

"Tolerance of Religious Error"
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. II sermon 23
St. John Henry Newman
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"He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith." Acts xi. 24.

1 [Note] WHEN Christ came to form a people unto Himself to show forth His praise, He
2 took of every kind. Highways and hedges, the streets and lanes of the city, furnished
3 guests for His supper, as well as the wilderness of Judea, or the courts of the Temple.
4 His first followers are a sort of type of the general Church, in which many and various
5 minds are as one. And this is one use, if we duly improve it, of our Festivals; which set
6 before us specimens of the Divine life under the same diversity of outward
7 circumstances, advantages, and dispositions, which we discern around us. The especial
8 grace poured upon the Apostles and their associates, whether miraculous or moral, had
9 no tendency to destroy their respective peculiarities of temper and character, to invest
10 them with a sanctity beyond our imitation, or to preclude failings and errors which may
11 be our warning. It left them, as it found them, men. Peter and John, for instance, the
12 simple fishers on the lake of Gennesareth, Simon the Zealot, Matthew the busy tax-
13 gatherer, and the ascetic Baptist, how different are these,—first, from each other,—
14 then, from Apollos the eloquent Alexandrian, Paul the learned Pharisee, Luke the
15 physician, or the Eastern Sages, whom we celebrate at the Feast of the Epiphany; and
16 these again how different from the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the Innocents, or Simeon
17 and Anna, who are brought before us at the Feast of the Purification, or the women who
18 ministered to our Lord, Mary the wife of Cleophas, the Mother of James and John, Mary
19 Magdalene, Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus; or again, from the widow with her two
20 mites, the woman whose issue of blood was staunched, from her who poured forth tears
21 of penitence upon His feet, and the ignorant Samaritan at the well! Moreover, the
22 definiteness and evident truth of many of the pictures presented to us in the Gospels
23 serve to realize to us the history, and to help our faith, while at the same time they
24 afford us abundant instruction. Such, for instance, is the immature ardour of James and
25 John, the sudden fall of Peter, the obstinacy of Thomas, and the cowardice of Mark. St.
26 Barnabas furnishes us with a lesson in his own way; nor shall I be wanting in piety
27 towards that Holy Apostle, if on this his day I hold him forth, not only in the peculiar
28 graces of his character, but in those parts of it in which he becomes our warning, not
29 our example.

30 The text says, that "he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith." This praise
31 of goodness is explained by his very name, Barnabas, "the Son of Consolation," which
32 was given him, as it appears, to mark his character of kindness, gentleness,
33 considerateness, warmth of heart, compassion, and munificence.

34 His acts answer to this account of him. The first we hear of him is his selling some land
35 which was his, and giving the proceeds to the Apostles, to distribute to his poorer
36 brethren. The next notice of him sets before us a second deed of kindness, of as
37 amiable, though of a more private character. "When Saul was come to Jerusalem, he

38 assayed to join himself to the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and believed not
39 that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the Apostles, and
40 declared how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that He had spoken to him, and how
41 he had preached boldly at Damascus, in the name of Jesus." [Acts ix. 26, 27.] Next, he
42 is mentioned in the text, and still with commendation of the same kind. How had he
43 shown that "he was a good man?" by going on a mission of love to the first converts at
44 Antioch. Barnabas, above the rest, was honoured by the Church with this work, which
45 had in view the encouraging and binding together in unity and strength this incipient fruit
46 of God's grace. "When he came, and had seen the grace of God, he was glad" (surely
47 this circumstance itself is mentioned by way of showing his character); "and exhorted
48 them all that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord." Thus he may even
49 be accounted the founder of the Church of Antioch, being aided by St. Paul, whom he
50 was successful in bringing thither. Next, on occasion of an approaching famine, he is
51 joined with St. Paul in being the minister of the Gentiles' bounty towards the poor saints
52 of Judea. Afterwards, when the Judaizing Christians troubled the Gentile converts with
53 the Mosaic ordinances, Barnabas was sent with the same Apostle and others from the
54 Church of Jerusalem to relieve their perplexity. Thus the Scripture history of him does
55 but answer to his name, and is scarcely more than a continued exemplification of his
56 characteristic grace. Moreover, let the particular force of his name be observed. The
57 Holy Ghost is called our Paraclete, as assisting, advocating, encouraging, comforting
58 us; now, as if to put the highest honour upon the Apostle, the same term is applied to
59 him. He is called "the Son of Consolation," or the Paraclete; and in accordance with this
60 honourable title, we are told, that when the Gentile converts of Antioch had received
61 from his and St. Paul's hands the Apostles' decision against the Judaizers, "they
62 rejoiced for the *consolation*."

63 On the other hand, on two occasions his conduct is scarcely becoming an Apostle, as
64 instancing somewhat of that infirmity which uninspired persons of his peculiar character
65 frequently exhibit. Both are cases of indulgence towards the faults of others, yet in a
66 different way; the one, an over-easiness in a matter of doctrine, the other, in a matter of
67 conduct. With all his tenderness for the Gentiles, yet on one occasion he could not
68 resist indulging the prejudices of some Judaizing brethren, who came from Jerusalem to
69 Antioch. Peter first was carried away; before they came, "he did eat with the Gentiles,
70 but when they were come, he withdrew, and separated himself, fearing them which
71 were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch,
72 that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation." The other instance was
73 his indulgent treatment of Mark, his sister's son, which occasioned the quarrel between
74 him and St. Paul. "Barnabas determined to take with them," on their Apostolic journey,
75 "John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who
76 departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work." [Gal. ii. 12,
77 13. Acts xv. 37, 38.]

78 Now it is very plain what description of character, and what kind of lesson, is brought
79 before us in the history of this Holy Apostle. Holy he was, full of the Holy Ghost and of
80 faith; still the characteristics and the infirmities of man remained in him, and thus he is
81 "unto us for an ensample," consistently with the reverence we feel towards him as one

of the foundations of the Christian Church. He is an ensample and warning to us, not only as showing us what we ought to be, but as evidencing how the highest gifts and graces are corrupted in our sinful nature, if we are not diligent to walk step by step, according to the light of God's commandments. Be our mind as heavenly as it may be, most loving, most holy, most zealous, most energetic, most peaceful, yet if we look off from Him for a moment, and look towards ourselves, at once these excellent tempers fall into some extreme or mistake. Charity becomes over-easiness, holiness is tainted with spiritual pride, zeal degenerates into fierceness, activity eats up the spirit of prayer, hope is heightened into presumption. We cannot guide ourselves. God's revealed word is our sovereign rule of conduct; and therefore, among other reasons, is faith so principal a grace, for it is the directing power which receives the commands of Christ, and applies them to the heart.

And there is particular reason for dwelling upon the character of St. Barnabas in this age, because he may be considered as the type of the better sort of men among us, and those who are most in esteem. The world itself indeed is what it ever has been, ungodly; but in every age it chooses some one or other peculiarity of the Gospel as the badge of its particular fashion for the time being, and sets up as objects of admiration those who eminently possess it. Without asking, therefore, how far men act from Christian principle, or only from the imitation of it, or from some mere secular or selfish motive, yet, certainly, this age, as far as appearance goes, may be accounted in its character not unlike Barnabas, as being considerate, delicate, courteous, and generous-minded in all that concerns the intercourse of man with man. There is a great deal of thoughtful kindness among us, of conceding in little matters, of scrupulous propriety of words, and a sort of code of liberal and honourable dealing in the conduct of society. There is a steady regard for the rights of individuals, nay, as one would fain hope in spite of misgivings, for the interest of the poorer classes, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. In such a country as ours, there must always be numberless instances of distress after all; yet the anxiety to relieve it existing among the more wealthy classes is unquestionable. And it is as unquestionable that we are somewhat disposed to regard ourselves favourably in consequence; and in the midst of our national trials and fears, to say (nay, sometimes with real humility and piety) that we do trust that these characteristic virtues of the age may be allowed to come up as a memorial before God, and to plead for us. When we think of the commandments, we know Charity to be the first and greatest; and we are tempted to ask with the young ruler, "What lack we yet?"

I ask, then, by way of reply, does not our kindness too often degenerate into weakness, and thus become not Christian Charity, but lack of Charity, as regards the objects of it? Are we sufficiently careful to do what is right and just, rather than what is pleasant? do we clearly understand our professed principles, and do we keep to them under temptation?

The history of St. Barnabas will help us to answer this question honestly. Now I fear we lack altogether, what he lacked in certain occurrences in it, firmness, manliness, godly severity. I fear it must be confessed, that our kindness, instead of being directed and

braced by principle, too often becomes languid and unmeaning; that it is exerted on improper objects, and out of season, and thereby is uncharitable in two ways, indulging those who should be chastised, and preferring their comfort to those who are really deserving. We are over-tender in dealing with sin and sinners. We are deficient in jealous custody of the revealed Truths which Christ has left us. We allow men to speak against the Church, its ordinances, or its teaching, without remonstrating with them. We do not separate from heretics, nay, we object to the word as if uncharitable; and when such texts are brought against us as St. John's command, not to show hospitality towards them, we are not slow to answer that they do not apply to us. Now I scarcely can suppose any one really means to say for certain, that these commands are superseded in the present day, and is quite satisfied upon the point; it will rather be found that men who so speak, merely wish to put the subject from them. For a long while they have forgotten that there were any such commands in Scripture; they have lived as though there were not, and not being in circumstances which immediately called for the consideration of them, they have familiarized their minds to a contrary view of the matter, and built their opinions upon it. When reminded of the fact, they are sorry to have to consider it, as they perhaps avow. They perceive that it interferes with the line of conduct to which they are accustomed. They are vexed, not as if allowing themselves to be wrong, but as feeling conscious that a plausible argument (to say the least) may be maintained against them. And instead of daring to give this argument fair play, as in honesty they ought, they hastily satisfy themselves that objections may be taken against it, use some vague terms of disapprobation against those who use it, recur to, and dwell upon, their own habitual view of the benevolent and indulgent spirit of the Gospel, and then dismiss the subject altogether, as if it had never been brought before them.

Observe *how* they rid themselves of it; it is by confronting it with other views of Christianity, which they consider incompatible with it: whereas the very problem which Christian duty requires us to accomplish, is the reconciling in our conduct opposite virtues. It is not difficult (comparatively speaking) to cultivate single virtues. A man takes some one partial view of his duty, whether severe or kindly, whether of action or of meditation: he enters into it with all his might, he opens his heart to its influence, and allows himself to be sent forward on its current. This is not difficult: there is no anxious vigilance or self-denial in it. On the contrary, there is a pleasure often in thus sweeping along in one way; and especially in matters of giving and conceding. Liberality is always popular, whatever be the subject of it, and excites a glow of pleasure and self-approbation in the giver, even though it involves no sacrifice, nay, is exercised upon the property of others. Thus in the sacred province of religion, men are led on,—without any bad principle, without that utter dislike or ignorance of the Truth, or that self-conceit, which are chief instruments of Satan at this day, nor again from mere cowardice or worldliness, but from thoughtlessness, a sanguine temper, the excitement of the moment, the love of making others happy, susceptibility of flattery, and the habit of looking only one way,—led on to give up Gospel Truths, to consent to open the Church to the various denominations of error which abound among us, or to alter our Services so as to please the scoffer, the lukewarm, or the vicious. To be kind is their one principle of action; and, when they find offence taken at the Church's creed, they begin

170 to think how they may modify or curtail it, under the same sort of feeling as would lead
171 them to be generous in a money transaction, or to accommodate another at the price of
172 personal inconvenience. Not understanding that their religious privileges are a trust to
173 be handed on to posterity, a sacred property entailed upon the Christian family, and
174 their own in enjoyment rather than in possession, they act the spendthrift, and are lavish
175 of the goods of others. Thus, for instance, they speak against the Anathemas of the
176 Athanasian Creed, or of the Communion Service, or of certain of the Psalms, and wish
177 to rid themselves of them.

178 Undoubtedly, even the best specimens of these men are deficient in a due appreciation
179 of the Christian Mysteries, and of their own responsibility in preserving and transmitting
180 them; yet, some of them are such truly "good" men, so amiable and feeling, so
181 benevolent to the poor, and of such repute among all classes, in short, fulfil so
182 excellently the office of shining like lights in the world, and witnesses of Him "who went
183 about doing good," that those who most deplore their failing, will still be most desirous of
184 excusing them personally, while they feel it a duty to withstand them. Sometimes it may
185 be, that these persons cannot bring themselves to think evil of others; and harbour men
186 of heretical opinions or immoral life from the same easiness of temper which makes
187 them fit subjects for the practices of the cunning and selfish in worldly matters. And
188 sometimes they fasten on certain favorable points of character in the person they
189 should discountenance, and cannot get themselves to attend to any but these; arguing
190 that he is certainly pious and well-meaning, and that his errors plainly do himself no
191 harm;—whereas the question is not about their effects on this or that individual, but
192 simply whether they *are* errors; and again, whether they are not certain to be injurious to
193 the mass of men, or on the long run, as it is called. Or they cannot bear to hurt another
194 by the expression of their disapprobation, though it be that "his soul may be saved in the
195 day of the Lord." Or perhaps they are deficient in keenness of intellectual perception as
196 to the moral mischief of certain speculative opinions, as they consider them; and not
197 knowing their ignorance enough to forbear the use of private judgment, nor having faith
198 enough to acquiesce in God's word, or the decision of His Church, they incur the
199 responsibility of serious changes. Or, perhaps they shelter themselves behind some
200 confused notion, which they have taken up, of the peculiar character of our own Church,
201 arguing that they belong to a tolerant Church, that it is but consistent as well as right in
202 her members to be tolerant, and that they are but exemplifying tolerance in their own
203 conduct, when they treat with indulgence those who are lax in creed or conduct. Now, if
204 by the tolerance of our Church, it be meant that she does not countenance the use of
205 fire and sword against those who separate from her, so far she is truly called a tolerant
206 Church; but she is not tolerant of error, as those very formularies, which these men wish
207 to remove, testify; and if she retains within her bosom proud intellects, and cold hearts,
208 and unclean hands, and dispenses her blessings to those who disbelieve or are
209 unworthy of them, this arises from other causes, certainly not from her principles; else
210 were she guilty of Eli's sin, which may not be imagined.

211 Such is the defect of mind suggested to us by the instances of imperfection recorded of
212 St. Barnabas; it will be more clearly understood by contrasting him with St. John. We
213 cannot compare good men together in their points of excellence; but whether the one or

214 the other of these Apostles had the greater share of the spirit of love, we all know that
215 anyhow the Beloved Disciple abounded in it. His General Epistle is full of exhortations to
216 cherish that blessed temper, and his name is associated in our minds with such
217 heavenly dispositions as are more immediately connected with it,—contemplativeness,
218 serenity of soul, clearness of faith. Now see in what he differed from Barnabas; in
219 uniting charity with a firm maintenance of "the Truth as it is in Jesus." So far were his
220 fervour and exuberance of charity from interfering with his zeal for God, that rather, the
221 more he loved men, the more he desired to bring before them the great unchangeable
222 Verities to which they must submit, if they would see life, and on which a weak
223 indulgence suffers them to shut their eyes. He loved the brethren, but he "loved them in
224 the Truth." [3 John 1.] He loved them for the Living Truth's sake which had redeemed
225 them, for the Truth which was in them, for the Truth which was the measure of their
226 spiritual attainments. He loved the Church so honestly, that he was stern towards those
227 who troubled her. He loved the world so wisely, that he preached the Truth in it; yet, if
228 men rejected it, he did not love them so inordinately as to forget the supremacy of the
229 Truth, as the Word of Him who is above all. Let it never be forgotten then, when we
230 picture to ourselves this saintly Apostle, this unearthly Prophet, who fed upon the sights
231 and voices of the world of spirits, and looked out heavenwards day by day for Him
232 whom he had once seen in the flesh, that this is he who gives us that command about
233 shunning heretics, which whether of force in this age or not, still certainly in any age is
234 (what men now call) severe; and that this command of his is but in unison with the
235 fearful descriptions he gives in other parts of his inspired writings of the Presence, the
236 Law, and the Judgments of Almighty God. Who can deny that the Apocalypse from
237 beginning to end is a very fearful book; I may say, the most fearful book in Scripture, full
238 of accounts of the wrath of God? Yet, it is written by the Apostle of love. It is possible,
239 then, for a man to be at once kind as Barnabas, yet zealous as Paul. Strictness and
240 tenderness had no "sharp contention" in the breast of the Beloved Disciple; they found
241 their perfect union, yet distinct exercise, in the grace of Charity, which is the fulfilling of
242 the whole Law.

243 I wish I saw any prospect of this element of zeal and holy sternness springing up among
244 us, to temper and give character to the languid, unmeaning benevolence which we
245 misname Christian love. I have no hope of my country till I see it. Many schools of
246 Religion and Ethics are to be found among us, and they all profess to magnify, in one
247 shape or other, what they consider the principle of love; but what they lack is, a firm
248 maintenance of that characteristic of the Divine Nature, which, in accommodation to our
249 infirmity, is named by St. John and his brethren, the wrath of God. Let this be well
250 observed. There are men who are advocates of Expedience; these, as far as they are
251 religious at all, resolve conscience into an instinct of mere benevolence, and refer all the
252 dealings of Providence with His creatures to the same one Attribute. Hence, they
253 consider all punishment to be remedial, a means to an end, deny that the woe
254 threatened against sinners is of eternal duration, and explain away the doctrine of the
255 Atonement. There are others, who place religion in the mere exercise of the excited
256 feelings; and these too, look upon their God and Saviour, as far (that is) as they
257 themselves are concerned, solely as a God of love. They believe themselves to be
258 converted from sin to righteousness by the mere manifestation of that love to their

souls, drawing them on to Him; and they imagine that that same love, untired by any possible transgressions on their part, will surely carry forward every individual so chosen to final triumph. Moreover, as accounting that Christ has already done everything for their salvation, they do not feel that a moral change is necessary on their part, or rather, they consider that the Vision of revealed love works it in them spontaneously; in either case dispensing with all laborious efforts, all "fear and trembling," all self-denial in "working out their salvation," nay, looking upon such qualifications with suspicion, as leading to a supposed self-confidence and spiritual pride. Once more, there are others of a mystical turn of mind, with untutored imaginations and subtle intellects, who follow the theories of the old Gentile philosophy. These, too, are accustomed to make love the one principle of life and providence in heaven and earth, as if it were a pervading Spirit of the world, finding a sympathy in every heart, absorbing all things into itself, and kindling a rapturous enjoyment in all who contemplate it. They sit at home speculating, and separate moral perfection from action. These men either hold, or are in the way to hold, that the human soul is pure by nature; sin an external principle corrupting it; evil, destined to final annihilation; Truth attained by means of the imagination; conscience, a taste; holiness, a passive contemplation of God; and obedience, a mere pleasurable work. It is difficult to discriminate accurately between these three schools of opinion, without using words of unseemly familiarity; yet I have said enough for those who wish to pursue the subject. Let it be observed then, that these three systems, however different from each other in their principles and spirit, yet all agree in this one respect, viz., in overlooking that the Christian's God is represented in Scripture, not only as a God of love, but also as "a consuming fire." Rejecting the testimony of Scripture, no wonder they also reject that of conscience, which assuredly forebodes ill to the sinner, but which, as the narrow religionist maintains, is not the voice of God at all,—or is a mere benevolence, according to the disciple of Utility,—or, in the judgment of the more mystical sort, a kind of passion for the beautiful and sublime. Regarding thus "the goodness" only, and not "the severity of God," no wonder that they ungird their loins and become effeminate; no wonder that their ideal notion of a perfect Church, is a Church which lets every one go on his way, and disclaims any right to pronounce an opinion, much less inflict a censure on religious error.

But those who think themselves and others in risk of an eternal curse, dare not be thus indulgent. Here then lies our want at the present day, for this we must pray,—that a reform may come in the spirit and power of Elias. We must pray God thus "to revive His work in the midst of the years;" to send us a severe Discipline, the Order of St. Paul and St. John, "speaking the Truth in love," and "loving in the Truth,"—a Witness of Christ, "knowing the terror of the Lord," fresh from the presence of Him "whose head and hairs are white like wool, as white as snow, and whose eyes are as a flame of fire, and out of His mouth a sharp sword,"—a Witness not shrinking from proclaiming His wrath, as a real characteristic of His glorious nature, though expressed in human language for our sakes, proclaiming the narrowness of the way of life, the difficulty of attaining Heaven, the danger of riches, the necessity of taking up our cross, the excellence and beauty of self-denial and austerity, the hazard of disbelieving the Catholic Faith, and the duty of zealously contending for it. Thus only will the tidings of mercy come with force to the

304 souls of men, with a constraining power and with an abiding impress, when hope and
305 fear go together. Then only will Christians be successful in fight, "quitting themselves
306 like men," conquering and ruling the fury of the world, and maintaining the Church in
307 purity and power, when they condense their feelings by a severe discipline, and are
308 loving in the midst of firmness, strictness, and holiness. Then only can we prosper
309 (under the blessing and grace of Him who is the Spirit both of love and of truth), when
310 the heart of Paul is vouchsafed to us, to withstand even Peter and Barnabas, if ever
311 they are overcome by mere human feelings, to "know henceforth no man after the
312 flesh," to put away from us sister's son, or nearer relative, to relinquish the sight of
313 them, the hope of them, and the desire of them, when He commands, who raises up
314 friends even to the lonely, if they trust in Him, and will give us "within His walls a name
315 better than of sons and of daughters, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." [Isa.
316 lvi. 4, 5.]

Note

317 The Feast of St. Barnabas the Apostle.