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## The Four Classes of Bible Characters

**B**IBLE CHARACTERS fall into four classes: those who are great but not good; those who are good but not great; those who are neither good nor great; and those who are both great and good.

Among those who are great but not good are Joab, Nebuchadnezzar, Sennacherib. Of the good who are not great we may name Isaac, Elkanah and Joseph the husband of Mary. Neither great nor good are Eli, Shimei, Ahab. Of those who are both good and great, the most famous would be Abraham, Moses, David and Paul. A few speckled souls, as Balaam, Samson and Solomon, may need a fifth class to accommodate them. Their checkered characters make classification difficult.

Under these heads may be arranged not only all Bible characters, but the whole world and all of history. Each one of us is in one or another of these classes. A mighty lot depends upon which one.

Goodness is possible to all, greatness to a few. Salvation makes a man good but not necessarily great. Greatness contributes nothing to any man's happiness; goodness, everything; yet all men desire to be great, and only a few desire to be good. Greatness requires a combination of qualities rare in nature; goodness is a gift of God and may be acquired by the humblest of men. Greatness will count for nothing in the day of judgment; goodness will be rewarded before the eyes of all.

We have made a disastrous mistake in holding up our great men as models to youth; good men should rather serve for their examples.

A great man may be miserable in this world and wretched in the world to come; a truly good man will not be miserable for long even in this world, and in the future world he will be comforted in the bosom of Abraham.

## We Are in Debt to God

**W**E ARE all in debt to the universe; we have nothing we did not receive. To our parents we owe our very existence; to leaders, pioneers, inventors, we owe every comfort we possess above the average. To our political fathers we in America owe our freedom. To the brave men who have died in all our wars we owe the blessing of a free and prosperous country.

To the gifted great of the past we owe every lovely picture, every sweet song, every notable book. Around us we see little or nothing for which we can properly claim credit. Labor-saving devices, our excellent school system, highways, parks and museums all are the work of other hearts and other hands. We are the heirs of the ages; we reap where we have not sown and gather where we have not planted.

All good and beneficial things the world affords are gifts of Almighty God and come to us out of His lovingkindness. Add to these all the wealth of grace which comes to us through blood atonement: revelation, redemption, mercy, the gift of eternal life and the indwelling Spirit. For all this, for everything, we are in debt to God forever. We can never repay our heavenly Father for the least of His goodness.

In view of all these things, a thankless man must be a bad man if for no other reason than that he is thankless. Ingratitude is a major sin. The man of enlightened mind will always feel deeply humbled when he considers God's goodness and his own insignificance. He is likely to be very modest about demanding anything further; he will be too conscious that he already enjoys far more than the circumstances warrant.

## God Requires Sincerity

**W**E LIVE like civilized men, but we go back six thousand years to do our dying. The curse of artificiality which infects our modern life disappears for a moment when we are born and forever when we die. Birth and death remain untouched by the hand of change. We see life in the raw at its beginning and at its close.

In the depths of our universal beings we remain essentially primitive; our culture affects little more than the surface.

There are numberless distinctions between men involving acquired habits, tastes, modes of speech; but when the heart is moved deeply enough, these distinctions disappear. Who can tell as he listens to the cry of a bereaved mother whether she comes from the avenue or from the slums? We speak like educated persons, but we weep like primitive men.

The heart has a universal language known to all men. It is this language which Christ speaks. He directs His call to the ancient human heart of mankind. For this reason His message needs little modification for different classes of hearers. That which differentiates is incidental. Christ searches for the essential man beneath his disguises, and as the Son of Man He is instantly understood.

This adds up to one thing: Be absolutely sincere in every dealing with God. Veneer, pose, efforts to impress—all are offensive to Him. We must put away all pretense and come to Him in our true characters as fallen sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. It is such the Lord came to seek and to save.

## Check with God First

**T**O GET to the truth I recommend a plain text Bible and the diligent application of two knees to the floor. Beware of too many footnotes. The rabbis of Israel took to appending notes to the inspired text, with the result that a great body of doctrine grew up which finally crowded out the Scriptures themselves. This mass of interpretation was called the Talmud and was for generations taught as the very truth of God. Jesus referred to this when He said, "Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:7).

It is a dangerous and costly practice to consult men every time we reach a dark spot in the Scriptures. We do not overlook the importance of the gift of teaching to the Church, but we do warn against the habit of taking by blind faith the opinions of men—even good men. A few minutes of earnest prayer will often give more light than hours of reading the commentaries.

And the commentators—how disappointing they are! Up to now I cannot recall a single instance where they have given me light on the point that bothered me. They usually wax eloquent on the things we all know and pass over in silence the verses "hard to be understood." In so doing they merely bear witness to their own humanity. No one knows too much, even as you and I.

An expensive cover and a complicated index will often awe the young seeker into a state of mental passivity where he would never dare to disagree with what he reads on those sacred pages. There is something about the smell of a well-bound book that is hard to resist! Well, reading another commentator will serve as a corrective against a too-great credulity, for they frequently disagree with each other. The shock produced by an irresistible force meeting an immovable body is small compared with that experienced by a young Christian who for the first time finds two "infallible" teachers contradicting each other. But if the

fledgling saint can survive the shock he will be better off, for he will be driven to trust the Holy Spirit for light, and that is worth almost any price.

The best rule is: Go to God first about the meaning of any text. Then consult the teachers. They may have found a grain of wheat you had overlooked.

## The Puttering Pastor

**C**HRISTIAN MINISTRY is conceded to be the noblest of professions. It is also attended with greatest dangers.

The ministry affords limitless opportunity for the lazy man to indulge his talents. Doing nothing can be accomplished more gracefully in the Lord's work than anywhere else for the simple reason that the minister has no one to check up on him. The average church requires little of its pastor except to mark time decorously; the preacher with a propensity for loafing is strongly tempted to do just that.

Many a minister who would be shocked at the thought of doing nothing nevertheless gets nothing done because he has acquired the habit of frittering away his time. Late hours, requiring compensatory late sleeping, several trips to the store, assisting with the family laundry, standing in line to buy a reservation for his wife's niece who is going on a visit to Keokuk—these things, or others like them, eat up the time and leave him spent and empty at the end of the day.

After a day occupied with trifles, our prophet faces his audience in the evening mentally and spiritually out of tune and altogether unprepared for the holy task before him. His confused smile is attributed to his humility. The audience is tolerant. They know that he has nothing worthwhile to say, but they figure that he has been so busy with his pastoral duties he has not had time to study. They generously forgive him and accept his threadbare offering as the best they can expect under the circumstances.

However much we may dislike to hear it, loafing and puttering are deadly habits for the young minister. He will either conquer them or they will break him.



## The Value of Good Habits

**A** HABIT is a useful servant, but a dangerous master.

The better the habit the greater the danger.

Bad habits disturb the conscience and create a sense of inward uneasiness. Often a sudden shock, the sight of death, a good gospel sermon, the quiet rebuke of a friend will throw the man of evil habit into a state of mental anguish. Isaiah had it right when he said, "The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt" (Isaiah 57:20).

Good habits may, on the contrary, unless great care is taken, put the heart into a smiling sleep. "As far as that matter is concerned," says the conscience, "I need trouble myself no more about it. It is taken care of." Thus the life loses its spontaneity and becomes conventionalized. The good act is continued after the reason for it has gone from the life. The result is a perfunctory and wooden Christianity.

Religious habits can deceive the possessor as few things can do. As far as I know, a habit and a mud turtle are the only things in nature that can walk around after they are dead. For instance, many a man has returned thanks at the table faithfully for many years and yet has never once really prayed from the heart during all that time. The life died out of the habit long ago, but the habit itself persisted in the form of a meaningless mumble.

The point is that we should put away every useless habit, reject all patented religious phrases, refuse to follow other people's visions. We should insist upon living wholly from within. This encourages a childlike simplicity in life, very pleasing to God, and a source of great strength to the soul.

## God Evaluates Our Average

**T**O GET quick and easy results at the altar the evangelist will sometimes resort to a little gem of specious logic cast in some such language as this: "If you have ever enjoyed a better moment than you are enjoying right now, then you are backslidden, and you should come forward at once and get right with God."

That net is practically sucker-proof; nothing will slip through but the polliwogs.

Look at the record: Moses was forty days and forty nights on the mount in intimate communion with God; after that he came down to a lower plane and spent forty years walking by faith in obedience to the Lord's instructions. Isaiah had one mighty revolutionizing vision of God high and lifted up, but as far as we know he never had another. Paul was caught up once into the third heaven; from then on he had to be content to walk the earth like any other man.

In baseball a man will sometimes "play over his own head," which is to say that he will, for a brief time, rise above his average ability as a day-by-day player. No manager would sign a man on such an erratic performance. He wants to know what the player is capable of doing game after game against all kinds of opposition.

A man's true character is the average of his life, not the extremes. David reached the top when he slew Goliath and the bottom when he slew Uriah. In one instance he went above his average, in the other he went below it. The real David is found between the two.

We should not be too much elated over a victory nor too much discouraged over a defeat. God reckons the average and will evaluate us accordingly.

## The State of Ancient Saints

**I**T IS disappointing that there are so few sweet old saints among us. The nature of the gospel is such as to encourage us to expect the children of God to grow tender and more Christlike as the years go on. Old age should find us like the woods in autumn, lovely with the varied pastels of the Spirit. Too often it finds us bitter, intolerant and a sore trial to those who have to live with us.

There are few sadder sights than that of an old man who has outlived his generation and his usefulness, but who, for some reason, still lingers on, staring with crusty disfavor at any servant of the Lord, however humble, who may be for the moment in a place of prominence in the kingdom of God.

The knowledge that he is no longer needed is like gall and wormwood to the soul of such a man. All who once appreciated him are gone. He is filled with sour resentment that the work of the Lord can manage to muddle along without him, and he takes arbitrary revenge by discounting every effort made by anyone now living.

Like a robin in the snow he stands silent as the chill of his own spirit. When he does open his mouth it is to chirp a querulous and reminiscent elegy to a glory that has departed from the earth. He is fully convinced that the grave has reaped a total harvest of righteousness (his lone self excepted) and that no man now on earth can be big or honest or sincere. If there were any such they would be dead; anyone should be able to see that!

Lot's wife looked back and was turned to salt; there is danger that we look back and be turned to acid.

## Jesus Christ Is Every Man's Contemporary

**J**ESUS CHRIST is every man's contemporary. With Him there is nothing new and nothing old, no one modern and no one old-fashioned.

To praise the past and cry down the present is to localize Christ in time and strip Him of some of the very qualities which enabled Him to be the Savior of the world.

There is no need to speak of "the time of Christ" nor to sing plaintively, "I should like to have been with Him then." This is the time of Christ. Today is as near to Him as yesterday. It is as near to Him from the twentieth century as from the first, from North America as from Jerusalem.

Jesus stands at the center of the world's life. He is (if we may borrow a figure) the Hub of the wheel; everyone and everything are on the rim, equally near to Him and equally distant from Him.

Christ is not only the Son of Abraham; He is the Son of Adam and the Son of man. So He is every man's countryman, at home anywhere. H.G. Wells has given it as his opinion that Buddhism is the best of the world's great religions. He admits, however, that it can flourish in no countries except those having a warm climate! Christianity knows no such limitations. Christ stands above and outside of race and time, of climate and social customs.

Salvation is an internal thing and is wholly independent of externals. Any man who will admit Christ into his heart will recognize Him instantly as a Brother.

## The Necessity of Honoring God

**T**HE GLORY of God is the health of the universe; the essential soundness of things requires that He be honored among created intelligences.

Where God is honored fully is heaven, and it is heaven for that reason; where He is honored not at all is hell, and for that cause it is hell. Among men we see a mixture of honor and dishonor. Basically this is the cause back of earth's tragic, confused history.

God has not finished with His saints till He has brought them to a place where they honor Him on earth as He is honored in heaven.

God gives away His full purpose in redeeming man when He says, "Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (Isaiah 49:3).

If we can convince God that we are sold out to His high honor, the problem of unanswered prayer is solved. God will withhold nothing from that man who is determined to live to His glory alone.

The sinful instinct to arrogate to ourselves some amount at least of praise is deep-seated and hard to destroy.

But there is hope for us nevertheless.

At the cross human pride withers like the cursed fig tree, from the root up. There will be a period of agonized struggle when life-loving old Adam is led out to die; but if the Christian will have the courage to go through with it, the whole quality of his life will be changed from that moment on.

God has said, "them that honour me I will honour" (1 Samuel 2:30). He can honor us only when He knows His glory is safe in our hands.

## The Danger of Judging Others

**T**HE DEEPEST of all deep things is the human heart. No man can fully know his own, and it follows that no man can ever know the heart of another.

For this reason it is dangerous to judge any Christian's conduct or character. There is too great a likelihood that we will misjudge from plain lack of knowledge of our subject.

The Christian public has been amazingly kind to me. I have not one fault to find with the treatment accorded me by my longsuffering brethren. But when I have sometimes run afoul of the critics it has been my experience to have them fasten on some trifling fault that did not matter, as the old writers would say, "a farthing," and blindly pass over the really serious ones without noticing them.

I have on a few occasions been toasted a rich brown over some personal idiosyncrasy which could not possibly do any harm, while the big weaknesses that really give me trouble were either ignored altogether or made to pass for virtues.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1) is still a mighty safe rule to follow. The Christian who will be always panning others will surely come in for a session on the hot griddle himself sooner or later. And he won't get much help from the Lord when the time comes. He asked for it.

## The Cross Did Not Change God

**T**HE CROSS did not change God. "I am the LORD, I change not" (Malachi 3:6).

The work of Christ on the cross did not influence God to love us, did not increase that love by one degree, did not open any fount of grace or mercy in His heart. He had loved us from old eternity and needed nothing to stimulate that love. The cross is not responsible for God's love; rather it was His love which conceived the cross as the one method by which we could be saved.

God felt no different toward us after Christ had died for us, for in the mind of God Christ had already died before the foundation of the world. God never saw us except through atonement. The human race could not have existed one day in its fallen state had not Christ spread His mantle of atonement over it. And this He did in eternal purpose long ages before they led Him out to die on the hill above Jerusalem. All God's dealings with man have been conditioned upon the cross.

Much unworthy thinking has been done about the cross, and a lot of injurious teaching has resulted. The idea that Christ rushed in breathless to catch the upraised arm of God ready to descend in fury upon us is not drawn from the Bible. It has arisen from the necessary limitations of human speech in attempting to set forth the fathomless mystery of atonement.

Neither is the picture of Christ, going out trembling to the cross to appease the wrath of God, in accordance with the truth. The Scriptures never represent the Persons of the Trinity as opposed to or in disagreement with each other. The Holy Three have ever been and will forever be one in essence, in love, in purpose.

We have been redeemed not by one Person of the Trinity putting Himself against another, but by the three Persons working in the ancient and glorious harmony of the Godhead.

## God Blesses Us on His Terms

**G**OD'S LOVE makes His blessings available to all without money and without price. Grace operates in a sphere where human merit cannot enter. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

We must not, however, overlook the fact that God's benefits are dispensed according to promise, and that each promise carries with it specific conditions which must be met if it is to be honored. Every blessing has its own terms; meet them and the blessing is yours.

Our chief difficulty in dealing with God is the habit of trying to make our own terms instead of meeting the terms already laid down. With our mouths we sturdily deny that weeping has any value, but I fear that in our hearts we are often guilty of embracing the heresy of tears. We sometimes allow our natural sympathy to throw us over on the side of rebellious humanity against **God Himself**.

That there are holy tears no one will deny, but who has not seen at an altar the vexed weeping of stubborn souls angry with God for refusing to yield His sovereignty to their importunate demands?

It would be well for us if we could learn early the futility of trying to obtain forbidden things by overpersuading God. He will not be thus stampeded. Anything that falls within the circle of His will He gives freely to whosoever asks aright, but not days or weeks of fasting and prayer will persuade Him to alter anything that has gone out of His mouth.

In fairness to the whole truth we should recall two apparent exceptions to this rule. God did bend His will to give Israel flesh in the wilderness, and He did, against His own desires, give them a king. But for these two breaches Israel had to pay in tears and blood.

That is a price too high to consider.



If we would but quickly surrender to the will of God we could the sooner begin to enjoy His blessings.

If our love were but more simple  
We should take Him at His word:  
And our lives would be all sunshine  
In the sweetness of our Lord.