or death to you whether or not you give him his. Whether he pay you what you count his debt or no, you will be compelled to pay him all you owe him. If you owe him a pound and he you a million, you must pay him the pound whether he pay you the million or not; there is no business-parallel here. If, owing you love, he gives you hate, you, owing him love, have yet to pay it. A love unpaid you, a justice undone you, a praise withheld from you, a judgment passed on you without judgment, will not absolve you of the debt of a love unpaid, a justice not done, a praise withheld, a false judgment passed: these uttermost farthings--not to speak of such debts as the world itself counts grievous wrongs--you must pay him, whether he pay you or not. We have a good while given us to pay, but a crisis will come--come soon after all--comes always sooner than those expect it who are not ready for it--a crisis when the demand unyielded will be followed by prison.'

The same holds with every demand of God: by refusing to pay, the man makes an adversary who will compel him--and that for the man's own sake. If you or your life say, 'I will not,' then he will see to it. There is a prison, and the one thing we know about that prison is, that its doors do not open until entire satisfaction is rendered, the last farthing paid.

The main debts whose payment God demands are those which lie at the root of all right, those we owe in mind, and soul, and being. Whatever in us can be or make an adversary, whatever could prevent us from doing the will of God, or from agreeing with our fellow--all must be yielded. Our every relation, both to God and our fellow, must be acknowledged heartily, met as a reality. Smaller debts, if any debt can be small, follow as a matter of course.

If the man acknowledge, and would pay if he could but cannot, the universe will be taxed to help him rather than he should continue unable. If the man accepts the will of God, he is the child of the Father, the whole power and wealth of the Father is for him, and the uttermost farthing will easily be paid. If the man denies the debt, or acknowledging does nothing towards paying it, then--at last--the prison! God in the dark can make a man thirst for the light, who never in the light sought but the dark. The cells of the prison may differ in degree of darkness; but they are all alike in this, that not a door opens but to payment. There is no day but the will of God, and he who is of the night cannot be for ever allowed to roam the day; unfelt, unprized, the light must be taken from him, that he may know what the darkness is. When the darkness is perfect, when he is totally without the light he has spent the light in slaying, then will he know darkness.

I think I have seen from afar something of the final prison of all, the innermost cell of the debtor of the universe; I will endeavour to convey what I think it may be.

It is the vast outside; the ghastly dark beyond the gates of the city of which God is the light--where the evil dogs go ranging, silent as the dark, for there is no sound any more than sight. The time of signs is over. Every sense has its signs, and they were all misused: there is no sense, no sign more--nothing now by means of which to believe. The man wakes from the final struggle of death, in absolute loneliness--such a loneliness as in the most miserable moment of deserted childhood he never knew. Not a hint, not a shadow of anything outside his consciousness reaches him. All is dark, dark and dumb; no motion--not the breath of a wind! never a dream of change! not a scent from far-off field! nothing to suggest being or thing besides the man himself, no sign of God anywhere. God has so far withdrawn from the man, that he is conscious only of that from which he has withdrawn. In the midst of the live world he cared for nothing but himself; now in the dead world he is in God's prison, his own separated self. He would not believe in God because he never saw God; now he doubts if there be such a thing as the face of a man--doubts if he ever really saw one, ever anything more than dreamed of such a thing:--he never came near enough to human being, to know what human being really was--so may well doubt if human beings ever were, if ever he was one of them.

Next after doubt comes reasoning on the doubt: 'The only one must be God! I know no one but myself: I must myself be God--none else!' Poor helpless dumb devil!--his own glorious lord god! Yea, he will imagine himself that same resistless force which, without his will, without his knowledge, is the law by which the sun burns, and the stars keep their courses, the strength that drives all the engines of the world. His fancy will give birth to a thousand fancies, which will run riot like the mice in a house but just deserted: he will call it creation, and his. Having no reality to set them beside, nothing to correct them by; the measured order, harmonious relations, and sweet graces of God's world nowhere for him; what he thinks, will be, for lack of what God thinks, the man's realities: what others can he have! Soon, misery will beget

on imagination a thousand shapes of woe, which he will not be able to rule, direct, or even distinguish from real presences--a whole world of miserable contradictions and cold-fever-dreams.

But no liveliest human imagination could supply adequate representation of what it would be to be left without a shadow of the presence of God. If God gave it, man could not understand it: he knows neither God nor himself in the way of the understanding. For not he who cares least about God was in this world ever left as God could leave him. I doubt if any man could continue following his wickedness from whom God had withdrawn.

The most frightful idea of what could, to his own consciousness, befall a man, is that he should have to lead an existence with which God had nothing to do. The thing could not be; for being that is caused, the causation ceasing, must of necessity cease. It is always in, and never out of God, that we can live and do. But I suppose the man so left that he seems to himself utterly alone, yet, alas! with himself--smallest interchange of thought, feeblest contact of existence, dullest reflection from other being, impossible: in such evil case I believe the man would be glad to come in contact with the worst-loathed insect: it would be a shape of life, something beyond and besides his own huge, void, formless being! I imagine some such feeling in the prayer of the devils for leave to go into the swine. His worst enemy, could he but be aware of him, he would be ready to worship. For the misery would be not merely the absence of all being other than his own self, but the fearful, endless, unavoidable presence of that self. Without the correction, the reflection, the support of other presences, being is not merely unsafe, it is a horror--for anyone but God, who is his own being. For him whose idea is God's, and the image of God, his own being is far too fragmentary and imperfect to be anything like good company. It is the lovely creatures God has made all around us, in them giving us himself, that, until we know him, save us from the frenzy of aloneness--for that aloneness is Self, Self, Self. The man who minds only himself must at last go mad if God did not interfere.

Can there be any way out of the misery? Will the soul that could not believe in God, with all his lovely world around testifying of him, believe when shut in the prison of its own lonely, weary all-and-nothing? It would for a time try to believe that it was indeed nothing, a mere glow of the setting sun on a cloud of dust, a paltry dream that dreamed itself--then, ah, if only the dream might dream that it was no more! that would be the one thing to hope for. Self-loathing, and that for no sin, from no repentance, from no vision of better, would begin and grow and grow; and to what it might not come no soul can tell--of essential, original misery, uncompromising self-disgust! Only, then, if a being be capable of self-disgust, is there not some room for hope--as much as a pinch of earth in the cleft of a rock might yield for the growth of a pine? Nay, there must be hope while there is existence; for where there is existence there must be God; and God is for ever good, nor can be other than good. But alas, the distance from the light! Such a soul is at the farthest verge of life's negation!--no, not the farthest! a man is nearer heaven when in deepest hell than just ere he begins to reap the reward of his doings--for he is in a condition to receive the smallest show of the life that is, as a boon unspeakable. All his years in the world he received the endless gifts of sun and air, earth and sea and human face divine, as things that came to him because that was their way, and there was no one to prevent them; now the poorest thinning of the darkness he would hail as men of old the glow of a descending angel; it would be as a messenger from God. Not that he would think of God! it takes long to think of God; but hope, not yet seeming hope, would begin to dawn in his bosom, and the thinner darkness would be as a cave of light, a refuge from the horrid self of which he used to be so proud.

A man may well imagine it impossible ever to think so unpleasantly of himself! But he has only to let things go, and he will make it the real, right, natural way to think of himself. True, all I have been saying is

imaginary; but our imagination is made to mirror truth; all the things that appear in it are more or less after the model of things that are; I suspect it is the region whence issues prophecy; and when we are true it will mirror nothing but truth. I deal here with the same light and darkness the Lord dealt with, the same St. Paul and St. John and St. Peter and St. Jude dealt with. Ask yourself whether the faintest dawn of even physical light would not be welcome to such a soul as some refuge from the dark of the justly hated self.

And the light would grow and grow across the awful gulf between the soul and its haven--its repentance--for repentance is the first pressure of the bosom of God; and in the twilight, struggling and faint, the man would feel, faint as the twilight, another thought beside his, another thinking Something nigh his dreary self--perhaps the man he had most wronged, most hated, most despised--and would be glad that some one, whoever, was near him: the man he had most injured, and was most ashamed to meet, would be a refuge from himself--oh, how welcome!

So might I imagine a thousand steps up from the darkness, each a little less dark, a little nearer the light--but, ah, the weary way! He cannot come out until he have paid the uttermost farthing! Repentance once begun, however, may grow more and more rapid! If God once get a willing hold, if with but one finger he touch the man's self, swift as possibility will he draw him from the darkness into the light. For that for which the forlorn, self-ruined wretch was made, was to be a child of God, a partaker of the divine nature, an heir of God and joint heir with Christ. Out of the abyss into which he cast himself, refusing to be the heir of God, he must rise and be raised. To the heart of God, the one and only goal of the human race--the refuge and home of all and each, he must set out and go, or the last glimmer of humanity will die from him. Whoever will live must cease to be a slave and become a child of God. There is no half-way house of rest, where ungodliness may be dallied with, nor prove quite fatal. Be they few or many cast into such prison as I have endeavoured to imagine, there can be no deliverance for human soul, whether in that prison or out of it, but in paying the last farthing, in becoming lowly, penitent, self-refusing--so receiving the sonship, and learning to cry, Father!

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