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

**36. KEEPING THE ROADS OPEN by JOHN H. JOWETT**

"IF thy brother sin." But we must be quite sure about it. We can so easily be mistaken. Summary judgment can be villainously unjust. The assumed criminal may be altogether innocent, and his supposed crime may be the ugly figment of our own diseased imagination. For through what perverting media we can look at one another, and what monsters we appear when seen through a distorting lens! And therefore the primary rule of guidance in all presumed offences is that a man should examine his lens. Is the lens a perverting medium? Am I looking through a magnifying glass, and therefore magnifying trifles? Is the whole matter an exaggeration? And is the real fault in my own eye? Let me not leap to conclusions concerning my brother. "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath."

But assuming that there is no distorting lens corrupting our judgment, and that the offence is palpable when seen through cool and simple sight, what then should be our course? "Rebuke him." Well, that would be pleasant enough. It is an exercise which provides a feast for the majority of people, and we set about it with rare satisfaction. But there are rebukes and rebukes. There is a rebuke which is only intended to satisfy the offended, and there is a rebuke which is purposed to rectify the offender. A legitimate rebuke is more than a vent for passion--it is a minister of redemption. It is intended to do more than work off my spleen; it is purposed to remove my brother's defilement. It is to be used not so much for the relief of my wound, but for the healing of his. The wound of the offended is clean, and time will most surely heal it. But the wound of the offender is unclean, and it may easily fester into something worse. And therefore I say the primary purpose of a rebuke is not to gratify my temper, but to help my brother to recover his broken health.

Now, we may quite easily ascertain whether our rebuke has been of the kind counselled by the Master, a medicated kind, and the test is to be found in whether we are prepared to go further with our Lord. "If he repent, forgive him." If our rebuke has been healthy and wholesome, we shall be quite ready to take the further step as soon as occasion offers. The fine aim and trend of all Christian rebuke is ultimate reconciliation. A rebuke is not an instrument of punishment; it is an instrument of adjustment. It is not penal, but surgical, and always and everywhere it is purposed to be a minister of moral and spiritual restoration. To put the matter in a word, in all the offences we suffer, our after-conduct should seek the moral recovery of the offender.

Now, let us seek to grasp one or two vital principles which lie behind this teaching. And I think we must begin here: a man's finest asset is his integrity. It is just as well that even so familiar a commonplace as this should be re-emphasized. We are in such general agreement about it that it is apt to be ignored. Let a man destroy his integrity, and he destroys the finest jewel in his life. "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth." Things provide only an existence; in character is found the life.

And the second step is this: the finest contribution which any man can make to a city or a nation is the contribution of an unblemished character, the gift of a scrupulously clean and consistent life. It is ever a temptation to men to esteem gifts more than dispositions, to exalt the showy and the dazzling more than the inherently good. We are captured and fascinated by genius, and talent, and cleverness, and subtle and ingenious accomplishments. And yet these do not constitute the sterling wealth of the corporate life. When a man has given only brilliant genius to his country he has not given his best. The best we can give is not our interest, not our service, but a chivalrous character, massive and undefiled.

If, therefore, a man has lapsed from moral and spiritual health, and is squandering his finest treasure, it should surely be his brother's concern, for his own sake as well as for the sake of the offender, to keep the way open for his return. It is wise, even for our own sakes, to seek an offender's restoration. When a man becomes morally defiled he introduces uncleanness into the commonwealth. Our sense of the corporate life is so dull and faint that we only very imperfectly discern the influence of the part upon the whole. Our conception of society is mechanical, not organic; it is political, not vital. We think of society as a chance collection, not as a nerve-pervaded corporation. At the best we regard it only as an aggregation and not a union. But the teaching of the Scriptures brings before us a far more profound conception. According to the New Testament, society is not a mere combination, like a heap of miscellaneous articles which the ocean has thrown up on the shore. The race of men constitute one vast, nervy body, with all the members vitally interdependent, vitally intercommunicative, inherently one and whole, every part related to every other part in community of interest, and every part suffering in so far as any part is undeveloped or bruised or broken. Let me state quite boldly the implications of this teaching. So long as China's hordes are stagnant we ourselves will remain immature! So long as the cannibal tribes of tropical islands drowse on in their animalism we ourselves will not be fully awake! So long as anywhere in broad England any man is mentally or morally dwarfed, every other man will be hindered from gaining his appointed stature! No man will walk at his full height so long as any man remains a pigmy! One moral cripple affects the pace of the race! And therefore if a man "goes wrong," if he becomes morally filthy, whether in slum or suburb, there is no isolation-hospital in which his nefarious influence can be safely confined. Prison-walls may isolate bodies, they cannot destroy the nerve communications of the race. We are every man and woman the poorer for every man and woman in gaol to-day.

If, therefore, my brother sin, what shall I do? Why, for the sake of everybody, try to get him right again. To rebuke him is not enough; to punish him unduly may aggravate the danger. The only adequate purpose is to get him whole again. And therefore did I say it is for the offended to keep the road open for the offender's return.

Now, according to the teachings of the Master, one of the methods for keeping open roads in the moral and spiritual realm is the ministry of forgiveness. "Forgive him." Yes, but the word is not used with the thin significance of effeminate emotion. The forgiveness of the New Testament is not emotional, but motional; not pathetic, but energetic; not a matter of cheap tears, but of sacrificial service. It is more than pardon, it is chivalry. It is more than the withdrawal, of the sword, it is the conversion of the sword into a ploughshare. It is the destructive transformed into the constructive and employed in positive culture. It is no use-considering anything else than this when we are thinking or speaking about forgiveness. There are many counterfeits about; masquerading as forgiveness, but they have no vital kinship with reality. There is a superciliousness which patronizingly utters sacred words, but its poverty is exposed by its very pride. Forgiveness is not a passive acquittal; it expresses itself in the ministry of self-sacrificing toil. And such a spirit, by the teaching of the Master, will assuredly keep the road open for a sinful brother's return, and we shall be called "the repairers of the breach, the restorers of paths to dwell in."

But a disposition of this kind demands that .we ourselves have faith in the spiritualities. Practical materialists will have no concern for these things, because the currents and forces in which they believe are of an altogether mundane kind. It is needful to have a firm conviction of the reality of the spiritualities, and of their power to strengthen or corrode the temporalities which are often so glaringly showy and so superficially majestic. If we are to exercise the ministry of forgiveness, in the way in which I have indicated, it is needful that we believe in God, and in the energies of godliness, and in our own possible co-operation in the ministries of redemption. And, therefore, how fitting was the prayer of the apostles which succeeded this high counsel of our Lord, "Increase our faith"!