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*JESUS MIRRORED IN MATTHEW, MARK, AND
LUKE.*

IX. THE WORTH OF MAN.

JESUS believed in the absolute, infinite worth of man taken even at the lowest and meanest. But He did not express His faith in philosophical terms like infinite and absolute. He used the method of comparison. Once He employed a comparison which adequately embodied His idea: "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"¹ "Christ's maxim is—one soul outweighs the world." But usually He dealt in comparisons which seem utterly inadequate, as when in the admonition against care He asked anxious disciples: "Are ye not much better than they?" *i.e.*, than the fowls of the air.² Similarly, in a discourse on apostolic tribulations, to keep the Twelve in good heart, He said: "Fear ye not therefore; ye are of more value than many sparrows."³ Comparisons at the best can never express absolute truth. To say that one thing is better than another, however good the latter may be, does not amount to saying that it is the best possible. But when the object whose value is being estimated is compared with something of recognised standard worth, "better" practically means "best." So, for example, in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. There also the method of comparison is used to set forth the excellence of the Christian religion. The writer's position really is: Christianity the best possible religion, the absolutely perfect, therefore the final form of man's relation with God. But he puts that position in this way: Christianity better than the Old Testament religion, with all its agents and agencies of revelation and redemp-

¹ *Matt.* xvi. 26.

² *Matt.* vi. 26.

³ *Matt.* x. 31.

tion. Practically it amounted to the same thing, because for the Hebrew Christians, for whose benefit the comparison was made, the ancient religion of the Jewish people, with its Moses and Aaron and Levitical rites, was a sacred divine institution. But "of more value than many sparrows," which have almost no worth at all, that is surely not saying much! Yet in the very inadequacy of the comparison lies its pathos and its power as addressed to men who have a depressing sense of their own insignificance. Persons in this state of mind need such humble estimates to help them to rise to higher faith and bolder self-respect, and the use of them by Jesus is signal proof of His deep sympathy, as of His poetic tact and felicity. I value greatly these simple, naïve questions of Jesus preserved for us in the synoptic Gospels as a contribution to His doctrine of man. There is nothing like them elsewhere in the New Testament; nothing so expressive and impressive, so suggestive, so humanely sympathetic, so quietly yet severely condemnatory of all unloving estimates of human worth. Compare with these questions of Jesus St. Paul's, "Doth God take care for oxen?"¹ Jesus could not have asked that question with an implied negative in His mind. His doctrine was: "God does take care even for oxen, but for men more."

These simple, kindly comparisons by which our Lord sought to indoctrinate His disciples in the worth of man to God suggest more than they say, and provoke far-reaching reflections. Better than sparrows, than all the fowls of the air, than a sheep,² or an ox.³ How? Not in all respects. Man cannot fly like the birds, or sing like the lark, or furnish material that can be manufactured into cloth like the sheep, or bear heavy burdens like the ox. The ground of his superiority is not physical but spiritual. He can think and love, and act with freedom. In these respects he is unique. Simply incomparable with "birds and four-

¹ 1 Cor. ix. 9.

² Matt. xii. 12.

³ Luke xiv. 5.

footed beasts," and not merely with them, but with the entire subrational universe. The principle involved in our Lord's question, "Are ye not much better than they?" is that man as a rational being and moral personality is of more value than the whole inanimate and lower animate world. This is an essential principle in the Christian theory of the universe. And it is a principle which the most recent science amply justifies. The evolutionary conception of the process by which the world as it now is came into being places man at the head of the creation. It assigns him this position just in proportion as it brings his whole nature on its spiritual not less than on its physical side within the scope of evolutionary law. When the scientist says: Man in his intellect and in his moral nature, as well as in his body, has been evolved, he declares in effect that man in his composite being is the crown and climax of the grand movement by which the present universe, with its endless variety of existences, has slowly emerged out of the primitive chaos of homogeneous matter. That being so, it follows of necessity that man is a being of unique significance. He is the key to the meaning of the universe and to the nature of its Maker. He is the end the Creator had in view in making the world. Till man arrives on the scene one feels tempted to ask, To what purpose those stars, mountains, rocks, rivers, plains, and plants, and animals of all sorts and sizes? When he makes his appearance, one begins to see that it was worth while to make a world. And one also begins to understand the nature of the Maker. He is, we see, one who has been working all through the ages towards the production of rational and moral beings. And hence we infer that He is Himself rational and moral. And as the Maker of the world had man in view as the *raison d'être* of world-making, it stands to reason that he will care for man after He has in the fulness of the time brought him into existence. He

will see to it that all rational and moral possibilities of this new type of being shall be realized, and will make all nature's laws and all events co-operate towards this end. In other words, a *Kingdom of God*, with good men for its citizens, will be God's own chief end, directing and controlling the whole course of His providence.

This is a great bold thought which the hand of even strong faith cannot at first grasp without trembling. Yet it is easier to believe that God thinks thus highly of man than for man himself to cherish such thoughts of his kind. Rather I should say that the main cause of unbelief in God's care for man is the low estimate men form of human nature in themselves and in others. Contempt of the human, whencesoever arising, is a fruitful cause of practical atheism. Who can believe that God careth for men who does not himself believe that a man is better than a sheep? And who are they who are guilty of scepticism so radical? Well, various sorts of people. Philosophers, *e.g.*, like Celsus, who deliberately maintained that man is no better than a beast, and that he is surpassed by some animals even in respect of morality and religion. Commercial men, also, who measure the worth of all things by their value as property. My sheep belongs to me, and I can sell it for so much, but that drunken good-for-nothing, what have I to do with him? He is not my slave; and even if he were, nobody would buy him. Even religious men, have needed to be reminded of the worth of man as man. How much is a man better than a sheep? was a question addressed by our Lord to *Pharisees*. They really did not believe anything of the kind. They had got into a way of setting the human and the divine in antagonism. They made man the slave of the Sabbath law in zeal for the supposed honour of the Divine Lawgiver. A sheep was a creature to be envied by comparison, as in virtue of its very irrationality lying outside the scope of the vexatious statute. For

an analogous reason they would not feel the force of the parable of the lost sheep. Yes, they would say within themselves, we can understand a shepherd going after a strayed sheep and rejoicing when he found it. It belonged to him, and moreover it was blameless. But these publicans and sinners belong neither to you nor to us; and if they are lost, it is their own fault; let them take the consequences.

In view of this inhuman type of religion then prevalent in Palestine one can appreciate the startling significance of Christ's own bearing towards the neglected classes. It was nothing short of revolutionary. It would stimulate thought on the question, What is the worth of man even at the worst? far more powerfully than any number of mild suggestions as to man being better than this or that member of the lower animal creation. These might provoke from unsympathetic hearers a sceptical smile, but the mission to the outcasts of Capernaum provoked indignation as against one who had committed a wanton outrage on the moral feelings of a God-fearing community. "Think of such scandalous people being treated even as fellow-men, not to say as comrades admitted to social privilege on equal terms!" The rude shock to the sense of propriety is the measure of the innovation inaugurated, and of the extent to which the contemporary world needed education in the elementary rights and claims of man. As the teacher of a new doctrine on this subject, Jesus could not get past that Capernaum mission and all that went along with it. The holy rage of religionists was no doubt a regrettable circumstance, but unfortunately radical reforms cannot be brought about in this world without rude initial shocks to prejudice. "Woe unto the world because of offences";¹ but blessing also comes through them. Outrage to rooted caste pride first, and it may be fierce war in defence of cherished pre-

¹ *Matt.* xviii. 7.

rogative, then ultimate acceptance of a beneficent moral axiom, which to disinterested, wise, humane men was self-evident from the first. Thank God for the men who bring this kind of offences. They are the world's benefactors and saviours at a great cost to themselves. For woe is to that man by whom even the beneficent offence cometh. The world calls him evil names, and is not content till it has got rid of him. But he leaves his blessing behind him, in the form of a truth that upsets partition walls, fills up gulfs of social cleavage, banishes the kingdoms of the wild beast type and ushers in the kingdom of the *human*.

So did Jesus Christ teach His new doctrine concerning the worth of man by quaint pathetic comparisons and by aggressive action, which compelled all to take note that in His judgment a man was a man, even though a publican and a "sinner." He crowned the doctrine by the name He assumed for Himself—*Son of man*. This name Jesus nowhere formally defines, any more than He defines the name He gave to God. In this case, as in that, He defines only by discriminating use. We must listen attentively as He calls Himself "Son of man," and strive to catch the sense of the title from the tone and accent of the speaker. To do this successfully needs a sensitive, sympathetic ear, unfilled with other sounds that blunt its perceptive faculty. Lacking such an ear, men may get very false impressions, and read all sorts of meanings into the simple phrase, collected perhaps from Old Testament texts, or suggested by systems of theology. To my ear the title speaks of one who is sympathetic and unpretentious; loves men, and advances no ambitious claims. He may be great, so to speak, in spite of Himself, by gifts and graces even *unique*; but these must speak for themselves. He will not take pains to point them out, or advertise His importance as their possessor. The Son of man wears no grand airs, but is meek and lowly. He is simply the *man*, the brother of

men, loving humanity with a passionate love which fits Him to be the world's Christ; but His personal attitude is that of one who says: "Discover what is deepest in me, and draw your own inference."

Specially instructive is the earliest instance of the use of this title by our Lord occurring in the first Gospel. Matthew introduces it for the first time in connection with the offer of a *scribe* to become a disciple.¹ The incident is recorded both by Matthew and by Luke,² but in neither Gospel is there any clear indication of its true historical setting. We may assume that it happened after the attitude of the class to which the aspirant belonged towards Jesus had been made manifest, and that the reception given to the would-be disciple was influenced by Christ's practical acquaintance therewith. Were we to take as our guide Luke, who introduces the aspirant simply as a certain person, we should, of course, lay no stress on the indication of his profession given in the narrative of Matthew. But that a scribe should offer to become a disciple was so unlikely that no reason can be assigned for its place in the tradition save that it was a fact. And just because it was unlikely we are entitled to treat the fact as important, and to interpret in the light of it both the name Jesus gave Himself and the repellent word He addressed to the candidate for discipleship.

Taking the latter first, when we remember to whom Jesus is speaking, it becomes probable that the saying, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have lodging-places, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head," is to be taken parabolically. That is to say, it refers to Christ's spiritual situation as one who has no home for His soul in the religion of the time, rather than to His physical condition as one at the moment without any certain dwelling-place. Though this view suggested

¹ *Matt.* viii. 19, 20.

² *Luke* ix. 57, 58.

itself to my mind only recently, I confess that I have always felt a certain measure of dissatisfaction with the current conception of our Lord's meaning. I have never been able to see any special aptitude of the saying so understood to the case of the person addressed, nor have I been able to get rid of the feeling that the word, taken in the literal sense, is not without a certain tone of exaggerated sentiment according ill with the known character of Jesus. There does not seem to have been any great hardship in the physical aspect of the life of our Lord and His disciples, such as might scare away any one the least inclined to disciple-life. And suppose this aspirant had been admitted to the ranks of discipleship, would he not have been one more added to the number of followers possessing means sufficient to make the daily life of the Jesus-circle not without a due measure of comfort? ¹ On these grounds the suggestion that the saying about the foxes and the birds is to be interpreted parabolically came to my mind as a relief. Looked at in this light, it is seen to be at once very true and very apposite. How thoroughly true that Jesus was spiritually an alien, without a home in the religion of the time. Recall all that quite probably had happened before this incident took place: the charge of blasphemy in connection with the healing of the palsied man; the offence taken at the festive meeting with the publicans, and the scandalous charges that grew out of that event; the numerous conflicts respecting Sabbath-keeping, fasting, ritual ablutions, and the like; the infamous suggestion that the cure of demoniacs was wrought by the aid of Beelzebub; and so on. If the whole, or even a part, of these experiences lay behind Him when He uttered this word, with what truth and pathos Jesus might say, "The

¹ *Vide Luke* viii. 1-3, which Wendt regards as a kind of introduction to the passage about the three aspirants (*Luke* ix. 57-62) as it stood in the book of *Logia*.

foxes and the birds of the air are better off than I am, so far as a home for the soul is concerned." Then with what point and pungency He might say this to a *scribe*! For was it not the class the aspirant belonged to that made Him homeless? Whether viewed as an excuse for reluctance to receive him as a disciple, or as a summons to deliberate consideration of what was involved in the step he was proposing to take, the word was altogether seasonable. In the one case it meant, "You need not wonder if I give not a prompt, warm welcome to *you*, remembering all that has passed between me and the class you belong to." In the other case it means, "Consider how it is with Me. I am a religious outlaw—suspected, hated; a fugitive from those who seek my life. Are you really able to break with your class in opinion, feeling, and interest, and to bear the obloquy and ill-will that will inevitably come upon you as my disciple?"

Let us turn now to this title "Son of man," which we meet with here for the first time in Matthew's Gospel, and inquire what view of its import is most naturally suggested by the situation of Jesus as parabolically described, and by the religious connections of the party addressed. We may assume that, as in all cases probably more or less, so very specially in this case, the title was used significantly and not merely from custom. It served, that is to say, as a symbol of the religious attitude of Jesus and as a protest against the antagonistic attitude of the scribes. Wherein then did the difference between the two attitudes lie? It might be summed up in these two particulars. First, the religion of the scribes was *inhuman*; it posited an artificial false antithesis between the divine and the human interest. Second, it was *ambitious*. The spirit of pride and self-importance pervaded it throughout. This spirit found expression in the Messianic idea of the scribes as in all other parts of their system. Only a Messiah coming with worldly

pomp would please them. He must come as the son of some great one, and be in all things like his descent. We quite understand how, when Jesus asked the Pharisees (in spirit identical with the scribes), "What think ye concerning the Christ? whose son is He?" they were so ready with the answer, "The Son of *David*."¹ That was the essential point for them. Davidic descent before all things, everything else subordinate and conforming thereto.

At both points Jesus stood in irreconcilable antagonism to the scribes. He was emphatically, passionately *human*, and He was *humble*. In His whole public career, by every word and act, He was ever saying in effect: "I stand for the human, not as opposed to the divine, but as ultimately identical with it. I am jealous for God's honour, and just on that account I champion the interest of man. For I find in this land, among those who make themselves prominent in religion, a spurious zeal for the divine, whose practical issue is immorality and inhumanity. They encourage men to say 'corban,' and so excuse themselves for neglecting the duties of filial piety.² They interpret the Sabbath law of rest so strictly as to make it wrong for a man to satisfy hunger by rubbing a few ears of corn in his hands,³ or to heal a sick man on the seventh day, so bringing the Fourth Commandment into needless conflict with the higher law of mercy. Therefore I make it my business to emphasize the neglected interest, not in a one-sided way, or in the spirit of mere reaction, but as the best way of guarding that very Divine interest of which they have constituted themselves the patrons." The contrast in the other respect was not less glaring. The scribes loved titles of honour. They desired to be called of men Rabbi.⁴ It gratified their vanity, and proclaimed their importance as men who knew the law and the traditional interpretation

¹ *Matt.* xxii. 42.

³ *Matt.* xii. 1-8.

² *Matt.* xv. 5.

⁴ *Matt.* xxiii. 7.

of it current in the schools. Jesus had nothing in common with them here. He set no value on complimentary epithets or on any expressions of respect towards Himself, except in so far as they represented intelligent and sincere conviction. He declined even to be called "good" in the way of compliment by one who came to Him inquiring the way to eternal life.¹ His aversion to everything savouring of vanity, ostentation, self-importance, and self-advertisement was austere and unconquerable. He prayed not at the street corner, but amid the solitude of the mountains when men were asleep. He withdrew into the wilderness from popular admiration. He enjoined on His disciples to tell no man that He was the Christ.

The title "Son of man," as used in the reply to the scribe, was a compendious proclamation of this twofold antagonism. It said these two things: Son of *man*, in My religious tendency, zealous for the human; Son of *man*, in My estimate of Myself, as opposed to Son of *David*, the attractive title for those who desire a Messiah harmonizing with vain thoughts. Charged with such significance, it set very fully before the scribe the grave import of the step he proposed to take in becoming a disciple. That, we now clearly understand, did not lie in entering on a life of physical hardship. It rather lay here, that the aspirant to discipleship was called upon to abandon for ever Rabbinical ways of thinking and to adopt as his leader one who could make no response to current Messianic hopes. What happened? We are not told, but we are apt to take for granted that of course the scribe turned away from a Master who seemed so cynically indifferent to his approaches. Indeed we are inclined to wonder how a scribe could ever think of becoming a disciple of Jesus even if he possessed only a moderate acquaintance with His character, and are tempted to suspect that in connecting the aspirant

¹ *Mark* x. 17.

with this class the evangelic tradition is at fault. But it has to be remembered that the class-spirit does not dominate all the members of a fraternity to a uniform extent, and that Mark tells of a scribe who had considerable sympathy with the ideas of Jesus, and whom Jesus regarded with much interest as one not far from the kingdom of God.¹ It takes time for a human soul to be made an abject, willing slave of a pernicious religious system, and in the case of not a few young men of ingenuous spirit and somewhat robust moral sentiments the process is a species of martyrdom. There were doubtless among the scholars of the scribes some whose better nature revolted against the doctrines they were being taught. Such malcontents would steal away now and then from the school to hear the new Teacher, as young men and women in our cities now steal away from orthodox churches to hear some charming "heretic." And of course these runaways felt the spell of Him who taught "not as the scribes." What wonder if one at least bethought himself of breaking away from their dominion and joining the society of the Great Proscribed.

I have discussed at some length this first text in Matthew's Gospel containing the title "Son of man" because of the light which, in virtue of its setting there, it throws on the strong convictions of our Lord concerning the significance of man. My present aim is not to discuss the import of the title for its own sake, but simply in connection with what I regard as a wider and more important question, what Jesus thought of the race with which He so emphatically identified Himself. But I may say that I regard it as a happy circumstance that just this particular text is the first containing the title which we encounter in perusing the records of our Lord's ministry. For it is not only the first but the most luminous. The title *scribe* given to the

¹ Mark xii. 28-34.

aspirant furnishes the key to the title *Son of man* assumed by the Master. And the meaning struck out of the latter, like a spark out of steel by the stroke of a flint, is in turn the key to its meaning in some other texts where its sense is often misapprehended. For example, in the text "the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day."¹ The title here is not to be charged with all sorts of theological meanings, such as the "ideal man," or the man who while human is more, even divine, or the Messiah invested with full Messianic prerogative. It is not yet become a stereotyped phrase, a *vox signata*, it is a phrase whose meaning is fluid, used with conscious significance and with strict relevance to the context. And the connection requires that it should, as in the text we have so fully considered, be taken as meaning, "The man who stands for the human interest as distinct from the supposed divine interest." Christ's whole thought is: "the Sabbath was made for man, not (as you think) man for the Sabbath; therefore I, who make it My business to vindicate the claims of the neglected human, am the best judge of how the Sabbath is to be observed. I have no desire to set it aside, for as God meant it, it is a beneficent institution, but I wish and intend to restore to it its true place and function as having for its end man's good. So again in the text, "Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man it shall be forgiven; but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven him."² The idea is not: blasphemy against the Son of man comes next to blasphemy against the Holy Ghost in heinousness, and therefore is barely forgivable. So understood, it takes its place in a climax thus: blasphemy against ordinary men forgivable, of course; blasphemy against the extraordinary ideal man barely forgivable; blasphemy against the Holy Ghost not forgivable at all. The meaning rather is blasphemy

¹ *Matt.* xii. 8.

² *Matt.* xii. 32.

against the Son of man shall be forgiven just as blasphemous words against any son of man may be forgiven. If it be asked why the Son of man and sons of men in general are put on a level, we shall get light by reflecting on the source of the blasphemy against the Son of man. The main source of the blasphemies against the Son of man as a matter of fact was just *that He stood so stoutly for the human*. He identified Himself with neglected, outraged human interests, and He suffered in name and fame in consequence, and He was content to do so and took it all as a matter of course, and regarded it as in most cases the result of a pardonable misunderstanding. He associated with publicans and sinners and they called Him a drunkard, a glutton, and a philo-publican.¹ He healed on the Sabbath day and they called Him a Sabbath-breaker. He cheered the heart of the palsied man by proclaiming the forgiveness of sins and they called Him a blasphemer.² He allowed a sinful woman to touch His person, and it was inferred that if He was a good man He at all events could not be a prophet.³ He pitied the poor demoniacs and restored them to health and sanity, and they said, "He is in league with Beelzebub." It is true that in this last instance He did not take the blasphemy as a matter of course but made it the subject of grave animadversion, as if it bordered on the unpardonable. But why so? Simply because He found it impossible to believe that in this case, as in most of the others just enumerated, it was the result of a pardonable misunderstanding. He did not at all wonder that men misjudged Him when they saw Him associating with the social pariahs. Fellowship with such for their moral rescue was so new a thing, and fellowship with them from love of their evil ways so much the rule, that misconception could hardly fail to arise. The calumniated One even in

¹ *Matt.* xi. 19.² *Matt.* ix. 2, 3.³ *Luke* vii. 39.

that case might have His own suspicions as to the real source of the calumny, but the presumption was against Him, and He was silent. It was the penalty He had to pay for doing a daring thing at the bidding of an unexampled love and value for man even at the worst. But in the case of the Beelzebub hypothesis the position was different. The demoniacs were not regarded with moral aversion like the publicans and "sinners." They were not immoral, but simply unhappy sufferers under some supernatural influence of a malignant type. Men regarded them with feelings kindred to those we cherish towards the insane. Pity for them therefore, even if unusual in degree, offered no occasion for sinister remark. That one tried to cure them could not legitimately expose to suspicion, for such attempts were not uncommon in unsuspected quarters. The offence of Jesus in this instance was not His pity, nor His effort to succour, but His *signal success*. That made Him famous and popular, therefore it had to be explained away; or, if the fact could not be denied, its character had to be somehow blackened. The Beelzebub hypothesis was invented for this purpose. The inventors had no faith in it themselves; they simply hoped that it would throw dust in the eyes of an admiring populace. And that was why their sin appeared to Jesus so serious. It was not in His view a sin of misunderstanding against the Son of man arising out of His identifying Himself with novel or unpopular humanities, but a sin against knowledge committed by men who would say and do anything rather than admit that any good was to be found in *Him*.

I do not forget that the title "Son of man" has another side, an apocalyptic sense, connecting it with the visions of Daniel, and with the glories of the second advent. But even on that side it is not divorced from the radical sense, standing for the human. Daniel's kingdom of one like unto a son of man is a kingdom of the *human* as distinct

from kingdoms of the brutal type symbolized by wild beasts—lion, bear, leopard, or other unnamed monster more hideous and ferocious than the rest. The kingdom of the human came to its rights in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, and this constitutes His best claim to be the Christ, not mere physical descent from David, though that, as the genealogies attest, may have been a fact. And whatever apocalyptic glories may be in store for the Son of man they will never be such as to put Him out of conceit with the humanities He inaugurated, or divorce His celestial life from His life on earth. The Son of man who returns to this world, accompanied by a royal escort of angels, to take His seat as judge of men, does not forget His state of humiliation or the classes of which that state made Him a fellow. He judges men by the way in which they treat the classes who are lightly esteemed, and whom He still accounts His brethren. The glorified Son of man in the teaching of Jesus is still the man who stands for the human, whose heart burns with the “enthusiasm of humanity,” and His decisive test of character is the relation in which men stand to that sacred passion. Does it burn in their hearts? then they are the children of the Father. Are they inhuman? then their place cannot be in the kingdom prepared by the Father for those who with heart and soul have practised the humanities.¹

Christ's doctrine of man is grand, and still at the end of nineteen centuries stands above Christendom a lofty, un-reached ideal. And what shall we say of Him who taught it not by word only, but still more emphatically by deed? Surely that He has earned the eternal honour of all who seek the good of their kind. With open face we see “the Saviour and the Friend of man,” and His teaching and His example are the inspiration of all who desire to leave the world better than they found it.

A. B. BRUCE.

¹ *Matt.* xxv. 31-46.