**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**33. HONEST MORAL JUDGEMENT by JOHN H. JOWETT**

"BY their fruits ye shall know them." So that is to be the standard of judgment. We are not to be concerned with the label, but with the fruit. We are not to draw our conclusions from the florist's catalogue, but from the actual garden. Men are to be judged, not by their professions, but by their character, not by their theology, but by their life. That is a very simple and reasonable principle. We are to test things by their issues. We are to go into the orchard and taste the fruit.

But the Master's teaching goes further than this. He insists that we are to be perfectly honest with our findings. If we find grapes We are to infer a vine, and not to suggest they are the product of a thorn. If we come upon figs we are to infer a fig tree, and not to suspect that they were borne on a thistle. We are not to belie our moral intelligence. We are not to cheat our instincts. We are not to confuse our common-sense. When I see fine moral grapes I must not hesitate in my conclusion that they are significant of so much nature and force of the moral vine. If I come upon spiritual grapes I must not insinuate that the serpent was the gardener, and that he himself has produced them. Wherever I see true goodness I must infer God. Wherever I find noble spiritual fruit I am to reason that it is a fruit of the Spirit. I must not confuse myself by saying "thorns" when it is as clear as the morning that I have found a cluster of grapes, and I must not say "thistles" when I have discovered ripe, delicious figs.

Now there is a strange unwillingness to apply this principle. There is a hidden perversity in the mind and heart which turns us away from its simplicity. We are timid and hesitant and uncertain in our application. We see a grape, and we are half fearful it may have sprung from a thorn. We see a fig, and we are dubious whether it may not have sprung from a thistle. So we have confused our reason and abused our moral instincts. We have misinterpreted hopeful and helpful signs and presences. We have limited "the Holy One of Israel." We have seen noble deeds, and attributed them to an alien power. We have witnessed glorious ministries of emancipation, and we have said they were done by "Beelzebub, the Prince of devils."

I must fearlessly apply the principle to my own life. I go into my heart and find a strange, wild country. There are many things that are withered, things that are distorted, and things that are ugly. There are thoughts and purposes sharp and cruel as thorns, and idle thistles abound on every hand. But suppose I find a few grapes, one tiny cluster of grapes? Then I must be honest with myself and rigidly true. I must not throw them to the thorns and thistles. I will say to myself: "These are true grapes, and they betoken the presence of the True Vine; the vine nature is here, the vine force, the Living Vine, the Christ." I find in my soul hints and suggestions of a better and larger life. My self-made earthclouds sometimes part asunder for a moment, and there breaks upon my gaze the glory of the heavenly country. I cannot quite say how they come. Sometimes they come in the quietness of the night. Sometimes they come in the convulsion of circumstances. I have known them come at the suggestion of a passing face. No matter how they come, what shall I do with them when they appear? Let me not call them flares from the pit, false beacons kindled by the Devil. Let me rather attribute them to the Father of Lights, the King of Glory.

I find also in my soul some responsiveness to the "higher calling." Often when the gleam shines before me my heart goes out in earnest craving. Sometimes I have a hunger and a thirst for righteousness; desire is kindled, and I long to be clothed in the beauty on which I gaze. What then shall I call these things? Let me be just to myself, especially when I am tempted to think myself God-forsaken and God-ignored. Here is a holy desire; then I will call it a grape. I will not call it a thistledown. It is a fruit of the Vine, and the Lord is near. So will I reason concerning every gracious moment in my soul, just putting out tendrils toward the spiritual and the eternal. It may be only petty and poor, but if there be any achievement at all I will give it its right name. It may be that the grapes are not yet fully formed. They may be hard and green and sour. Still, they are imperfect grapes, and they are the fruit of the Vine, and for these I will thank and praise His grace.

For every virtue we possess,

And every conquest won,

And every thought of holiness

Are His and His alone.

I must firmly apply the same principle to others. When I see grapes growing in their lives, I must not attribute them to thorns or thistles. I must be honest and firm in my reasoning. I never glorify God when I refer His works to the Devil. I must apply the reasoning to the people who are outside all Churches. I must not be tempted to label everything thorns and thistles, as though the Lord had no dominion and no ministry outside ecclesiastical fields. Here, again, perfect honesty and perfect candour will do the best service to the Lord. And I must follow the reasoning in my conclusions about the worshippers in Churches other than mine. How suspicious we are! How ready we are to call grapes thorns when they grow in another denominational field! Even when graces are evident, our consent is frequently so qualified, so ungracious, so reluctant! We reluctantly attribute them to "uncovenanted mercies." The seeds have been carried by stray winds, and the raindrops were intended for other fields!

How grudging we often are in our recognition of the grapes that grow in the Episcopal Church, and still more of those that are found in the Roman Catholic Church! I know there has been much in our history to make us resentful, and to fill us with a hot contempt. But, however tempted we may be, we must not yield to the injustice of denying the real grapes, and labelling the whole field as the home of thorns and thistles. There are winsomely gracious things in their midst. There is saintly character, there is mystical insight, there are marvellous range and power, and tenderness of intercession. There is chivalrous and heroic consecration and service. The grapes are evident. Let us gladly attribute them to the blood of the vine.

If I thus apply the Master's principle, honestly, consistently, universally, what will the result be?

First of all, I shall have an enormously enlarged conception of the workings of the Lord. I shall realize that His spirit is present everywhere, knocking everywhere, and that "His train fills the temple." And, secondly, I shall have the energy of exhilarant hope. I shall know that I cannot begin and work anywhere where the Lord has not anticipated me and done preparatory work for my coming. "The fields are white already unto harvest." So life will become more reverent, as perception becomes more delicate, and it will thus be filled with the spirit of hopefulness and praise.