

THE EDIFICATION IMPLIED IN THE THOUGHT THAT AS  
AGAINST GOD WE ARE ALWAYS IN THE WRONG

PRAYER

OUR Father in heaven, teach us to pray aright, that our hearts may disclose themselves to Thee in prayer and supplication, and may conceal no hidden thought which we know is not well-pleasing to Thee, nor any secret fear that Thou wilt deny us anything which is truly to our advantage; so that the laboring thoughts, the restless mind, the fearful heart may there find rest where alone it is to be found, as we rejoice always in giving thanks to Thee, and gladly confess that as against Thee we are always in the wrong.

*The Holy Gospel is written in the nineteenth chapter of  
St. Luke, beginning with the forty-first verse.*

“And when he drew nigh, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known in this thy day, even thou, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, when thine enemies shall cast up a bank about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall dash thee to the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.

“And he entered into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold, saying unto them, And my house shall be a house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of robbers.

“And he was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the city sought to destroy him: and they could not find what they might do; for the people all hung upon him, listening.”

What the Spirit through visions and dreams had revealed to the prophets, what they in a premonitory voice had proclaimed to one generation after another, the rejection of the elect people, the dreadful destruction of proud Jerusalem—that was drawing nearer and nearer. Christ goes up to Jerusalem. He is not a prophet who proclaims future events, His speech does not awaken anxiety and alarm, for what still is hidden He sees directly before His eyes. He does not prophesy, since the time for that is past—He weeps over Jerusalem. And yet the city was still standing in its glory, and the temple still held its head high, higher

than any structure in the world, and Christ Himself says, "If thou hadst known in this thy day the things which are for thy good!" But to this he adds, "Now they are hid from thine eyes." In God's eternal counsel its destruction is determined, and salvation is hid from the eyes of its inhabitants. Was the generation then living more wicked than the foregoing generations to which it owed its life? Was the whole nation corrupt, was there none righteous in Jerusalem, not a single one who could check God's wrath? Among all those from whom salvation was hid was there no pious man? And if there was one, then was no gate opened for him in the time of anguish and distress when the enemy besieged the city round about and pressed it upon every side? Did no angel descend and save him when all the gates were still shut, was no miracle wrought for his sake? No, its destruction was determined; in vain the besieged city looked in anguish for a way out, the army of the enemy pressed it in its mighty embrace, and no one escaped, and heaven remained shut and sent forth no angel except the angel of death which brandished its sword over the city. For the sin of the people this generation must suffer, for the sin of this generation every individual in it must suffer. Shall then the righteous suffer with the unrighteous? Is this the jealousy of God, that He visits the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation—in such a way that He does not punish the fathers but the children? What answer should we make? Should we say, "There have elapsed now nearly two thousand years since those days; such a horror the world never saw before and never again will see; we thank God that we live in peace and security, that the scream of anguish from those days reaches us only very faintly; we will hope and believe that our days and those of our children may pass in quietness, unaffected by the storms of existence? We do not feel strong enough to reflect upon such things, but we are ready to thank God that we are not subjected to such trials."

Can anything be imagined more cowardly and more disconsolate than such talk? Is then the inexplicable explained by saying that it has occurred only once in the world? Or is not this the inexplicable, that it did occur? And has not this fact, the fact that it did occur, the power to make everything inexplicable, even to the most explicable events? If once it occurred in the world that man's lot was essentially different from what it ordinarily is, what assurance is there that this will not recur, what assurance that this is not the true thing, and what ordinarily occurs is the untrue? Or is the true proved to be such by the fact that it most often occurs? And does not that really often occur which those

ages witnessed? Is it not what we all of us in so many ways have experienced, that what occurs on a great scale is experienced also in a minor degree? "Think ye," said Christ, "that those Galileans whose blood Pilate commanded to be shed were sinners above all the Galileans because they suffered these things? Or the eighteen on whom the tower in Saloam fell and killed them, think ye that they were offenders above all the men that dwelt in Jerusalem?" So then those Galileans were not sinners above other men, those eighteen were not offenders above all the men that dwelt in Jerusalem—and yet the innocent shared the same lot as the guilty. It was a providential dispensation, perhaps you will say, not a punishment. But the destruction of Jerusalem was a punishment, and it fell with equal severity upon the innocent and the guilty. Hence you will not alarm yourselves by pondering such things. For that a man may have adversity and suffering, that these things as well as the rain may fall upon the just and upon the unjust, that you can comprehend, but that it should be a punishment!—and yet the Scripture so represents it. Is then the lot of the righteous like that of the unrighteous, has godly fear no promise for the life which now is, is then every uplifting thought which once made you so rich in courage and confidence only an illusion, a juggler's trick in which the child believes, the youth still hopes, but in which one who is a little older finds no blessing but only mockery and offense?

This thought shocks you, but yet it cannot and shall not acquire power to beguile you, it shall not be able to dull your soul. Righteousness you will love, righteousness you will practice early and late, though it have no reward, you still will practice it, you feel that it advances a claim which must in the end be satisfied; you will not sink back languidly and conclude that righteousness has promises but that you had forfeited them by not doing righteousness. You will not strive with men, but with God you will strive, and will not let Him go until He has blessed you. Yet the Scripture saith, "Thou shalt not cavil with God." Is it not this you are doing? Is this then again a disconsolate speech, is the Holy Scripture only given to man to humiliate him, to annihilate him? By no manner of means! When it is said, "Thou shalt not cavil with God,"<sup>2</sup> the meaning of this is that you shall not wish to prove yourself in the right before Him. There is only one way of supporting the claim that you are in the right before God—by learning that you are in the wrong. Yea, this is what you yourselves ought to wish. So when you are forbidden to cavil against God, this is an indication of your lofty station and by no means affirms that you are a lowly being which has no im-

portance for Him. The sparrow falls to the ground—in a way it is in the right before God. The lily fades—in a way it is in the right before God. Only man is in the wrong, for to him alone is reserved that which to all other creatures was denied...to be in the wrong before God.

Ought I to speak differently, ought I to remind you of a wisdom which knows how to explain everything easily enough without doing injustice either to God or man? "Man is a frail creature," it says, "and it would be unreasonable of God to require of him the impossible. One does what one can, and if a person is once in a while a little remiss, God will never forget that we are weak and imperfect men." Ought I to admire most the lofty conception of the Deity which this shrewd saying betrays, or the deep insight into the human heart, the searching consciousness which scrutinizes itself and then comes to the comfortable conclusion that one does what one can? Would it be so easy a thing for you, my hearers, to determine how much it is one can? Were you never in such danger that almost in despair you exerted your strength to the utmost and yet ardently wished you could do more? And perhaps another man was watching you with a dubious and beseeching look, wondering if you might not do more. Or were you never alarmed about yourself, so much alarmed that it seemed to you as if there were no sin so black, no selfishness so odious, that it might not sneak into you and as a foreign power gain mastery over you? Did you never sense this dread? For if you never sensed it, then do not open your mouth to reply, for you are unable to answer the question here put to you. But if you have sensed this dread, then, my hearers, I ask you, did you find repose in that saying: One does what one can? Or were you never in dread for others, have you not seen those men tottering to whom you were wont to look up with trust and confidence, and did you not hear a low voice whispering to you, "If even these men cannot accomplish the great, what then is life but vain toil and trouble, and what is faith but a snare which drags us out into the infinity in which we are unable to live? Far better, then, to forget, to relinquish every such pretension"? Did you not hear this voice? If you did not hear it, then do not open your mouth to reply, for you are unable to answer the question here put to you. But if you have heard it, my hearers, I ask you, Was this your consolation that you said, One does what one can? Was not this precisely the reason for your inquietude, that you did not know within yourself how much it is a man can do, that at one moment it seemed to you so infinitely much, at another so very little? Was it not for this reason your anxiety was so painful, that your soul could not penetrate your consciousness,

that the more earnestly you desired to act, the more heartily you wished to, so much the more dreadful became the duplicity in which you found yourself involved, wondering whether you may not have done what you could, or whether you had done what you could, but no one came to your aid?

Therefore, no earnest doubt, no really deep concern, is put to rest by the saying that one does what one can. If a man is sometimes in the right, sometimes in the wrong, to a certain degree in the right, to a certain degree in the wrong, who, then, is to decide this except man; but in deciding it may he not be to a certain degree in the right, to a certain degree in the wrong? Or is he when he judges his action a different man from the man who acted? Must doubt then prevail, constantly discovering new difficulties, and must concern walk alongside of the alarmed soul and imprint upon it the experiences it has had? Or might we prefer to be constantly in the right, in the sense that the irrational creatures are? We have, then, only the choice of being nothing before God, or the eternal torture of beginning over again every instant, but without being able to begin. For if we are to be able to determine definitely whether at the present instant we are in the right, this question must be definitely determined with a view to the preceding instant, and then further and further back.

Doubt is again stirred up, concern is again aroused; so let us strive to set them at rest by meditating upon

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Being in the wrong—can any feeling be thought of more painful than this? And do we not see that men would rather suffer anything than admit that they are in the wrong? We do not approve of such stiff-necked pride either in ourselves or in others, we think it would be wiser and better to admit it when we really are in the wrong, and accordingly we say that the pain attendant upon this admission is like a bitter medicine which will prove to be healing; but we do not attempt to conceal the fact that it is painful to be in the wrong and painful to admit it. So we endure the pain because we know that it is for our good, we trust that some day we shall succeed in opposing a stronger resistance; perhaps we may carry it so far that we very seldom are really in the wrong. This way of thinking is so natural, so obvious to everybody. There is something edifying in being in the wrong, for when we admit it, there is some prospect that it will occur more and more rarely. And

yet it was not by this consideration we proposed to set doubt at rest, it was rather by meditating upon the fact that we are always in the wrong. But if the former way of looking at it was edifying for the hope it held out that in time we might no longer be in the wrong, how can the opposite consideration also be edifying which teaches us that with respect to the future as well as the past we are always in the wrong?

Your life brings you into manifold relationships with other people, some of whom love right and justice, while others do not seem willing to practice them. They do you a wrong. Your soul is not callous to the suffering they inflict upon you, but you search and examine yourself and are convinced that you are in the right. You repose quietly and staunchly in this conviction. However much they injure me, you say, they shall not be able to deprive me of the peace of knowing that I am in the right and suffer wrong. There is a satisfaction, a joy, in this reflection which surely every one of us has tasted, and when you continue to suffer wrong, you are edified by the thought that you are in the right. This consideration is so natural, so comprehensible, so often put to the test, and yet it is not by this we would quiet doubt and allay concern, but by reflecting upon the edification implied in the thought that we are always in the wrong. Can, then, this opposite consideration have the same effect?

Your life brings you into manifold relationships with other people, to some of whom you are drawn by a more heart-felt love than you feel for others. Now if such a man who was the object of your love were to do you a wrong, it would pain you deeply, would it not? You would carefully rehearse everything that had occurred—but then would you say, I know of myself that I am in the right, this thought shall tranquilize me? Oh, if you loved him, this thought would not tranquilize you, you would explore anew every possibility. You would not be able to come to any other conclusion but that he was in the wrong, and yet this certainty would disquiet you, you would wish that you might be in the wrong, you would try whether you could not find something which might speak in his defense, and if you did not find it, you would first find comfort in the thought that you were in the wrong. Or if the responsibility were laid upon you of caring for the welfare of such a person, you would do everything in your power, and if in spite of that the other showed no appreciation and only caused you sorrow, would you cast up the account and say, I know that I have done right by him? Oh, no! If you loved him, this thought would only distress you, you would grasp at every probability, and if you found none, you would tear up the reckoning in order to be able to forget it, and you would

endeavor to edify yourself with the thought that you were in the wrong.

So it is painful to be in the wrong, and the more painful the more frequently it occurs; it is edifying to be in the wrong, and the more edifying the more frequently it occurs! That is clearly a contradiction. How can it be explained except by the fact that in the one case you are compelled to recognize that which in the other case you wish to recognize? But was not the recognition the same in both cases, and does the consideration that one wishes or does not wish exert any influence upon it? How is this to be explained, except by the consideration that in the one case you loved and in the other you did not, in other words, that in the one case you found yourself in an infinite relationship to a person, in another case in a finite relationship? So, then, it is edifying always to be in the wrong, for only the infinite edifies, not the finite.

If, then, there was a man whom you loved, and in favor of him you succeeded in deceiving your thought and yourself, you would still be in a perpetual contradiction, because you knew that you were in the right but wished that you were in the wrong and wished to believe it. On the other hand, if it was God you loved, could there be any question of such a contradiction, could you then have knowledge of anything else but what you wished to believe? Might He who is in heaven not be greater than you who dwell on the earth? Might His riches not be more abundant than your scant measure? His wisdom no deeper than your shrewdness? His holiness no greater than your righteousness? Must you not recognize this necessarily? But if you must recognize it, then there is no contradiction between your knowledge and your wish. And yet if you necessarily must recognize it, then there is no edification in the thought that you are always in the wrong, for we have said that the reason why at one time it could prove so painful to be in the wrong, and at another time edifying, was because in the one case you were compelled to recognize that which in the other case you wished to recognize. So in your relationship to God you would, it is true, be freed from the contradiction, but you would have lost the edification—and yet what we wished to ponder was precisely this: the edification in the fact that as against God we are always in the wrong.

Might it really be thus? Why was it you wished to be in the wrong with respect to a person? Because you loved. Why did you find this edifying? Because you loved. The more you loved, the less time you had to deliberate whether you were in the right or not; your love had only one wish, that you might constantly be in the wrong. So also in your relation to God. You loved God, and hence your soul could find repose

and joy only in the thought that you must always be in the wrong. It was not by the toil of thought you attained this recognition, neither was it forced upon you, for in love one finds oneself in freedom. So if thought convinced you that such was the case, that it could not be otherwise than that you must always be in the wrong, or that God must always be in the right, then this recognition followed as a logical consequence—but in fact you did not attain the certainty that you were in the wrong as a deduction from the knowledge that God was always in the right; but from love's dearest and only wish, that you might always be in the wrong, you reached the apprehension that God was always in the right. But this wish is the affair of love, hence, of freedom, and you were not in any way compelled to recognize that you were always in the wrong. So it was not by reflection you became certain that you were always in the wrong, but the certainty was due to the fact that you were edified by this thought.

So it is an edifying thought that against God we are always in the wrong. If this were not the case, if this conviction did not have its source in your whole being, that is, did not spring from the love within you, then your reflection also would have taken a different turn; you would have recognized that God is always in the right, this you are compelled to recognize, and as a consequence of this you are compelled to recognize that you are always in the wrong. This conclusion would, in fact, be rather difficult, for you may well be compelled to recognize that God is always in the right, but to make application of this to yourself, to take up this perception into your whole being, is a thing you really cannot be compelled to do. So you recognize that God is always in the right, and, as a consequence of this, that you are always in the wrong; but this recognition does not edify you. There is no edification in recognizing that God is always in the right, and so, too, there is none in any thought which follows from this by necessity. When you recognize that God is always in the right you stand aloof from God, and so, too, when you recognize as a consequence of this that you are always in the wrong. On the other hand, if in virtue of no foregoing recognition you claim and are convinced that you are always in the wrong, then you are hidden in God. This is your divine worship, your religious devotion, your godly fear.

You loved a person, you wished that with respect to him you might always be in the wrong; but, alas, he was unfaithful to you, and however reluctantly you admitted it, however much it pained you, you nevertheless would have to recognize that you were in the right in your



behavior towards him, and in the wrong for loving him so dearly. And yet your soul insisted upon loving him thus, only in this could you find peace and rest and happiness. Then your soul turned away from the finite to the infinite; there it found its object, there your love became a happy love. God I will love, you said; He bestows upon the lover all things, He fulfills my dearest, my only wish, that against Him I must be always in the wrong. Never shall any alarming doubt tear me away from Him, never shall I be terrified by the thought that I could ever find myself in the right against Him, against God I am always in the wrong.

Or is this not true, was not this your only wish, your dearest wish, and were you not seized by a terrible dread when for an instant the thought could enter into your mind that you might be in the right, that God's governance was not wisdom, but that your plans were; that God's thoughts were not righteousness, but that your pursuits were; that God's heart was not love, but that your sentiments were? And was it not your bliss that you never could love as you were loved? So, then, this thought that against God you are always in the wrong is not a truth you are compelled to recognize, not a comfort which assuages your pain, not a compensation for the loss of something better, but it is a joy in which you triumph over yourself and over the world, it is your delight, your anthem of praise, your divine worship, a demonstration that your love is a happy one, as only that love can be wherewith one loves God.

So, then, the thought that against God we are always in the wrong is an edifying thought. It is edifying that we are in the wrong, edifying that we always are. It proves its edifying power in a double way: partly by the fact that it checks doubt and allays the solicitude of doubt; partly by the fact that it animates to action.

Surely, my hearers, you will still bear in mind the wisdom which I described above. It appeared to be so trustworthy and reliable, it explained everything so easily, it was willing to conduct every man safely through life, unaffected by the storms of doubt. "One does what one can," it called out to the man who stood perplexed. And indeed it is undeniable that when one has done what one can, one is the better for it. It had nothing more to say, it vanished like a dream, or it remained as a monotonous repetition in the ear of the doubter. Then when he would put it to use, it appeared that he could not use it, it entangled him in a mesh of difficulties. He could not find time to deliberate how much he could do, for at the same time he had to be doing what he could. Or if he found time to deliberate, the test resulted in a more or

less, an approximation, but never anything exhaustive of his possibilities. How might a man be able to depict his relationship to God by a more or a less, or by an approximate definition? He then convinced himself that this wisdom was a treacherous friend, who, under the pretext of helping him, involved him in doubt, drew him alarmingly into a perpetual circle of confusion. What before had been obscure to him, but had not troubled him, became now, not any clearer, but alarming to his mind and troubling. Only by an infinite relationship to God could the doubt be calmed, only by an infinitely free relationship to God could his trouble be transformed into joy. He is in an infinite relationship to God when he recognizes that God is always in the right, in an infinitely free relationship to God when he recognizes that he himself is always in the wrong. In this way, therefore, doubt is checked, for the movement of doubt consists precisely in the fact that at one instant he might be in the right, at another in the wrong, to a certain degree in the right, to a certain degree in the wrong, and this was supposed to characterize his relationship to God. But such a relationship to God is no relationship, and it was the nutriment of doubt. In his relationship to another man it was quite possible that he might be partly in the wrong, partly in the right, to a certain degree in the wrong, to a certain degree in the right, because he, like every other man, is a finite being, and his relation to other men is a finite relation which consists in a more or a less. Therefore, so long as doubt would make the infinite relationship finite, and so long as wisdom would fill up the infinite relationship with finiteness, just so long would he remain in doubt. So whenever doubt would alarm him by the particular instance, would teach him that he suffers too much, that he is tried beyond his powers, he thereupon forgets the finite in the infinite thought that he is always in the wrong. Whenever the affliction of doubt would make him sad, he thereupon raises himself above the finite into the infinite; for the thought that he is always in the wrong is the wing whereby he soars above finitude, it is the longing wherewith he seeks God, it is the love wherein he finds God.

Against God we are always in the wrong. But does not this thought produce anaesthesia? Edifying as it may be, is it not dangerous to a person, does it not lull him into a slumber in which he dreams of a relationship to God which yet is not a real relationship, does it not consume the power of a man's will and the strength of his resolution? Not by any means! Or the man who wished to be always in the wrong with respect to another, was he dull and inactive, did he not do everything in his power to be in the right? And yet he wished only to be in the

wrong. And how could the thought that as against God we are always in the wrong be anything but an animating thought? For what else does it express but that God's love is greater than our love? Does not this thought make a man glad to act? For when he is in doubt he has no power to act. Does it not make him fervent in spirit? For when he reckons finitely the fire of the Spirit is quenched. So when your only wish is denied to you, my hearer, you are joyful nevertheless; you do not say, "God is always in the right," for in that there is no joy; you say, "Against God I am always in the wrong." Though it were you, you yourself,<sup>3</sup> that had to deny yourself your dearest wish, you are joyful nevertheless, my hearer; you do not say, "God is always in the right," for in that there is no jubilation; you say, "Against God I am always in the wrong." Though that which was your wish were what others, and you yourself in a certain sense, might call your duty, though you must not only forego your wish but in a way be unfaithful to your duty, though you were to lose not only your joy but even your honor, you are joyful nevertheless; "Against God," you say, "I am always in the wrong." Though you were to knock but it was not opened unto you, though you were to seek but you did not find, though you were to labor but acquired nothing, though you were to plant and water but saw no blessing, though heaven were to remain closed and the witness failed to appear, you are joyful in your work nevertheless; though the punishment which the iniquity of the fathers had called down were to fall upon you, you are joyful nevertheless, for against God we are always in the wrong.

Against God we are always in the wrong. This thought then checks doubt and calms its distress, it encourages and inspires to action.

Your thought has now followed the course of this exposition, perhaps hurrying swiftly ahead when it was along familiar paths it led you, slowly and perhaps reluctantly when the way was strange to you. But nevertheless you must admit that the case is as it was set forth, and your thought had no objection to raise against it. Before we separate, one question more, my hearer: did you wish, could you wish, that the case might be different? Could you wish that you might be in the right? Could you wish that that beautiful law which for thousands of years has supported the race and every generation in the race, that beautiful law, more glorious than the law which supports the stars in their courses upon the vault of heaven, could you wish that this law might burst, with more dreadful effect than if that law of nature were to lose its force and everything were to be resolved into horrid chaos? Could you wish

this? I have no word of wrath with which to terrify you; your wish must not proceed from dread of the presumptuous thought of willing to be in the right against God; I ask only, could you wish that it might be otherwise? Perhaps my voice does not possess enough strength and heartiness to penetrate into your inmost thought—O, but ask yourself, ask with the solemn uncertainty with which you would address yourself to a man who was able, you knew, by a single word to decide your happiness in life, ask yourself still more seriously, for verily it is a question of salvation. Do not check your soul's flight, do not grieve the better promptings within you, do not dull your spirit with half wishes and half thoughts, ask yourself, and continue to ask until you find the answer; for one may have known a thing many times and acknowledged it, one may have willed a thing many times and attempted it, and yet it is only by the deep inward movements, only by the indescribable emotions of the heart, that for the first time you are convinced that what you have known belongs to you, that no power can take it from you; for only the truth which edifies is truth for you.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES AND INDEX

## TO "ULTIMATUM"

1. Oehlenschläger's *Ludlams Hule. Samlede Værke* XVII, p. 176.
2. Job 40:2.
3. Really this is the experience of S.K. himself.
4. This note on which *Either/Or* ends is heard again and again in S.K.'s works. In the *Postscript* it is heard in the assertion that "Subjectivity is the truth."