

Maclaren on Proverbs 2

Sermons by Alexander Maclaren on Proverbs

Proverbs 13:7: THE POOR RICH AND THE RICH POOR

‘There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing; there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.’— PROVERBS xiii. 7 .

Two singularly-contrasted characters are set in opposition here. One, that of a man who lives like a millionaire and is a pauper; another, that of a man who lives like a pauper and is rich. The latter character, that of a man who hides and hoards his wealth, was, perhaps, more common in the days when this collection of Proverbs was put together, because in all ill-governed countries, to show wealth is a short way to get rid of it. But they have their modern representatives. We who live in a commercial community have seen many a blown-out bubble soaring and glittering, and then collapsing into a drop of soapsuds, and on the other hand, we are always hearing of notes and bank-books being found stowed away in some wretched hovel where a miser has died.

Now, I do not suppose that the author of this proverb attached any kind of moral to it in his own mind. It is simply a jotting of an observation drawn from a wide experience; and if he meant to teach any lesson by it, I suppose it was nothing more than that in regard to money, as to other things, we should avoid extremes, and should try to show what we are, and to be what we seem. But whilst thus I do not take it that there is any kind of moral or religious lesson in the writer’s mind, I may venture, perhaps, to take this saying as being a picturesque illustration, putting in vivid fashion certain great truths which apply in all regions of life, and which find their highest application in regard to Christianity, and our relation to Jesus Christ. There, too, ‘there is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing; and there is that maketh himself poor, and yet’—or one might, perhaps, say therefore —‘hath great riches.’ It is from that point of view that I wish to look at the words at this time. I must begin with recalling to your mind, I. Our universal poverty.

Whatever a man may think about himself, however he may estimate himself and conceit himself, there stand out two salient facts, the fact of universal dependence, and the fact of universal sinfulness, which ought to bear into every heart the consciousness of this poverty. A word or two about each of these two facts.

First, the fact of universal dependence. Now, wise men and deep thinkers have found a very hard problem in the question of how it is possible that there should be an infinite God and a finite universe standing, as it were, over against Him. I am not going to trouble you with the all-but-just-succeeding answers to that great problem which the various systems

of thinking have given. These lie apart from my present purpose. But what I would point out is that, whatever else may be dark and difficult about the co-existence of these two, the infinite God and the finite universe, this at least is sun-clear, that the creature depends absolutely for everything on that infinite Creator. People talk sometimes, and we are all too apt to think, as if God had made the world and left it. And we are all too apt to think that, however we may owe the origination of our own personal existence to a divine act, the act was done when we began to be, and the life was given as a gift that could be separated from the Bestower. But that is not the state of the case at all. The real fact is that life is only continued because of the continued operation on every living thing, just as being is only continued by reason of the continued operation on every existing thing, of the Divine Power. 'In Him we live,' and the life is the result of the perpetual impartation from Himself 'in whom all things consist,' according to the profound word of the Apostle. Their being depends on their union with Him. If it were possible to cut a sunbeam in two, so that the further half of it should be separated from its vital union with the great central fire from which it rushed long, long ago, that further half would pale into darkness. And if you cut the connection between God and the creature, the creature shrivels into nothing. By Him the spring buds around us unfold themselves; by Him all things are. So, at the very foundation of our being there lies absolute dependence.

In like manner, all that we call faculties, capacities, and the like, are, in a far deeper sense than the conventional use of the word 'gift' implies, bestowments from Him. The Old Testament goes to the root of the matter when, speaking of the artistic and aesthetic skill of the workers in the fine arts in the Tabernacle, it says, 'the Spirit of the Lord' taught Bezaleel; and when, even in regard to the brute strength of Samson—surely the strangest hero of faith that ever existed—it says that when 'the Spirit of the Lord came upon him,' into his giant hands there was infused the strength by which he tore the lion's jaws asunder. In like manner, all the faculties that men possess they have simply because He has given them. 'What hast thou that thou hast not received? If thou hast received, why dost thou boast thyself?' So there is a great psalm that gathers everything that makes up human life, and traces it all to God, when it says, 'They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house,' for from God comes all that sustains us; 'Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures,' for from God comes all that gladdens us; 'with Thee is the fountain of life,' for from Him flow all the tiny streams that make the life of all that live; 'in Thy light shall we see light,' for every power of perceiving, and all grace and lustre of purity, owe their source to Him. As well, then, might the pitcher boast itself of the sparkling water that it only holds, as well might the earthen jar plume itself on the treasure that has been deposited in it, as we make ourselves rich because of the riches that we have received. 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his strength. Let not the rich man glory in his riches; but he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.'

Then, turn for a moment to the second of the facts on which this universal poverty depends, and that is the fact of universal sinfulness. Ah! there is one thing that is our own

'If any power we have, it is to will.'

We have that strange faculty, which nobody has ever thoroughly explained yet, but which we all know to exist, of wrenching ourselves so far away from God, 'in whom we live and move and have our being,' that we can make our thoughts and ways, not merely lower than, but contradictory of, and antagonistic to, His thoughts, and His ways. Conscience tells us, and we all know it, that we are the causes of our own actions, though from Him come the powers by which we do them. The electricity comes from the central powerstation, but it depends on us what sort of wheels we make it drive, and what kind of work we set it to do. Make all allowances you like for circumstances—what they call nowadays 'environment,' by which formidable word some people seem to think that they have explained away a great many difficulties—make all allowances you like for inheritance—what they now call 'heredity,' by which other magic word people seem to think that they may largely obliterate the sense of responsibility and sin—allow as much as you like, in reason, for these, and there remains the indestructible consciousness in every man, 'I did it, and it was my fault that I did it; and the moral guilt remains.'

So, then, there are these two things, universal dependence and universal sinfulness, and on them is built the declaration of universal poverty. Duty is debt. Everybody knows that the two words come from the same root. What we ought is what we owe. We all owe an obedience which none of us has rendered. Ten thousand talents is the debt and—'they had nothing to pay.' We are like bankrupts that begin business with a borrowed capital, by reason of our absolute dependence; and so manage their concerns as to find themselves inextricably entangled in a labyrinth of obligations which they cannot discharge. We are all paupers. And so I come to the second point, and that is—

II. The poor rich man.

'There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.' That describes accurately the type of man of whom there are thousands; of whom there are dozens listening to me at this moment; who ignores dependence and is not conscious of sin, and so struts about in self-complacent satisfaction with himself, and knows nothing of his true condition. There is nothing more tragic—and so it would be seen to be if it were not so common—than that a man, laden, as we each of us are, with a burden of evil that we cannot get rid of, should yet conceit himself to possess merits, virtues, graces, that ought to secure for him the admiration of his fellows, or, at least, to exempt him from their censure, and which he thinks, when he thinks about it at all, may perhaps secure for him the approbation of God. 'The deceitfulness of sin' is one of its mightiest powers. There is nothing that so blinds a man to the real moral character of actions as that obstinate self-complacency which approves of a thing because it is mine. You condemn in other people the very things you do yourself. You see all their ugliness in them; you do not recognise it when it is your deed. Many of you have never ventured upon a careful examination and appraisal of your own moral and religious character. You durst not, for you are afraid that it would turn out badly. So, like some insolvent who has not the courage to face the facts, you take refuge in defective bookkeeping, and think that that is as good as being solvent. Then you have far

too low a standard, and one of the main reasons why you have so low a standard is just because the sins that you do have dulled your consciences, and like the Styrian peasants that eat arsenic, the poison does not poison you, and you do not feel yourself any the worse for it. Dear brethren! these are very rude things for me to say to you. I am saying them to myself as much as to you, and I would to God that you would listen to them, not because I say them, but because they are true. The great bulk of us know our own moral characters just as little as we know the sound of our own voices. I suppose if you could hear yourself speak you would say, 'I never knew that my voice sounded like that.' And I am quite sure that many of you, if the curtain could be drawn aside which is largely woven out of the black yarn of your own evil thoughts, and you could see yourselves as in a mirror, you would say, 'I had no notion that I looked like that.' 'There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.'

Ay! and more than that. The making of yourself rich is the sure way to prevent yourself from ever being so. We see that in all other regions of life. If a student says to himself, 'Oh! I know all that subject,' the chances are that he will not get it up any more; and the further chance is that he will be 'ploughed' when the examination-day comes. If the artist stands before the picture, and says to himself, 'Well done, that is the realisation of my ideal!' he will paint no more anything worth looking at. And in any department, when a man says 'Lo! I have attained,' then he ceases to advance.

Now, bring all that to bear upon religion, upon Christ and His salvation, upon our own spiritual and religious and moral condition. The sense of imperfection is the salt of approximation to perfection. And the man that says 'I am rich' is condemning himself to poverty and pauperism. If you do not know your need, you will not go to look for the supply of it. If you fancy yourselves to be quite well, though a mortal disease has gripped you, you will take no medicine, nor have recourse to any physician. If you think that you have enough good to show for man's judgment and for God's, and have not been convinced of your dependence and your sinfulness, then Jesus Christ will be very little to you, and His great work as the Redeemer and Saviour of His people from their sins will be nothing to you. And so you will condemn yourselves to have nothing unto the very end.

I believe that this generation needs few things more than it needs a deepened consciousness of the reality of sin and of the depth and damnable nature of it. It is because people feel so little of the burden of their transgression that they care so little for that gentle Hand that lifts away their burden. It is because from much of popular religion—and, alas! that I should have to say it, from much of popular preaching—there has vanished the deep wholesome sense of poverty, that, from so much of popular religion, and preaching too, there has faded away the central light of the Gospel, the proclamation of the Cross by which is taken away the sin of the whole world.

So, lastly, my text brings before us—

III. The rich poor man.

'There is that maketh himself poor and yet'—or, as varied, the expression is, 'therefore hath great riches.' Jesus Christ has lifted the thoughts in my text into the very region into

which I am trying to bring them, when in the first of all the Beatitudes, as they are called, 'He opened His mouth and said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' Poor, and therefore an owner of a kingdom! Now I need not, at this stage of my sermon, insist upon the fact that that consciousness of poverty is the only fitting attitude for any of us to take up in view of the two facts with which I started, the fact of our dependence and the fact of our sinfulness. What absurdity it seems for a man about whom these two things are true, that, as I said, he began with a borrowed capital, and has only incurred greater debts in his transactions, there should be any foothold left in his own estimation on which he can stand and claim to be anything but the pauper that he is. Oh! brethren, of all the hallucinations that we put upon ourselves in trying to believe that things are as we wish, there is none more subtle, more obstinate, more deeply dangerous than this, that a man full of evil should be so ignorant of his evil as to say, like that Pharisee in our Lord's parable, 'I thank Thee that I am not as other men are. I give tithes ... I pray ... I am this, that, and the other thing; not like that wretched publican over there.' Yes, this is the fit attitude for us,—'He would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven.'

Then let me remind you that this wholesome recognition of facts about ourselves as they are is the sure way to possess the wealth. Of course, it is possible for a man by some mighty influence or other brought to bear upon him, to see himself as God sees him, and then, if there is nothing more than that, he is tortured with 'the sorrow that worketh death.' Judas 'went out and hanged himself'; Peter 'went out and wept bitterly.' The one was sent 'to his own place,' wherever that was; the other was sent foremost of the Twelve. If you see your poverty, let self-distrust be the nadir, the lowest point, and let faith be the complementary high point, the zenith. The rebound from self-distrust to trust in Christ is that which makes the consciousness of poverty the condition of receiving wealth.

And what wealth it is!—the wealth of a peaceful conscience, of a quiet heart, of lofty aims, of a pure mind, of strength according to our need, of an immortal hope, of a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, 'where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt; where thieves do not break through nor steal.' Blessed be God! the more we have the riches of glory in Christ Jesus, the more shall we feel that we have nothing, and that all is His, and none of it ours. And so, as the rivers run in the valleys, and the high mountain-tops are dry and barren, the grace which makes us rich will run in the low ground of our conscious humiliation and nothingness.

Dear brother! do you estimate yourself as you are? Have you taken stock of yourself? Have you got away from the hallucination of possessing wealth? Has your sense of need led you to cease from trust in yourself, and to put all your trust in Jesus Christ? Have you taken the wealth which He freely gives to all who sue in forma pauperis? He does not ask you to bring anything but debts and sins, emptiness and weakness, and penitent faith. He will strengthen the weakness, fill the emptiness, forgive the sins, cancel the debts, and make you 'rich toward God.' I beseech you to listen to Him, speaking from heaven, and taking up the strain of this text: 'Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be

rich.' And then you will be of those blessed poor ones who are 'rich through faith, and heirs of the Kingdom.'

Proverbs 13:23: THE TILLAGE OF THE POOR

'Much food is in the tillage of the poor.'— PROVERBS xiii. 23 .

Palestine was a land of small peasant proprietors, and the institution of the Jubilee was intended to prevent the acquisition of large estates by any Israelite. The consequence, as intended, was a level of modest prosperity. It was 'the tillage of the poor,' the careful, diligent husbandry of the man who had only a little patch of land to look after, that filled the storehouses of the Holy Land. Hence the proverb of our text arose. It preserves the picture of the economical conditions in which it originated, and it is capable of, and is intended to have, an application to all forms and fields of work. In all it is true that the bulk of the harvested results are due, not to the large labours of the few, but to the minute, unnoticed toils of the many. Small service is true service, and the aggregate of such produces large crops. Spade husbandry gets most out of the ground. The labourer's allotment of half an acre is generally more prolific than the average of the squire's estate. Much may be made of slender gifts, small resources, and limited opportunities if carefully cultivated, as they should be, and as their very slenderness should stimulate their being.

One of the psalms accuses 'the children of Ephraim' because, 'being armed and carrying bows, they turned back in the day of battle.' That saying deduces obligation from equipment, and preaches a stringent code of duty to those who are in any direction largely gifted. Power to its last particle is duty, and not small is the crime of those who, with great capacities, have small desire to use them, and leave the brunt of the battle to half-trained soldiers, badly armed.

But the imagery of the fight is not sufficient to include all aspects of Christian effort. The peaceful toil of the 'husbandman that labours' stands, in one of Paul's letters, side by side with the heroism of the 'man that warreth.' Our text gives us the former image, and so supplements that other.

It completes the lesson of the psalm in another respect, as insisting on the importance, not of the well endowed, but of the slenderly furnished, who are immensely in the majority. This text is a message to ordinary, mediocre people, without much ability or influence.

I. It teaches, first, the responsibility of small gifts.

It is no mere accident that in our Lord's great parable He represents the man with the one talent as the hider of his gift. There is a certain pleasure in doing what we can do, or fancy we can do, well. There is a certain pleasure in the exercise of any kind of gift, be it of body or mind; but when we know that we are but very slightly gifted by Him, there is a temptation to say, 'Oh! it does not matter much whether I contribute my share to this, that, or the other work or no. I am but a poor man. My half-crown will make but a small difference in the total. I am possessed of very little leisure. The few minutes that I can spare for individual cultivation, or for benevolent work, will not matter at all. I am only an

insignificant unit; nobody pays any attention to my opinion. It does not in the least signify whether I make my influence felt in regard of social, religious, or political questions, and the like. I can leave all that to the more influential men. My littleness at least has the prerogative of immunity. My little finger would produce such a slight impact on the scale that it is indifferent whether I apply it or not. It is a good deal easier for me to wrap up my talent—which, after all, is only a threepenny bit, and not a talent—and put it away and do nothing.'

Yes, but then you forget, dear friend! that responsibility does not diminish with the size of the gifts, but that there is as great responsibility for the use of the smallest as for the use of the largest, and that although it does not matter very much to anybody but yourself what you do, it matters all the world to you.

But then, besides that, my text tells us that it does matter whether the poor man sets himself to make the most of his little patch of ground or not. 'There is much food in the tillage of the poor.' The slenderly endowed are the immense majority. There is a genius or two here and there, dotted along the line of the world's and the Church's history. The great men and wise men and mighty men and wealthy men may be counted by units, but the men that are not very much of anything are to be counted by millions. And unless we can find some stringent law of responsibility that applies to them, the bulk of the human race will be under no obligation to do anything either for God or for their fellows, or for themselves. If I am absolved from the task of bringing my weight to bear on the side of right because my weight is infinitesimal, and I am only one in a million, suppose all the million were to plead the same excuse; what then? Then there would not be any weight on the side of the right at all. The barns in Palestine were not filled by farming on a great scale like that pursued away out on the western prairies, where one man will own, and his servants will plough a furrow for miles long, but they were filled by the small industries of the owners of tiny patches.

The 'tillage of the poor,' meaning thereby not the mendicant, but the peasant owner of a little plot, yielded the bulk of the 'food.' The wholesome old proverb, 'many littles make a mickle,' is as true about the influence brought to bear in the world to arrest evil and to sweeten corruption as it is about anything besides. Christ has a great deal more need of the cultivation of the small patches that He gives to the most of us than He has even of the cultivation of the large estates that He bestows on a few. Responsibility is not to be measured by amount of gift, but is equally stringent, entire, and absolute whatsoever be the magnitude of the endowments from which it arises.

Let me remind you, too, how the same virtues and excellences can be practised in the administering of the smallest as in that of the greatest gifts. Men say—I dare say some of you have said—'Oh! if I were eloquent like So-and-so; rich like somebody else; a man of weight and importance like some other, how I would consecrate my powers to the Master! But I am slow of speech, or nobody minds me, or I have but very little that I can give.' Yes! 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.' If you do not utilise the capacity possessed, to increase the estate would only be to increase the crop of weeds from its uncultivated clods. We never palm off a greater deception on ourselves than when

we try to hoodwink conscience by pleading bounded gifts as an excuse for boundless indolence, and to persuade ourselves that if we could do more we should be less inclined to do nothing. The most largely endowed has no more obligation and no fairer field than the most slenderly gifted lies under and possesses.

All service coming from the same motive and tending to the same end is the same with God. Not the magnitude of the act, but the motive thereof, determines the whole character of the life of which it is a part. The same graces of obedience, consecration, quick sympathy, self-denying effort may be cultivated and manifested in the spending of a halfpenny as in the administration of millions. The smallest rainbow in the tiniest drop that hangs from some sooty eave and catches the sunlight has precisely the same lines, in the same order, as the great arch that strides across half the sky. If you go to the Giant's Causeway, or to the other end of it amongst the Scotch Hebrides, you will find the hexagonal basaltic pillars all of identically the same pattern and shape, whether their height be measured by feet or by tenths of an inch. Big or little, they obey exactly the same law. There is 'much food in the tillage of the poor.'

II. But now, note, again, how there must be a diligent cultivation of the small gifts.

The inventor of this proverb had looked carefully and sympathetically at the way in which the little peasant proprietors worked; and he saw in that a pattern for all life. It is not always the case, of course, that a little holding means good husbandry, but it is generally so; and you will find few waste corners and few unweeded patches on the ground of a man whose whole ground is measured by rods instead of by miles. There will usually be little waste time, and few neglected opportunities of working in the case of the peasant whose subsistence, with that of his family, depends on the diligent and wise cropping of the little patch that does belong to him.

And so, dear brethren! if you and I have to take our place in the ranks of the one-talented men, the commonplace run of ordinary people, the more reason for us to enlarge our gifts by a sedulous diligence, by an unwearied perseverance, by a keen look-out for all opportunities of service, and above all by a prayerful dependence upon Him from whom alone comes the power to toil, and who alone gives the increase. The less we are conscious of large gifts the more we should be bowed in dependence on Him from whom cometh 'every good and perfect gift'; and who gives according to His wisdom; and the more earnestly should we use that slender possession which God may have given us. Industry applied to small natural capacity will do far more than larger power rusted away by sloth. You all know that it is so in regard of daily life, and common business, and the acquisition of mundane sciences and arts. It is just as true in regard to the Christian race, and to the Christian Church's work of witness.

Who are they who have done the most in this world for God and for men? The largely endowed men? 'Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called.' The coral insect is microscopic, but it will build up from the profoundest depth of the ocean a reef against which the whole Pacific may dash in vain. It is the small gifts that, after all, are the important ones. So let us cultivate them the more earnestly the more humbly we think of

our own capacity. 'Play well thy part; there all the honour lies.' God, who has builded up some of the towering Alps out of mica-flakes, builds up His Church out of infinitesimally small particles—slenderly endowed men touched by the consecration of His love.

III. Lastly, let me remind you of the harvest reaped from these slender gifts when sedulously tilled.

Two great results of such conscientious cultivation and use of small resources and opportunities may be suggested as included in that abundant 'food' of which the text speaks.

The faithfully used faculty increases. 'To him that hath shall be given.' 'Oh! if I had a wider sphere how I would flame in it, and fill it!' Then twinkle your best in your little sphere, and that will bring a wider one some time or other. For, as a rule, and in the general, though with exceptions, opportunities come to the man that can use them; and roughly, but yet substantially, men are set in this world where they can shine to the most advantage to God. Fill your place; and if you, like Paul, have borne witness for the Master in little Jerusalem, He will not keep you there, but carry you to bear witness for Him in imperial Rome itself.

The old fable of the man who told his children to dig all over the field and they would find treasure, has its true application in regard to Christian effort and faithful stewardship of the gifts bestowed upon us. The sons found no gold, but they improved the field, and secured its bearing golden harvests, and they strengthened their own muscles, which was better than gold. So if we want larger endowments let us honestly use what we possess, and use will make growth.

The other issue, about which I need not say more than a word, is that the final reward of all faithful service—'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord' is said, not to the brilliant, but to the 'faithful' servant. In that great parable, which is the very text-book of this whole subject of gifts and responsibilities and recompense, the men who were entrusted with unequal sums used these unequal sums with equal diligence, as is manifest by the fact that they realised an equal rate of increase. He that got two talents made two more out of them, and he that had five did no more; for he, too, but doubled his capital. So, because the poorer servant with his two, and the richer with his ten, had equally cultivated their diversely-measured estates, they were identical in reward; and to each of them the same thing is said: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.' It matters little whether we copy some great picture upon a canvas as big as the side of a house, or upon a thumbnail; the main thing is that we copy it. If we truly employ whatsoever gifts God has given to us, then we shall be accepted according to that we have, and not according to that we have not.

Proverbs 14:9 SIN THE MOCKER

'Fools make a mock at sin; but among the righteous there is favour.'— PROVERBS xiv. 9 .

The wisdom of this Book of Proverbs is not simply intellectual, but it has its roots in reverence and obedience to God, and for its accompaniment, righteousness. The wise man

is the good man, and the good man is the godly man. And as is wisdom, so its opposite, folly, is not only intellectual feebleness—the bad man is a fool, and the godless is a bad man. The greatest amount of brain-power cultivated to the highest degree does not make a man wise, and about many a student and thinker God pronounces the sentence ‘Thou fool!’

That does not mean that all sin is ignorance, as we sometimes hear it said with a great show of tolerant profundity. There is some ignorance in all sin, but the essence of sin is the aversion of the will from a law and from a Person, not the defect of the understanding. So far from all sin being but ignorance, and therefore blameless, there is no sin without knowledge, and the measure of ignorance is the measure of blamelessness; unless the ignorance be itself, as it often is, criminal. Ignorance is one thing, folly is another.

One more remark by way of introduction must be made on the language of our text. The margin of the Revised Version correctly turns it completely round, and for ‘the foolish make a mock at guilt,’ would read, ‘guilt mocketh at the foolish.’ In the original the verb in our text is in the singular, and the only singular noun to go with it is ‘guilt.’ The thought then here is, that sin tempts men into its clutches, and then gibes and taunts them. It is a solemn and painful subject, but perhaps this text rightly pondered may help to save some of us from hearing the mocking laugh which echoes through the empty chambers of many an empty soul.

I. Sin mocks us by its broken promises.

The object immediately sought by any wrong act may be attained. In sins of sense, the appetite is gratified; in other sins, the desire that urged to them attains its end. But what then? The temptation lay in the imagination that, the wrong thing being done, an inward good would result, and it does not; for even if the immediate object be secured, other results, all unforeseen, force themselves on us which spoil the hoped for good. The sickle cuts down tares as well as wheat, and the reaper’s hands are filled with poisonous growths as well as with corn. There is a revulsion of feeling from the thing that before the sin was done attracted. The hideous story of the sin of David’s son, Amnon, puts in ugliest shape the universal experience of men who are tempted to sin and are victims of the revulsion that follows—He ‘hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her.’ Conscience, which was overpowered and unheard amid the loud cries of desire, speaks. We find out the narrow limits of satisfaction. The satisfied appetite has no further driving power, but lies down to sleep off its debauch, and ceases to be a factor for the time. Inward discord, the schism between duty and inclination, sets up strife in the very sanctuary of the soul. We are dimly conscious of the evil done as robbing us of power to do right. We cannot pray, and would be glad to forget God. And a self thus racked, impoverished, and weakened, is what a man gains by the sin that promised him so much and hid so much from him.

Or if these consequences are in any measure silenced and stifled, a still more melancholy mockery betrays him, in the continuance of the illusion that he is happy and all is well, when all the while he is driving headlong to destruction. Many a man orders his life so that

it is like a ship that sails with huzzas and bedizened with flags while a favouring breeze fills its sails, but comes back to port battered and all but waterlogged, with its canvas 'lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind.' It is always a mistake to try to buy happiness by doing wrong. The price is rigorously demanded, but the quid pro quo is not given, or if it seems to be so, there is something else given too, which takes all the savour out of the composite whole. The 'Folly' of the earlier half of this book woos men by her sweet invitations, and promises the sweetness of stolen waters and the pleasantness of bread eaten in secret, but she hides the fact, which the listener to her seducing voice has to find out for himself after he has drunk of the stolen waters and tasted the maddening pleasantness of her bread eaten in secret, that 'her guests are in the depths of Sheol.' The temptations that seek to win us to do wrong and dazzle us by fair visions are but 'juggling fiends that keep the word of promise to the ear, and break it to the hope.'

II. Sin mocks fools by making them its slaves.

There is not only a revulsion of feeling from the evil thing done that was so tempting before, but there is a dreadful change in the voice of the temptress. Before her victim had done the sin, she whispered hints of how little a thing it was. 'Don't make such a mountain of a molehill. It is a very small matter. You can easily give it up when you like.' But when the deed is done, then her mocking laugh rings out, 'I have got you now and you cannot get away.' The prey is seduced into the trap by a carefully prepared bait, and as soon as its hesitating foot steps on to the slippery floor, down falls the door and escape is impossible, We are tempted to sin by the delusion that we are shaking off restraints that fetter our manhood, and that it is spirited to do as we like, and as soon as we have sinned we discover that we were pleasing not ourselves but a taskmaster, and that while the voice said, 'Show yourself a man, beyond these petty, old-fashioned maxims'; the meaning of it was, 'Become my slave.'

Sin grows in accordance with an awful necessity, so that it is never in a sinner's power to promise himself 'It is only this one time that I will do the wrong thing. Let me have one lapse and I will abjure the evil for ever after.' We have to reckon with the tremendous power of habit, and to bethink ourselves that a man may never commit a given sin, but that if he has committed it once, it is all but impossible that he will stop there. The incline is too slippery and the ice too smooth to risk a foot on it. Habit dominates, outward circumstances press, there springs up a need for repeating the draught, and for its being more highly spiced. Sin begets sin as fast as the green flies which infest rose-bushes. One has heard of slavers on the African coast speaking negroes fair, and tempting them on board by wonderful promises, but once the poor creatures are in the ship, then on with the hatches and, if need be, the chains.

III. Sin mocks fools by unforeseen consequences.

These are carefully concealed or madly disregarded, while we are in the stage of merely being tempted, but when we have done the evil, they are unmasked, like a battery against a detachment that has been trapped. The previous denial that anything will come of the sin, and the subsequent proclamation that this ugly issue has come of it, are both parts of

sin's mockery, and one knows not which is the more fiendish, the laugh with which she promises impunity or that with which she tells of the certainty of retribution. We may be mocked, but 'God is not mocked. Whatever a man soweth, that'—and not some other growth—'shall he also reap.' We dwell in an all-related order of things, in which no act but has its appropriate consequences, and in which it is only fools who say to themselves, 'I did not think it would matter much.' Each act of ours is at once sowing and reaping; a sowing, inasmuch as it sets in motion a train the issues of which may not be realised by us till the act has long been forgotten; a reaping, inasmuch as what we are and do to-day is the product of what we were and did in a forgotten past. We are what we are, because we were long ago what we were. As in these composite photographs, which are produced by laying one individual likeness on another, our present selves have our past selves preserved in them. We do not need to bring in a divine Judge into human life in order to be sure that, by the play of the natural laws of cause and effect, 'every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.' Given the world as it is, and the continuous identity of a man, and you have all that is needed for an Iliad of woes flowing from every life that makes terms with sin. If we gather into one dismal pile the weakening of power for good, the strengthening of impulses to evil, the inward poverty, the unrest, the gnawings of conscience or its silence, the slavery under evil often loathed even while it is being obeyed, the dreary sense of inability to mend oneself, and often the wreck of outward life which dog our sins like sleuth-hounds, surely we shall not need to imagine a future tribunal in order to be sure that sin is a murderess, or to hear her laugh as she mocks her helpless victims.

But as surely as there are in this present world experiences which must be regarded as consequences of sin, so surely do they all assume a more dreadful character and take on the office of prophets of a future. If man lives beyond the grave, there is nothing to suggest that he will there put off character as he puts off the bodily life. He will be there what he has made himself here. Only he will be so more intensely, more completely. The judgments of earth foretell and foreshadow a judgment beyond earth.

There is but one more word that I would say, and it is this. Jesus has come to set the captives of sin free from its mockery, its tyranny, its worst consequences. He breaks the power of past evil to domineer over us. He gives us a new life within, which has no heritage of evil to pervert it, no memories of evil to discourage it, no bias towards evil to lead it astray. As for the sins that we have done, He is ready to forgive, to seal to us God's forgiveness, and to take from our own self-condemnation all its bitterness and much of its hopelessness. For the past, His blood has taken away its guilt and power. For the future it sets us free from the mockery of our sin, and assures us of a future which will not be weakened or pained by remembrances of a sinful past. Sin mocks at fools, but they who have Christ for their Redeemer, their Righteousness, and their Life can smile at her impotent rage, and mock at her and her impotent attempts to terrify them and assert her lost power with vain threats.

Proverbs 14:13: HOLLOW LAUGHTER, SOLID JOY

‘Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.’—
PROVERBS xiv. 13 .

‘These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be fulfilled.’— JOHN xv. 11 (R.V.) .

A poet, who used to be more fashionable than he is now, pronounces ‘happiness’ to be our being’s end and aim. That is not true, except under great limitations and with many explanations. It may be regarded as God’s end, but it is ruinous to make it man’s aim. It is by no means the highest conception of the Gospel to say that it makes men happy, however true it may be. The highest is that it makes them good. I put these two texts together, not only because they bring out the contrast between the laughter which is hollow and fleeting and the joy which is perfect and perpetual, but also because they suggest to us the difference in kind and object between earthly and heavenly joys; which difference underlies the other between the boisterous laughter in which is no mirth and no continuance and the joy which is deep and abiding.

In the comparison which I desire to make between these two texts we must begin with that which is deepest, and consider—

I. The respective objects of earthly and heavenly joy.

Our Lord’s wonderful words suggest that they who accept His sayings, that they who have His word abiding in them, have in a very deep sense His joy implanted in their hearts, to brighten and elevate their joys as the sunshine flashes into silver the ripples of the lake. What then were the sources of the calm joys of ‘the Man of Sorrows’? Surely His was the perfect instance of ‘rejoicing in the Lord always’—an unbroken communion with the Father. The consciousness that the divine pleasure ever rested on Him, and that all His thoughts, emotions, purposes, and acts were in perfect harmony with the perfect will of the perfect God, filled His humanity up to the very brim with gladness which the world could not take away, and which remains for us for ever as a type to which all our gladness must be conformed if it is to be worthy of Him and of us. As one of the Psalmists says, God is to be ‘the gladness of our joy.’ It is in Him, gazed upon by the faith and love of an obedient spirit, sought after by aspiration and possessed inwardly in peaceful communion, confirmed by union with Him in the acts of daily obedience, that the true joy of every human life is to be realised. They who have drunk of this deep fountain of gladness will not express their joy in boisterous laughter, which is the hollower the louder it is, and the less lasting the more noisy, but will manifest itself ‘in the depth and not the tumult of the soul.’

Nor must we forget that ‘My joy’ co-existed with a profound experience of sorrow to which no human sorrow was ever like. Let us not forget that, while His joy filled His soul to the brim, He was ‘acquainted with grief’; and let us not wonder if the strange surface contradiction is repeated in ourselves. It is more Christlike to have inexpressibly deep joy with surface sorrow, than to have a shallow laughter masking a hurtful sorrow.

We have to set the sources of earthly gladness side by side with those of Christ’s joy to be aware of a contrast. His sprang from within, the world’s is drawn from without. His came

from union with the Father, the world's largely depends on ignoring God. His needed no supplies from the gratifications ministered by sense, and so independent of the presence or absence of such; the world's need the constant contributions of outward good, and when these are cut off they droop and die. He who depends on outward circumstances for his joy is the slave of externals and the sport of time and chance.

II. The Christian's joy is full, the world's partial.

All human joys touch but part of our nature, the divine fills and satisfies all. In the former there is always some portion of us unsatisfied, like the deep pits on the moon's surface into which no light shines, and which show black on the silver face. No human joys wait to still conscience, which sits at the banquet like the skeleton that Egyptian feasters set at their tables. The old story told of a magician's palace blazing with lighted windows, but there was always one dark;—what shrouded figure sat behind it? Is there not always a surly 'elder brother' who will not come in however the musicians may pipe and the servants dance? Appetite may be satisfied, but what of conscience, and reason, and the higher aspirations of the soul? The laughter that echoes through the soul is the hollower the louder it is, and reverberates most through empty spaces.

But when Christ's joy remains in us our joy will be full. Its flowing tide will rush into and placidly occupy all the else oozy shallows of our hearts, even into the narrowest crannies its penetrating waters will pass, and everywhere will bring a flashing surface that will reflect in our hearts the calm blue above. We need nothing else if we have Christ and His joy within us. If we have everything else, we need His joy within us, else ours will never be full.

III. The heavenly joys are perpetual, the earthly joys transient.

Many of our earthly joys die in the very act of being enjoyed. Those which depend on the gratification of some appetite expire in fruition, and at each recurrence are less and less complete. The influence of habit works in two ways to rob all such joys of their power to minister to us—it increases the appetite and decreases the power of the object to satisfy. Some are followed by swift revulsion and remorse; all soon become stale; some are followed by quick remorse; some are necessarily left behind as we go on in life. To the old man the pleasures of youth are but like children's toys long since outgrown and left behind. All are at the mercy of externals. Those which we have not left we have to leave. The saddest lives are those of pleasure-seekers, and the saddest deaths are those of the men who sought for joy where it was not to be found, and sought for their gratification in a world which leaves them, and which they have to leave.

There is a realm where abide 'fullness of joy and pleasures for ever more.' Surely they order their lives most wisely who look for their joys to nothing that earth holds, and have taken for their own the ancient vow: 'Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine... Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.' If 'My joy' abides in us in its calm and changeless depth, our joy will be 'full' whatever our circumstances may be; and we shall hear at last the welcome: 'Enter thou into the joy of

thy Lord.'

Proverbs 14:14: SATISFIED FROM SELF

'... A good man shall be satisfied from himself.'— PROVERBS xiv. 14

At first sight this saying strikes one as somewhat unlike the ordinary Scripture tone, and savouring rather of a Stoical self-complacency; but we recall parallel sayings, such as Christ's words, 'The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water'; and the Apostle's, 'Then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone.' We further note that the text has an antithetic parallel in the preceding clause, where the picture is drawn of 'a backslider in heart,' as 'filled with his own ways'; so that both clauses set forth the familiar but solemn thought that a man's deeds react upon the doer, and apart from all thoughts of divine judgment, themselves bring certain retribution. To grasp the inwardness of this saying we must note that—

I. Goodness comes from godliness.

There is no more striking proof that most men are bad than the notion which they have of what is good. The word has been degraded to mean in common speech little more than amiability, and is applied with little discrimination to characters of which little more can be said than that they are facile and indulgent of evil. 'A good fellow' may be a very bad man. At the highest the epithet connotes merely more or less admirable motives and more or less admirable deeds as their results, whilst often its use is no more than a piece of unmeaning politeness. That was what the young ruler meant by addressing Christ as 'Good Master'; and Christ's answer to him set him, and should set us, on asking ourselves why we call very ordinary men and very ordinary actions 'good.' The scriptural notion is immensely deeper, and the scriptural employment of the word is immensely more restricted. It is more inward: it means that motives should be right before it calls any action good; it means that our central and all-influencing motive should be love to God and regard to His will. That is the Old Testament point of view as well as the New. Or to put it in other words, the 'good man' of the Bible is a man in whom outward righteousness flows from inward devotion and love to God. These two elements make up the character: godliness is an inseparable part of goodness, is the inseparable foundation of goodness, and the sole condition on which it is possible. But from this conception follows, that a man may be truly called good, although not perfect. He may be so and yet have many failures. The direction of his aspirations, not the degree to which these are fulfilled, determines his character, and his right to be reckoned a good man. Why was David called 'a man after God's own heart,' notwithstanding his frightful fall? Was it not because that sin was contrary to the main direction of his life, and because he had struggled to his feet again, and with tears and self-abasement, yet with unconquerable desire and hope, 'pressed toward the mark for the prize of his high calling'? David in the Old Testament and Peter in the New bid us be of good cheer, and warn us against the too common error of thinking that goodness means perfection. 'The new moon with a ragged edge' is even in its imperfections beautiful, and in its thinnest circlet prophesies the perfect round. Remembering this inseparable connection between godliness and goodness we further

note that—

II. Godliness brings satisfaction.

There is a grim contrast between the two halves of this verse. The former shows us the backslider in heart as filled 'with his own ways.' He gets weary with satiety; with his doings he 'will be sick of them'; and the things which at first delighted will finally disgust and be done without zest. There is nothing sadder than the gloomy faces often seen in the world's festivals. But, on the other hand, the godly man will be satisfied from within. This is no Stoical proclamation of self-sufficingness. Self by itself satisfies no man, but self, become the abiding-place of God, does satisfy. A man alone is like 'the chaff which the wind driveth away'; but, rooted in God, he is 'like a tree planted by the rivers of water, whose leaf does not wither.' He has found all that he needs. God is no longer without him but within; and he who can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' has within him the secret of peace and the source of satisfaction which can never say 'I thirst.' Such an inward self, in which God dwells and through which His sweet presence manifests itself in the renewed nature, sets man free from all dependence for blessedness on externals. We hang on them and are in despair if we lose them, because we have not the life of God within us. He who has such an indwelling, and he only, can truly say, 'All my possessions I carry with me.' Take him and strip from him, film after film, possessions, reputation, friends; hack him limb from limb, and as long as there is body enough left to keep life in him, he can say, 'I have all and abound.' 'Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your possessions, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better possession.'

III. Godly goodness brings inward satisfaction.

No man is satisfied with himself until he has subjugated himself. What makes men restless and discontented is their tossing, anarchical desires. To live by impulse, or passion, or by anything but love to God, is to make ourselves our own tormentors. It is always true that he 'who loveth his life shall lose it,' and loses it by the very act of loving it. Most men's lives are like the troubled sea, 'which cannot rest,' and whose tossing surges, alas! 'cast up mire and dirt,' for their restless lives bring to the surface much that was meant to lie undisturbed in the depths.

But he who has subdued himself is like some still lake which 'heareth not the loud winds when they call,' and mirrors the silent heavens on its calm surface. But further, goodness brings satisfaction, because, as the Psalmist says, 'in keeping Thy commandments there is great reward.' There is a glow accompanying even partial obedience which diffuses itself with grateful warmth through the whole being of a man. And such goodness tends to the preservation of health of soul as natural, simple living to the health of the body. And that general sense of well-being brings with it a satisfaction compared with which all the feverish bliss of the voluptuary is poor indeed.

But we must not forget that satisfaction from one's self is not satisfaction with one's self. There will always be the imperfection which will always prevent self-righteousness. The good man after the Bible pattern most deeply knows his faults, and in that very

consciousness is there a deep joy. To be ever aspiring onwards, and to know that our aspiration is no vain dream, this is joy. Still to press 'toward the mark,' still to have 'the yet untroubled world which gleams before us as we move,' and to know that we shall attain if we follow on, this is the highest bliss. Not the accomplishment of our ideal, but the cherishing of it, is the true delight of life.

Such self-satisfying goodness comes only through Christ. He makes it possible for us to love God and to trust Him. Only when we know 'the love wherewith He has loved us,' shall we love with a love which will be the motive power of our lives. He makes it possible to live outward lives of obedience, which, imperfect as it is, has 'great reward.' He makes it possible for us to attain the yet unattained, and to be sure that we 'shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' He has said, 'The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life.' Only when we can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' will it be true of us in its fullest sense, 'A good man shall be satisfied from himself.'

Proverbs 16:2 WHAT I THINK OF MYSELF AND WHAT GOD THINKS OF ME

'All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the Lord weigheth the spirits.'—
PROVERBS xvi. 2

'All the ways of a man'—then there is no such thing as being conscious of having gone wrong, and having got into miry and foul ways? Of course there is; and equally of course a broad statement such as this of my text is not to be pressed into literal accuracy, but is a simple, general assertion of what we all know to be true, that we have a strange power of blinding ourselves as to what is wrong in ourselves and in our actions. Part of the cure for that lies in the thought in the second clause of the text—'But the Lord weigheth the spirits.' He weighs them in a balance, or as a man might take up something and poise it on his palm, moving his hand up and down till his muscles by their resistance gave him some inkling of its weight. But what is it that God weighs? 'The spirits.' We too often content ourselves with looking at our ways; God looks at ourselves. He takes the inner man into account, estimates actions by motives, and so very often differs from our judgment of ourselves and of one another.

Now so far the verse of my text carries me, and as a rule we have to keep ourselves within the limits of each verse in reading this Book of Proverbs, for two adjoining verses have very seldom anything to do with each other. But in the present case they have, for here is what follows: 'Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts' (about thyself and everything else) 'shall be established.' That is to say, since we make such terrible blunders about the moral character of our own works, and since side by side with these erroneous estimates there is God's absolutely correct and all-penetrating one, common sense says: 'Put yourself into His hands, and then it will be all right.' So we consider now these very well-worn and familiar thoughts as to our strange blunders about ourselves, as to the contemporaneous divine estimate, which is absolutely correct, and as to the practical

issues that come from two facts.

I. Our strange power of blinding ourselves.

It is difficult to make so threadbare a commonplace at all impressive. But yet if we would only take this thought, 'All the ways of a man'—that is me—'are right in his own eyes'—that is, my eyes—and apply it directly to our own personal experience and thoughts of ourselves, we should find that, like every other commonplace of morality and religion, the apparently toothless generality has sharp enough teeth, and that the trite truth flashes up into strange beauty, and has power to purify and guide our lives. Some one says that 'recognised truths lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with exploded errors.' And I am afraid that that is true of this thought, that we cannot truly estimate ourselves.

'All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes.' For to begin with, we all know that there is nothing that we so habitually neglect as the bringing of conscience to bear right through all our lives. Sometimes it is because there is a temptation that appeals very strongly, perhaps to sense, perhaps to some strong inclination which has been strengthened by indulgence. And when the craving arises, that is no time to begin asking, 'Is it right, or is it wrong to yield?' That question stands small chance of being wisely considered at a moment when, under the goading of roused desire, a man is like a mad bull when it charges. It drops its head and shuts its eyes, and goes right forward, and no matter whether it smashes its horns against an iron gate, and damages them and itself, or not, on it will go. So when great temptations rise—and we all know such times in our lives—we are in no condition to discuss that question with ourselves. Sometimes the craving is so vehement that if we could not get this thing that we want without putting our hands through the sulphurous smoke of the bottomless pit, we should thrust them out to grasp it. But in regard to the smaller commonplace matters of daily life, too, we all know that there are whole regions of our lives which seem to us to be so small that it is hardly worth while summoning the august thought of 'right or wrong?' to decide them. Yes, and a thousand smugglers that go across a frontier, each with a little package of contraband goods that does not pay any duty, make a large aggregate at the year's end. It is the trifles of life that shape life, and it is to them that we so frequently fail in applying, honestly and rigidly, the test, 'Is this right or wrong?' 'He that is faithful in that which is least,' and conscientious down to the smallest things, 'is faithful also in much.' The legal maxim has it, 'The law does not care about the very smallest matters.' What that precisely means, as a legal maxim, I do not profess to know, but it is rank heresy in regard to conduct and morality. Look after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves. Get the habit of bringing conscience to bear on little things, or you will never be able to bring it to bear when great temptations come and the crises emerge in your lives. Thus, by reason of that deficiency in the habitual application of conscience to our lives, we slide through, and take for granted that all our ways are right in our eyes.

Then there is another thing: we not only neglect the rigid application of conscience to all our lives, but we have a double standard, and the notion of right and wrong which we apply to our neighbours is very different from that which we apply to ourselves. No wonder

that the criminal is acquitted, and goes away from the tribunal 'without a stain on his character,' when he is his own judge and jury. 'All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes,' but the very same 'way's that you allow to pass muster and condone in yourselves, you visit with sharp and unflinching censure in others. That strange self-complacency which we have, which is perfectly undisturbed by the most general confessions of sinfulness, and only shies when it is brought up to particular details of faults, we all know is very deep in ourselves.

Then there is another thing to be remembered, and that is—the enormous and the tragical influence of habit in dulling the mirror of our souls, on which our deeds are reflected in their true image. There are places in Europe where the peasantry have become so accustomed to minute and constantly repeated doses of arsenic that it is actually a minister of health to them, and what would poison you is food for them. We all know that we may sit in a hall like this, packed full and steaming, while the condensed breath is running down the windows, and never be aware of the foulness of the odours and the air. But when we go out and feel the sweet, pure breath of the unpolluted atmosphere, then we know how habit has dulled the lungs. And so habit dulls the conscience. According to the old saying, the man that began by carrying a calf can carry an ox at the end, and feel no burden. What we are accustomed to do we scarcely ever recognise to be wrong, and it is these things which pass because they are habitual that do more to wreck lives than occasional outbursts of far worse evils, according to the world's estimate of them. Habit dulls the eye.

Yes; and more than that, the conscience needs educating just as much as any other faculty. A man says, 'My conscience acquits me'; then the question is, 'And what sort of a conscience have you got, if it acquits you?' All that your conscience says is, 'It is right to do what is right, it is wrong to do what is wrong.' But for the explanation of what is wrong and what is right you have to go somewhere else than to your consciences. You have to go to your reason, and your judgment, and your common sense, and a hundred other sources. And then, when you have found out what is right and what is wrong, you will hear the voice saying, 'Do that, and do not do this.' Every one of us has faults that we know nothing about, and that we bring up to the tribunal of our consciences, and wipe our mouths and say, 'We have done no harm.' 'I thought within myself that I verily ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.' 'They think that they do God service.' Many things that seem to us virtues are vices.

And as for the individual so for the community. The perception of what is right and what is wrong needs long educating. When I was a boy the whole Christian Church of America, with one voice, declared that 'slavery was a patriarchal institution appointed by God.' The Christian Church of to-day has not awakened either to the sin of war or of drink. And I have not the smallest doubt that there are hosts of things which public opinion, and Christian public opinion, regards to-day as perfectly allowable and innocent, and, perhaps, even praiseworthy, and over which it will ask God's blessing, at which, in a hundred years our descendants will hold up their hands in wonder, and say, 'How did good people—and good people they no doubt were—tolerate such a condition of things for a moment?' 'All a

man's ways are right in his own eyes,' and he needs a great deal of teaching before he comes to understand what, according to God's will, really, is right and what is wrong.

Now let me turn for a moment to the contrasted picture, with which I can only deal in a sentence or two.

II. The divine estimate.

I have already pointed out the two emphatic thoughts that lie in that clause, 'God weigheth,' and 'weigheth the spirits.' I need not repeat what I said, in the introduction to these remarks, upon this subject. Just let us take with us these two thoughts, that the same actions which we sometimes test, in our very defective and loaded balances, have also to go into the infallible scales, and that the actions go with their interpretation in their motive. 'God weighs the spirits.' He reads what we do by His knowledge of what we are. We reveal to one another what we are by what we do, and, as is a commonplace, none of us can penetrate, except very superficially and often inaccurately, to the motives that actuate. But the motive is three-fourths of the action. God does not go from without, as it were, inwards; from our actions to estimate our characters; but He starts with the character and the motive—the habitual character and the occasional motive—and by these He reads the deed. He weighs, ponders, penetrates to the heart of the thing, and He weighs the spirits.

So on the one hand, 'I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief,' and many a deed which the world would condemn, and in which we onlookers would see evil, God does not wholly condemn, because He, being the Inlooker as well as the Onlooker, sees the albeit mistaken yet pure motives that underlay it. So it is conceivable that the inquisitor, and the heretic that he sent to the stake, may stand side by side in God's estimate; the one if he were actuated by pure zeal for the truth, the other because he was actuated by self-sacrifice in loyalty to his Lord. And, on the other hand, many a deed that goes flaunting through the world in 'purple and fine linen' will be stripped of its gauds, and stand naked and ugly before the eyes of 'Him with whom we have to do.' He 'weighs the spirits.'

Lastly, a word about—

III. The practical issues of these thoughts.

'Commit thy works unto the Lord'—that is to say, do not be too sure that you are right because you do not think you are wrong. We should be very distrustful of our own judgments of ourselves, especially when that judgment permits us to do certain things. 'I know nothing against myself,' said the Apostle, 'yet am I not hereby justified.' And again, still more emphatically, he lays down the principle that I would have liked to have enlarged upon if I had had time. 'Happy is he that condemneth not himself in the things which he alloweth.' You may have made the glove too easy by stretching. It is possible that you may think that something is permissible and right which a wiser and more rigid and Christlike judgment of yourself would have taught you was wrong. Look under the stones for the reptiles, and remember the prayer, 'Cleanse thou me from secret faults,' and distrust a

permitting and easy conscience.

Then, again, let us seek the divine strengthening and illumination. We have to seek that in some very plain ways. Seek it by prayer. There is nothing so powerful in stripping off from our besetting sins their disguises and masks as to go to God with the honest petition: 'Search me ... and try me ... and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' Brethren! if we will do that, we shall get answers that will startle us, that will humble us, but that will be blessed beyond all other blessedness, and will bring to light the 'hidden things of darkness.' Then, after they are brought to light and cast out, 'then shall every man have praise of God.'

We ought to keep ourselves in very close union with Jesus Christ, because if we cling to Him in simple faith, He will come into our hearts, and we shall be saved from walking in darkness, and have the light of life shining down upon our deeds. Christ is the conscience of the Christian man's conscience, who, by His voice in the hearts that wait upon Him, says, 'Do this,' and they do it. It is when He is in our spirits that our estimate of ourselves is set right, and that we hear the voice saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it'; and not merely do we hear the voice, but we get help to our feet in running in the way of His commandments, with enlarged and confirmed hearts. Brethren! for the discovery of our faults, which we ought all to long for, and for the conquest of these discovered faults, which, if we are Christians, we do long for, our confidence is in Him. And if you trust Him, 'the blood of Christ will cleanse'—because it comes into our life's blood—'from all sin.'

And the last thing that I would say is this. We must punctiliously obey every dictate that speaks in our own consciences, especially when it urges us to unwelcome duties or restrains us from too welcome sins. 'To him that hath shall be given'—and the sure way to condemn ourselves to utter blindness as to our true selves is to pay no attention to the glimmers of light that we have, whilst, on the other hand, the sure way to be led into fuller illumination is to follow faithfully whatsoever sparkles of light may shine upon our hearts. 'Do the duty that lies nearest thee.' Put thy trust in Jesus Christ. Distrust thine own approbation or condonation of thine actions, and ever turn to Him and say, 'Show me what to do, and make me willing and fit to do it.' Then there will be little contrariety between your estimate of your ways and God's judgments of your spirits.

Proverbs 16:22-33 A BUNDLE OF PROVERBS

A slight thread of connection may be traced in some of the proverbs in this passage. Verse 22, with its praise of 'Wisdom,' introduces one instance of Wisdom's excellence in verse 23, and that again, with its reference to speech, leads on to verse 24 and its commendation of 'pleasant words.' Similarly, verses 27-30 give four pictures of vice, three of them beginning with 'a man.' We may note, too, that, starting with verse 26, every verse till verse 30 refers to some work of 'the mouth' or 'lips.'

The passage begins with one phase of the contrast between Wisdom and Folly, which this book is never weary of emphasising and underscoring. We shall miss the force of its most characteristic teaching unless we keep well in mind that the two opposites of Wisdom and

Folly do not refer only or chiefly to intellectual distinctions. The very basis of 'Wisdom,' as this book conceives it, is the 'fear of the Lord,' without which the man of biggest, clearest brain, and most richly stored mind, is, in its judgment, 'a fool.' Such 'understanding,' which apprehends and rightly deals with the deepest fact of life, our relation to God and to His law, is a 'well-spring of life.' The figure speaks still more eloquently to Easterns than to us. In those hot lands the cool spring, bursting through the baked rocks or burning sand, makes the difference between barrenness and fertility, the death of all green things and life. So where true Wisdom is deep in a heart, it will come flashing up into sunshine, and will quicken the seeds of all good as it flows through the deeds. 'Everything liveth whithersoever the river cometh.' Productiveness, refreshment, the beauty of the sparkling wavelets, the music of their ripples against the stones, and all the other blessings and delights of a perpetual fountain, have better things corresponding to them in the life of the man who is wise with the true Wisdom which begins with the fear of God. Just as it is active in the life, so is Folly. But its activity is not blessing and gladdening, but punitive. For all sin automatically works its own chastisement, and the curse of Folly is that, while it corrects, it prevents the 'fool' from profiting by the correction. Since it punishes itself, one might expect that it would cure itself, but experience shows that, while it wields a rod, its subjects 'receive no correction.' That insensibility is the paradox and the Nemesis of 'Folly.'

The Old Testament ethics are remarkable for their solemn sense of the importance of words, and Proverbs shares in that sense to the full. In some aspects, speech is a more perfect self-revelation than act. So the outflow of the fountain in words comes next. Wise heart makes wise speech. That may be looked at in two ways. It may point to the utterance by word as the most precious, and incumbent on its possessor, of all the ways of manifesting Wisdom; or it may point to the only source of real 'learning,'—namely, a wise heart. In the former view, it teaches us our solemn obligation not to hide our light under a bushel, but to speak boldly and lovingly all the truth which God has taught us. A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are bound to give voice to our 'Wisdom.' In the other aspect, it reminds us that there is a better way of getting Wisdom than by many books,—namely, by filling our hearts, through communion with God, with His own will. Then, whether we have worldly 'learning' or no, we shall be able to instruct many, and lead them to the light which has shone on us.

There are many kinds of pleasant words, some of which are not like 'honey,' but like poison hid in jam. Insincere compliments, flatteries when rebukes would be fitting, and all the brood of civil conventionalities, are not the words meant here. Truly pleasant ones are those which come from true Wisdom, and may often have a surface of bitterness like the prophet's roll, but have a core of sweetness. It is a great thing to be able to speak necessary and unwelcome truths with lips into which grace is poured. A spoonful of honey catches more flies than a hogshead of vinegar.

Verse 25 has no connection with its context. It teaches two solemn truths, according to the possible double meaning of 'right.' If that word means ethically right, then the saying sets forth the terrible possibility of conscience being wrongly instructed, and sanctioning gross sin. If it means only straight, or level—that is, successful and easy—the saying enforces

the not less solemn truth that sin deceives as to its results, and that the path of wrongdoing, which is flowery and smooth at first, grows rapidly thorny, and goes fast downhill, and ends at last in a cul-de-sac, of which death is the only outlet. We are not to trust our own consciences, except as enlightened by God's Word. We are not to listen to sin's lies, but to fix it well in our minds that there is only one way which leads to life and peace, the narrow way of faith and obedience.

The Revised Version's rendering of verse 26 gives the right idea. 'The appetite,' or hunger, 'of the labourer labours for him' (that is, the need of food is the mainspring of work), and it lightens the work to which it impels. So hunger is a blessing. That is true in regard to the body. The manifold material industries of men are, at bottom, prompted by the need to earn something to eat. The craving which drives to such results is a thing to be thankful for. It is better to live where toil is needful to sustain life than in lazy lands where an hour's work will provide food for a week. But the saying reaches to spiritual desires, and anticipates the beatitude on those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness.' Happy they who feel that craving, and are driven by it to the labour for the bread which comes down from heaven! 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

The next three proverbs (vs. 27-29) give three pictures of different types of bad men. First, we have 'the worthless man' (Rev. Ver.), literally 'a man of Belial,' which last word probably means worthlessness. His work is 'digging evil'; his words are like scorching fire. To dig evil seems to have a wider sense than has digging a pit for others (Ps. vii. 15), which is usually taken as a parallel. The man is not merely malicious toward others, but his whole activity goes to further evil. It is the material in which he delights to work. What mistaken spade husbandry it is to spend labour on such a soil! What can it grow but thistles and poisonous plants? His words are as bad as his deeds. No honey drops from his lips, but scorching fire, which burns up not only reputations but tries to consume all that is good. As James says, such a tongue is 'set on fire of hell.' The picture is that of a man bad through and through. But there may be indefinitely close approximations to it, and no man can say, 'Thus far will I go in evil ways, and no further.'

The second picture is of a more specific kind. The 'froward man' here seems to be the same as the slanderer in the next clause. He utters perverse things, and so soweth strife and parts friends. There are people whose mouths are as full of malicious whispers as a sower's basket is of seed, and who have a base delight in flinging them broadcast. Sometimes they do not think of what the harvest will be, but often they chuckle to see it springing in the mistrust and alienation of former friends. A loose tongue often does as much harm as a bitter one, and delight in dwelling on people's faults is not innocent because the tattler did not think of the mischief he was setting agoing.

In verse 29 another type of evil-doer is outlined—the opposite, in some respects, of the preceding. The slanderer works secretly; this mischief-maker goes the plain way to work. He uses physical force or 'violence.' But how does that fit in with 'enticeth'? It may be that the enticement of his victim into a place suitable for robbing or murder is meant, but more probably there is here the same combination of force and craft as in chapter i. 10-14 . Criminals have a wicked delight in tempting innocent people to join their gangs. A lawless

desperado is a hotbed of infection.

Verse 30 draws a portrait of a bad man. It is a bit of homely physiognomical observation. A man with a trick of closing his eyes has something working in his head; and, if he is one of these types of men, one may be sure that he is brewing mischief. Compressed lips mean concentrated effort, or fixed resolve, or suppressed feeling, and in any of these cases are as a danger signal, warning that the man is at work on some evil deed.

Two sayings follow, which contrast goodness with the evils just described. The 'if' in verse 31 weakens the strong assertion of the proverb. 'The hoary head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness.' That is but putting into picturesque form the Old Testament promise of long life to the righteous—a promise which is not repeated in the new dispensation, but which is still often realised. 'Whom the gods love, die young,' is a heathen proverb; but there is a natural tendency in the manner of life which Christianity produces to prolong a man's days. A heart at peace, because stayed on God, passions held well in hand, an avoidance of excesses which eat away strength, do tend to length of life, and the opposites of these do tend to shorten it. How many young men go home from our great cities every year, with their 'bones full of the iniquities of their youth,' to die!

If we are to tread the way of righteousness, and so come to 'reverence and the silver hair,' we must govern ourselves. So the next proverb extols the ruler of his own spirit as 'more than conquerors,' whose triumphs are won in such vulgar fields as battles and sieges, Our sorest fights and our noblest victories are within.

'Unless above himself he can

Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!'

Verse 31 takes the casting of the lot as one instance of the limitation of all human effort, in all which we can but use the appropriate means, while the whole issue must be left in God's hands. The Jewish law did not enjoin the lot, but its use seems to have been frequent. The proverb presents in the sharpest relief a principle which is true of all our activity. The old proverb-maker knew nothing of chance. To him there were but two real moving forces in the world—man and God. To the one belonged sowing the seed, doing his part, whether casting the lot or toiling at his task. His force was real, but derived and limited. Efforts and attempts are ours; results are God's. We sow; He 'gives it a body as it pleases Him.' Nothing happens by accident. Man's little province is bounded on all sides by God's, and the two touch. There is no neutral territory between, where godless chance rules.

Proverbs 18:10-11 TWO FORTRESSES

'The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. 11. The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit'— PROVERBS xviii. 10, 11 .

The mere reading of these two verses shows that, contrary to the usual rule in the Book of

Proverbs, they have a bearing on each other. They are intended to suggest a very strong contrast, and that contrast is even more emphatic in the original than in our translation; because, as the margin of your Bibles will tell you, the last word of the former verse might be more correctly rendered, 'the righteous runneth into it, and is set on high.' It is the same word which is employed in the next verse—'a high wall.'

So we have 'the strong tower' and 'the strong city'; the man lifted up above danger on the battlements of the one, and the man fancying himself to be high above it (and only fancying himself) in the imaginary safety of the other.

I. Consider then, first, the two fortresses.

One need only name them side by side to feel the full force of the intended contrast. On the one hand, the name of the Lord with all its depths and glories, with its blaze of lustrous purity, and infinitudes of inexhaustible power; and on the other, 'the rich man's wealth.' What contempt is expressed in putting the two side by side! It is as if the author had said, 'Look on this picture and on that!' Two fortresses! Yes! The one is like Gibraltar, inexpugnable on its rock, and the other is like a painted castle on the stage; flimsy canvas that you could put your foot through—solidity by the side of nothingness. For even the poor appearance of solidity is an illusion, as our text says with bitter emphasis—'a high wall in his own conceit.'

'The name of the Lord,' of course, is the Biblical expression for the whole character of God, as He has made it known to us, or in other words, for God Himself, as He has been pleased to reveal Himself to mankind. The syllables of that name are all the deeds by which He has taught us what He is; every act of power, of wisdom, of tenderness, of grace that has manifested these qualities and led us to believe that they are all infinite. In the name, in its narrower sense, the name of Jehovah, there is much of 'the name' in its wider sense. For that name 'Jehovah,' both by its signification and by the circumstances under which it was originally employed, tells us a great deal about God. It tells us, for instance, by virtue of its signification, that He is self-existent, depending upon no other creature. 'I AM THAT I AM!' No other being can say that. All the rest of us have to say, 'I am that which God made me.' Circumstances and a hundred other things have made me; God finds the law of His being and the fountain of His being within Himself.

'He sits on no precarious throne,

Nor borrows leave to be.'

His name proclaims Him to be self-existent, and as self-existent, eternal; and as eternal, changeless; and as self-existent, eternal, changeless, infinite in all the qualities by which He makes Himself known. This boundless Being, all full of wisdom, power, and tenderness, with whom we can enter into relations of amity and concord, surely He is 'a strong tower into which we may run and be safe.'

But far beyond even the sweep of that great name, Jehovah, is the knowledge of God's deepest heart and character which we learn in Him who said, 'I have declared Thy name

unto My brethren, and will declare it.' Christ in His life and death, in His meekness, sweetness, gentleness, calm wisdom, infinite patience, attractiveness; yearning over sinful hearts, weeping over rebels, in the graciousness of His life, in the sacredness and the power of His Cross, is the Revealer to our hearts of the heart of God. If I may so say, He has builded 'the strong tower' broader, has expanded its area and widened its gate, and lifted its summit yet nearer the heavens, and made the name of God a wider name and a mightier name, and a name of surer defence and blessing than ever it was before.

And so, dear brethren! it all comes to this, the name that is 'the strong tower' is the name 'My Father!' a Father of infinite tenderness and wisdom and power. Oh! where can the child rest more quietly than on the mother's breast, where can the child be safer than in the circle of the father's arms? 'The name of the Lord is a strong tower.'

Now turn to the other for a moment: 'The rich man's wealth is' (with great emphasis on the next little word) 'his strong city, and as a high wall in his own conceit.' Of course we have not to deal here only with wealth in the shape of money, but all external and material goods, the whole mass of the 'things seen and temporal,' are gathered together here in this phrase.

Men use their imaginations in very strange fashion, and make, or fancy they make, for themselves out of the things of the present life a defence and a strength. Like some poor lunatic, out upon a moor, that fancies himself ensconced in a castle; like some barbarous tribes behind their stockades or crowding at the back of a little turf wall, or in some old tumble-down fort that the first shot will bring rattling down about their ears, fancying themselves perfectly secure and defended—so do men deal with these outward things that are given them for another purpose altogether: they make of them defences and fortresses.

It is difficult for a man to have them and not to trust them. So Jesus said to His disciples once: 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom'; and when they were astonished at His words, He repeated them with the significant variation, 'How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the Kingdom of God.' So He would teach that the misuse and not the possession of wealth is the barrier, but so, too, He would warn us that, nine times out of ten, the possession of them in more than a very modest measure, tempts a man into confidence in them.

The illusion is one that besets us all. We are all tempted to make a defence of the things that we can see and handle. Is it not strange, and is it not sad, that most of us just turn the truth round about and suppose that the real defence is the imaginary, and that the imaginary one is the real? How many men are there in this chapel who, if they spoke out of their deepest convictions, would say: 'Oh yes! the promises of God are all very well, but I would rather have the cash down. I suppose that I may trust that He will provide bread and water, and all the things that I need, but I would rather have a good solid balance at the banker's.' How many of you would rather honestly, and at the bottom of your hearts, have that than God's word for your defence? How many of you think that to trust in a living God is but grasping at a very airy and unsubstantial kind of support; and that the real solid

defence is the defence made of the things that you can see?

My brother! it is exactly the opposite way. Turn it clean round, and you get the truth. The unsubstantial shadows are the material things that you can see and handle; illusory as a dream, and as little able to ward off the blows of fate as a soap bubble. The real is the unseen beyond—‘the things that are,’ and He who alone really is, and in His boundless and absolute Being is our only defence.

In one aspect or another, that false imagination with which my last text deals is the besetting sin of Manchester. Not the rich man only, but the poor man just as much, is in danger of it. The poor man who thinks that everything would be right if only he were rich, and the rich man who thinks that everything is right because he is rich, are exactly the same man. The circumstances differ, but the one man is but the other turned inside out. And all round about us we see the fierce fight to get more and more of these things, the tight grip of them when we have got them, the overestimate of the value of them, the contempt for the people who have less of them than ourselves. Our aristocracy is an aristocracy of wealth; in some respects, one by no means to be despised, because there often go a great many good qualities to the making and the stewardship of wealth; but still it is an evil that men should be so largely estimated by their money as they are here. It is not a sound state of opinion which has made ‘what is he worth?’ mean ‘how much of it has he?’ We are taught here to look upon the prizes of life as being mainly wealth. To win that is ‘success’—‘prosperity’—and it is very hard for us all not to be influenced by the prevailing tone.

I would urge you, young men, especially to lay this to heart—that of all delusions that can beset you in your course, none will work more disastrously than the notion that the summum bonum, the shield and stay of a man, is the ‘abundance of the things that he possesses.’ I fancy I see more listless, discontented, unhappy faces looking out of carriages than I see upon the pavement. And I am sure of this, at any rate, that all which is noble and sweet and good in life can be wrought out and possessed upon as much bread and water as will keep body and soul together, and as much furniture as will enable a man to sit at his meal and lie down at night. And as for the rest, it has many advantages and blessings, but oh! it is all illusory as a defence against the evils that will come, sooner or later, to every life.

II. Consider next how to get into the true Refuge.

‘The righteous runneth into it and is safe,’ says my text. You may get into the illusory one very easily. Imagination will take you there. There is no difficulty at all about that. And yet the way by which a man makes this world his defence may teach you a lesson as to how you can make God your defence. How does a man make this world his defence? By trusting to it. He that says to the fine gold, ‘Thou art my confidence,’ has made it his fortress—and that is how you will make God your fortress—by trusting to Him. The very same emotion, the very same act of mind, heart, and will, may be turned either upwards or downwards, as you can turn the beam from a lantern which way you please. Direct it earthwards, and you ‘trust in the uncertainty of riches.’ Flash it heavenwards, and you ‘trust in the living

God.'

And that same lesson is taught by the words of our text, 'The righteous runneth into it.' I do not dwell upon the word 'righteous.' That is the Old Testament point of view, which could not conceive it possible that any man could have deep and close communion with God, except on condition of a pure character. I will not speak of that at present, but point to the picturesque metaphor, which will tell us a great deal more about what faith is than many a philosophical dissertation. Many a man who would be perplexed by a theologian's talk will understand this: 'The righteous runneth into the name of the Lord.'

The metaphor brings out the idea of eager haste in betaking oneself to the shelter, as when an invading army comes into a country, and the unarmed peasants take their portable belongings and their cattle, and catch up their children in their arms, and set their wives upon their mules, and make all haste to some fortified place; or as when the manslayer in Israel fled to the city of refuge, or as when Lot hurried for his life out of Sodom. There would be no dawdling then; but with every muscle strained, men would run into the stronghold, counting every minute a year till they were inside its walls, and heard the heavy door close between them and the pursuer. No matter how rough the road, or how overpowering the heat—no time to stop to gather flowers, or even diamonds on the road, when a moment's delay might mean the enemy's sword in your heart!

Now that metaphor is frequently used to express the resolved and swift act by which, recognising in Jesus Christ, who declares the name of the Lord, our hiding-place, we shelter ourselves in Him, and rest secure. One of the picturesque words by which the Old Testament expresses 'trust' means literally 'to flee to a refuge.' The Old Testament trust is the New Testament faith, even as the Old Testament 'Name of the Lord' answers to the New Testament 'Name of Jesus.' And so we run into this sure hiding-place and strong fortress of the name of the Lord, when we betake ourselves to Jesus and put our trust in Him as our defence.

Such a faith—the trust of mind, heart, and will—laying hold of the name of the Lord, makes us 'righteous,' and so capable of 'dwelling with the devouring fire' of God's perfect purity. The Old Testament point of view was righteousness, in order to abiding in God. The New Testament begins, as it were, at an earlier stage in the religious life, and tells us how to get the righteousness, without which, it holds as strongly as the Old Testament, 'no man shall see the Lord.' It shows us that our faith, by which we run into that fortress, fits us to enter the fortress, because it makes us partakers of Christ's purity.

So my earnest question to you all is—Have you 'fled for refuge to lay hold' on that Saviour in whom God has set His name? Like Lot out of Sodom, like the manslayer to the city of refuge, like the unwarlike peasants to the baron's tower, before the border thieves, have you gone thither for shelter from all the sorrows and guilt and dangers that are marching terrible against you? Can you take up as yours the old grand words of exuberant trust in which the Psalmist heaps together the names of the Lord, as if walking about the city of his defence, and telling the towers thereof, 'The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my

salvation, and my high tower'? If you have, then 'because you have made the Lord your refuge, there shall no evil befall you.'

III. So we have, lastly, what comes of sheltering in these two refuges.

As to the former of them, I said at the beginning of these remarks that the words 'is safe' were more accurately as well as picturesquely rendered by 'is set aloft.' They remind us of the psalm which has many points of resemblance with this text, and which gives the very same thought when it says, 'I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.' The fugitive is taken within the safe walls of the strong tower, and is set up high on the battlements, looking down upon the baffled pursuers, and far beyond the reach of their arrows. To stand upon that tower lifts a man above the region where temptations fly, above the region where sorrow strikes; lifts him above sin and guilt and condemnation and fear, and calumny and slander, and sickness, and separation and loneliness and death; 'and all the ills that flesh is heir to.'

Or, as one of the old Puritan commentators has it: 'The tower is so deep that no pioneer can undermine it, so thick that no cannon can breach it, so high that no ladder can scale it.' 'The righteous runneth into it,' and is perched up there; and can look down like Lear from his cliff, and all the troubles that afflict the lower levels shall 'show scarce so gross as beetles' from the height where he stands, safe and high, hidden in the name of the Lord.

I say little about the other side. Brethren! the world in any of its forms, the good things of this life in any shape, whether that of money or any other, can do a great deal for us. They can keep a great many inconveniences from us, they can keep a great many cares and pains and sorrows from us. I was going to say, to carry out the metaphor, they can keep the rifle-bullets from us. But, ah! when the big siege-guns get into position and begin to play; when the great trials that every life must have, sooner or later, come to open fire at us, then the defence that anything in this outer world can give comes rattling about our ears very quickly. It is like the pasteboard helmet which looked as good as if it had been steel, and did admirably as long as no sword struck it.

There is only one thing that will keep us peaceful and unharmed, and that is to trust our poor shelterless lives and sinful souls to the Saviour who has died for us. In Him we find the hiding-place, in which secure, as beneath the shadow of a great rock, dreaded evils will pass us by, as impotent to hurt as savages before a castle fortified by modern skill. All the bitterness of outward calamities will be taken from them before they reach us. Their arrows will still wound, but He will have wiped the poison off before He lets them be shot at us. The force of temptation will be weakened, for if we live near Him we shall have other tastes and desires. The bony fingers of the skeleton Death, who drags men from all other homes, will not dislodge us from our fortress-dwelling. Hid in Him we shall neither fear going down to the grave, nor coming up from it, nor judgment, nor eternity. Then, I beseech you, make no delay. Escape! flee for your life! A growing host of evil marches swift against you. Take Christ for your defence and cry to Him,

Lo! from sin and grief and shame,

Hide me, Jesus! in Thy name.

Proverbs 20:1-7: A STRING OF PEARLS

The connection between the verses of this passage is only in their common purpose to set forth some details of a righteous life, and to brand the opposite vices. A slight affinity may be doubtfully traced in one or two adjacent proverbs, but that is all.

First comes temperance, enforced by the picture of a drunkard. Wine and strong drink are, as it were, personified, and their effects on men are painted as their own characters. And an ugly picture it is, which should hang in the gallery of every young man and woman. 'Wine is a mocker.' Intemperance delights in scoffing at all pure, lofty, sacred things. It is the ally of wild profanity, which sends up its tipsy and clumsy ridicule against Heaven itself. If a man wants to lose his sense of reverence, his susceptibility for what is noble, let him take to drink, and the thing is done. If he would fain keep these fresh and quick, let him eschew what is sure to deaden them. Of course there are other roads to the same end, but there is no other end to this road. Nobody ever knew a drunkard who did not scoff at things that should be revered, and that because he knew that he was acting in defiance of them.

'A brawler,' or, as Delitzsch renders it, 'boisterous'—look into a liquor-store if you want to verify that, or listen to a drunken party coming back from an excursion and making night hideous with their bellowings, or go to any police court on a Monday morning. We in England are familiar with the combination on police charge-sheets, 'drunk and disorderly.' So does the old proverb-maker seem to have been. Drink takes off the brake, and every impulse has its own way, and makes as much noise as it can.

The word rendered in Authorised Version 'is deceived,' and in Revised Version 'ereth,' is literally 'staggers' or 'reels,' and it is more graphic to keep that meaning. There is a world of quiet irony in the unexpectedly gentle close of the sentence, 'is not wise.' How much stronger the assertion might have been! Look at the drunkard as he staggers along, scoffing at everything purer and higher than himself, and ready to fight with his own shadow, and incapable of self-control. He has made himself the ugly spectacle you see. Will anybody call him wise?

The next proverb applies directly to a state of things which most nations have outgrown. Kings who can give full scope to their anger, and who inspire mainly terror, are anomalies in civilised countries now. The proverb warns that it is no trifle to rouse the lion from his lair, and that when he begins to growl there is danger. The man who stirs him 'forfeits his own life,' or, at all events, imperils it.

The word rendered 'sins' has for its original meaning 'misses,' and seems to be so used here, as also in Proverbs viii. 36. 'Against' is a supplement. The maxim inculcates the wisdom of avoiding conduct which might rouse an anger so sure to destroy its object. And that is a good maxim for ordinary times in all lands, monarchies or republics. For there is in constitutional kingdoms and in republics an uncrowned monarch, to the full as irresponsible, as easily provoked, and as relentless in hunting its opponents to destruction,

as any old-world tyrant. Its name is Public Opinion. It is not well to provoke it. If a man does, let him well understand that he takes his life, or what is sometimes dearer than life, in his hand. Not only self-preservation, which the proverb and Scripture recognise as a legitimate motive, but higher considerations, dictate compliance with the ruling forces of our times, as far as may be. Conscience only has the right to limit this precept, and to say, 'Let the brute roar, and never mind if you do forfeit your life. It is your duty to say "No," though all the world should be saying "Yes."'

A slight thread of connection may be established between the second and third proverbs. The latter, like the former, commends peacefulness and condemns pugnacity. Men talk of 'glory' as the warrior's meed, and the so-called Christian world has not got beyond the semi-barbarous stage which regards 'honour' as mainly secured by fighting. But this ancient proverb-maker had learned a better conception of what 'honour' or 'glory' was, and where it grew.

'Peace hath her victories

No less renowned than war,'

said Milton. But our proverb goes farther than 'no less,' and gives greater glory to the man who never takes up arms, or who lays them down. The saying is true, not only about warfare, but in all regions of life. Fighting is generally wasted time. Controversialists of all sorts, porcupine-like people, who go through the world all sharp quills sticking out to pierce, are less to be admired than peace-loving souls. Any fool can 'show his teeth,' as the word for 'quarrelling' means. But it takes a wise man, and a man whose spirit has been made meek by dwelling near God in Christ, to withhold the angry word, the quick retort. It is generally best to let the glove flung down lie where it is. There are better things to do than to squabble.

Verse 4 is a parable as well as a proverb. If a man sits by the fireside because the north wind is blowing, when he ought to be out in the field holding the plough with frost-nipped fingers, he will beg (or, perhaps, seek for a crop) in harvest, and will find nothing, when others are rejoicing in the slow result of winter showers and of their toilsome hours. So, in all life, if the fitting moments for preparation are neglected, late repentance avails nothing. The student who dawdles when he should be working, will be sure to fail when the examination comes on. It is useless to begin ploughing when your neighbours are driving their reaping machines into the fields. 'There is a time to sow, and a time to reap.' The law is inexorable for this life, and not less certainly so for the life to come. The virgins who cried in vain, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' and were answered, 'Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now!' are sisters of the man who was hindered from ploughing because it was cold, and asked in vain for bread when harvest time had come. 'To-day, if ye will to hear His voice, harden not your hearts.'

The next proverb is a piece of shrewd common sense. It sets before us two men, one reticent, and the other skilful in worming out designs which he wishes to penetrate. The former is like a deep draw-well; the latter is like a man who lets down a bucket into it, and

winds it up full. 'Still waters are deep.' The faculty of reading men may be abused to bad ends, but is worth cultivating, and may be allied to high aims, and serve to help in accomplishing these. It may aid good men in detecting evil, in knowing how to present God's truth to hearts that need it, in pouring comfort into closely shut spirits. Not only astute business men or politicians need it, but all who would help their fellows to love God and serve Him—preachers, teachers, and the like. And there would be more happy homes if parents and children tried to understand one another. We seldom dislike a man when we come to know him thoroughly. We cannot help him till we do.

The proverb in verse 6 is susceptible of different renderings in the first clause. Delitzsch and others would translate, 'Almost every man meets a man who is gracious to him.' The contrast will then be between partial 'grace' or kindness, and thoroughgoing reliability or trustworthiness. The rendering of the Authorised and Revised Versions, on the other hand, makes the contrast between talk and reality, professions of goodwill and acts which come up to these. In either case, the saying is the bitter fruit of experience. Even charity, which 'believeth all things,' cannot but admit that soft words are more abundant than deeds which verify them. It is no breach of the law of love to open one's eyes to facts, and so to save oneself from taking paper money for gold, except at a heavy discount. Perhaps the reticence, noted in the previous proverb, led to the thought of a loose-tongued profession of kindness as a contrast. Neither the one nor the other is admirable. The practical conclusion from the facts in this proverb is double—do not take much heed of men's eulogiums on their own benevolence; do not trumpet your own praises. Caution and modesty are parts of Christian perfection.

The last saying points to the hereditary goodness which sometimes, for our comfort, we do see, as well as to the halo from a saintly parent which often surrounds his children. Note that there may be more than mere succession in time conveyed by the expression 'after him.' It may mean following in his footsteps. Such children are blessed, both in men's benedictions and in their own peaceful hearts. Weighty responsibilities lie upon the children of parents who have transmitted to them a revered name. A Christian's children are doubly bound to continue the parental tradition, and are doubly criminal if they depart from it. There is no sadder sight than that of a godly father wailing over an ungodly son, unless it be that of the ungodly son who makes him wail. Absalom hanging by his curls in the oak-tree, and David groaning, 'My son, my son!' touch all hearts. Alas that the tragedy should be so often repeated in our homes to-day!

Proverbs 20:4 THE SLUGGARD IN HARVEST

'The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing.'— PROVERBS xx. 4 .

Like all the sayings of this book, this is simply a piece of plain, practical common sense, intended to inculcate the lesson that men should diligently seize the opportunity whilst it is theirs. The sluggard is one of the pet aversions of the Book of Proverbs, which, unlike most other manuals of Eastern wisdom, has a profound reverence for honest work.

He is a great drone, for he prefers the chimney-corner to the field, even although it cannot have been very cold if the weather was open enough to admit of ploughing. And he is a great fool, too, for he buys his comfort at a very dear price, as do all men who live for to-day, and let to-morrow look out for itself.

But like most of the other sayings of this book, my text contains principles which are true in the highest regions of human life, for the laws which rule up there are not different from those which regulate the motions of its lower phases. Religion recognises the same practical common-sense principles that daily business does. I venture to take this as my text now, in addressing young people, because they have special need of, and special facilities for, the wisdom which it enjoins; and because the words only want to be turned with their faces heavenwards in order to enforce the great appeal, the only one which it is worth my while to make, and worth your while to come here to listen to; the appeal to each of you, 'I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves to God' now .

My object, then, will be perhaps best accomplished if I simply ask you to look, first, at the principles involved in this quaint proverb; and, secondly, to apply them in one or two directions.

I. First, then, let us try to bring out the principles which are crystallised in this picturesque saying.

The first thought evidently is: present conduct determines future conditions. Life is a series of epochs, each of which has its destined work, and that being done, all is well; and that being left undone, all is ill.

Now, of course, in regard to many of the accidents of a man's condition, his conduct is only one, and by no means the most powerful, of the factors which settle them. The position which a man fills, the tasks which he has to perform, and the whole host of things which make up the externals of his life, depend upon far other conditions than any that he brings to them. But yet on the whole it is true that what a man does, and is, settles how he fares. And this is the mystical importance and awful solemnity of the most undistinguished moments and most trivial acts of this awful life of ours, that each of them has an influence on all that comes after, and may deflect our whole course into altogether different paths. It is not only the moments that we vulgarly and blindly call great which settle our condition, but it is the accumulation of the tiny ones; the small deeds, the unnoticed acts, which make up so large a portion of every man's life. It is these, after all, that are the most powerful in settling what we shall be. There come to each of us supreme moments in our lives. Yes! and if in all the subordinate and insignificant moments we have not been getting ready for them, but have been nurturing dispositions and acquiring habits, and cultivating ways of acting and thinking which condemn us to fail beneath the requirements of the supreme moment, then it passes us by, and we gain nothing from it. Tiny mica flakes have built up the Matterhorn, and the minute acts of life after all, by their multiplicity, make up life to be what it is. 'Sand is heavy,' says this wise book of Proverbs. The aggregation of the minutest grains, singly so light that they would not affect the most delicate balance, weighs upon us with a weight 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' The mystic

significance of the trivialities of life is that in them we largely make destiny, and that in them we wholly make character.

And now, whilst this is true about all life, it is especially true about youth. You have facilities for moulding your being which some of us older men would give a great deal to have again for a moment, with our present knowledge and bitter experience. The lava that has solidified into hard rock with us is yet molten and plastic with you. You can, I was going to say, be anything you make up your minds to; and, within reasonable limits, the bold saying is true. 'Ask what thou wilt and it shall be given to thee' is what nature and Providence, almost as really as grace and Christ, say to every young man and woman, because you are the arbiters, not wholly, indeed, of your destiny, and are the architects, altogether, of your character, which is more.

And so I desire to lay upon your hearts this threadbare old truth, because you are living in the ploughing time, and the harvest is months ahead. Whilst it is true that every day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the parent of all the to-morrows, it is also true that life has its predominant colouring, varying at different epochs, and that for you, though you are largely inheriting, even now, the results of your past, brief as it is, still more largely is the future, the plastic future, in your hands, to be shaped into such forms as you will. 'The child is father of the man,' and the youth has the blessed prerogative of standing before the mouldable to-morrow, and possessing a nature still capable of being cast into an almost infinite variety of form.

But then, not only do you stand with special advantages for making yourselves what you will, but you specially need to be reminded of the terrible importance and significance of each moment. For this is the very irony of human life, that we seldom awake to the sense of its importance till it is nearly ended, and that the period when reflection would avail the most is precisely the period when it is the least strong and habitual. What is the use of an old man like me thinking about what he could make of life if he had it to do over again, as compared with the advantage of your doing it? Yet I dare say that for once that you think thus, my contemporaries do it fifty times. So, not to abate one jot of your buoyancy, not to cast any shadow over joys and hopes, but to lift you to a sense of the blessed possibilities of your position, I want to lay this principle of my text upon your consciences, and to beseech you to try to keep it operatively in mind—you are making yourselves, and settling your destiny, by every day of your plastic youth.

There is another principle as clear in my text—viz., the easy road is generally the wrong one. The sluggard was warmer at the fireside than he would be in the field with his plough in the north wind, and so he stopped there. There are always obstacles in the way of noble life. It is always easier, as flesh judges, to live ignobly than to live as Jesus Christ would have us live. 'Endure hardness' is the commandment to all who would be soldiers of any great cause, and would not fling away their lives in low self-indulgence. If a man is going to be anything worth being, or to do anything worth doing, he must start with, and adhere to this, 'to scorn delights and live laborious days.' And only then has he a chance of rising above the fat dull weed that rots in Lethe's stream, and of living anything like the life that it becomes him to live.

Be sure of this, dear young friends, that self-denial and rigid self-control, in its two forms, of stopping your ears to the attractions of lower pleasures, and of cheerily encountering difficulties, is an indispensable condition of any life which shall at the last yield a harvest worth the gathering, and not destined to be

‘Cast as rubbish to the void,

When God hath made the pile complete.’

Never allow yourselves to be turned away from the plain path of duty by any difficulties. Never allow yourselves to be guided in your choice of a road by the consideration that the turf is smooth, and the flowers by the side of it sweet. Remember, the sluggard would have been warmer, with a wholesome warmth, at the ploughtail than cowering in the chimney corner. And the things that seem to be difficulties and hardships only need to be fronted to yield, like the east wind in its season, good results in bracing and hardening. Fix it in your minds that nothing worth doing is done but at the cost of difficulty and toil.

That is a lesson that this generation wants, even more than some that have lived. I suppose it is one of the temptations of older men to look askance upon the amusements of younger ones, but I cannot help lifting up here one word of earnest appeal to the young men and women of this congregation, and beseeching them, as they value the nobleness of their own lives, and their power of doing any real good, to beware of what seems to me the altogether extravagant and excessive love, and following after, of mere amusement which characterises this day to so large an extent. Better toil than such devotion to mere relaxation.

The last principle here is that the season let slip is gone for ever. Whether my text, in its second picture, intends us to think of the sluggard when the harvest came as ‘begging’ from his neighbours; or whether, as is possibly the construction of the Hebrew, it simply means to describe him as going out into his field, and looking at it, and asking for the harvest and seeing nothing there but weeds, the lesson it conveys is the same—the old, old lesson, so threadbare that I should be almost ashamed of taking up your time with it unless I believed that you did not lay it to heart as you should. Opportunity is bald behind, and must be grasped by the forelock. Life is full of tragic might-have-beens. No regret, no remorse, no self-accusation, no clear recognition that I was a fool will avail one jot. The time for ploughing is past; you cannot stick the share into the ground when you should be wielding the sickle. ‘Too late’ is the saddest of human words. And, my brother, as the stages of our lives roll on, unless each is filled as it passes with the discharge of the duties, and the appropriation of the benefits which it brings, then, to all eternity, that moment will never return, and the sluggard may beg in harvest, that he may have the chance to plough once more, and have none. The student that has spent the term in indolence, perhaps dissipation, has no time to get up his subject when he is in the examination-room, with the paper before him. And life, and nature, and God’s law, which is the Christian expression for the heathen one of nature, are stern taskmasters, and demand that the duty shall be done in its season or left undone for ever.

II. In the second place, let me, just in a few words, carry the lamp of these principles of my text and flash its rays upon one or two subjects.

Let me say a word, first, about the lowest sphere to which my text applies. I referred at the beginning of this discourse to this proverb as simply an inculcation of the duty of honest work, and of the necessity of being wide awake to opportunities in our daily work. Now, the most of you young men, and many of you young women, are destined for ordinary trades, professions, walks in commerce; and I do not suppose it to be beneath the dignity of the pulpit to say this: Do not trust to any way of getting on by dodges or speculation, or favour, or anything but downright hard work. Don't shirk difficulties, don't try to put the weight of the work upon some colleague or other, that you may have an easier life of it. Set your backs to your tasks, and remember that 'in all labour there is profit'; and whether the profit comes to you in the shape of advancement, position, promotion in your offices, partnerships perhaps, wealth, and the like, or no, the profit lies in the work. Honest toil is the key to pleasure.

Then, let me apply the text in a somewhat higher direction. Carry these principles with you in the cultivation of that important part of yourself—your intellects. What would some of us old students give if we had the flexibility, the power of assimilating new truth, the retentive memories, that you young people have? Some of you, perhaps, are students by profession; I should like all of you to make a conscience of making the best of your brains, as God has given them to you, a trust. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold.' The dawdler will read no books that tax his intellect, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing. Amidst all the flood of feeble, foolish, flaccid literature with which we are afflicted at this day, I wonder how many of you young men and women ever set yourselves to some great book or subject that you cannot understand without effort. Unless you do you are not faithful stewards of the supreme gift of God to you of that great faculty which apprehends and lives upon truth. So remember the sluggard by his fireside; and do you get out with your plough.

Again I say, apply these principles to a higher work still—that of the formation of character. Nothing will come to you noble, great, elevating, in that direction, unless it is sought, and sought with toil.

'In woods, in waves, in wars, she wont to dwell,

And will be found with peril and with pain;

Before her gate high Heaven did sweat ordain,

And wakeful watches ever to abide.'

Wisdom and truth, and all their elevating effects upon human character, require absolutely for their acquirement effort and toil. You have the opportunity still. As I said a moment ago—you may mould yourselves into noble forms. But in the making of character we have to work as a painter in fresco does, with a swift brush on the plaster while it is wet. It sets and hardens in an hour. And men drift into habits which become tyrannies and dominant

before they know where they are. Don't let yourselves be shaped by accident, by circumstance. Remember that you can build yourselves up into forms of beauty by the help of the grace of God, and that for such building there must be the diligent labour and the wise clutching at opportunity and understanding of the times which my text suggests.

And, lastly, let these principles applied to religion teach us the wisdom and necessity of beginning the Christian life at the earliest moment. I am by no means prepared to say that the extreme tragedy of my text can ever be wrought out in regard to the religious experience of any man here on earth, for I believe that at any moment in his career, however faultful and stained his past has been, and however long and obstinate has been his continuance in evil, a man may turn himself to Jesus Christ, and beg, and not in vain, nor ever find 'nothing' there.

But whilst all that is quite true, I want you, dear young friends, to lay this to heart, that if you do not yield yourselves to Jesus Christ now, in your early days, and take Him for your Saviour, and rest your souls upon Him, and then take Him for your Captain and Commander, for your Pattern and Example, for your Companion and your Aim, you will lose what you can never make up by any future course. You lose years of blessedness, of peaceful society with Him, of illumination and inspiration. You lose all the sweetness of the days which you spend away from Him. And if at the end you did come to Him, you would have one regret, deep and permanent, that you had not gone to Him before. If you put off, as some of you are putting off, what you know you ought to do—namely, give your hearts to Jesus Christ and become His—think of what you are laying up for yourselves thereby. You get much that it would be gain to lose—bitter memories, defiled imaginations, stings of conscience, habits that it will be very hard to break, and the sense of having wasted the best part of your lives, and having but the fag end to bring to Him. And if you put off, as some of you are disposed to do, think of the risk you run. It is very unlikely that susceptibilities will remain if they are trifled with. You remember that Felix trembled once, and sent for Paul often; but we never hear that he trembled any more. And it is quite possible, and quite likely, more likely than not, that you will never be as near being a Christian again as you are now, if you turn away from the impressions that are made upon you at this moment, and stifle the half-formed resolution.

But there is a more solemn thought still. This life as a whole is to the future life as the ploughing time is to the harvest, and there are awful words in Scripture which seem to point in the same direction in reference to the irrevocable and irreversible issue of neglected opportunities on earth, as this proverb does in regard to the ploughing and harvests of this life.

I dare not conceal what seems to me the New Testament confirmation and deepening of the solemn words of our text, 'He shall beg in harvest and have nothing,' by the Master's words, 'Many shall say to me in that day, Lord! Lord I and I will say, I never knew you.' The five virgins who rubbed their sleepy eyes and asked for oil when the master was at hand got none, and when they besought, 'Lord! Lord! open to us,' all the answer was, 'Too late! too late! ye cannot enter now.' Now, while it is called day, harden not your hearts.

Proverbs 20:17 BREAD AND GRAVEL

“Bread of deceit” is sweet to a man; but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel.— PROVERBS xx. 17 .

‘Bread of deceit’ is a somewhat ambiguous phrase, which may mean either of two things, and perhaps means both. It may either mean any good obtained by deceit, or good which deceives in its possession. In the former signification it would appear to have reference primarily to unjustly gotten gain, while in the latter it has a wider meaning and applies to all the worthless treasures and lying delights of life. The metaphor is full of homely vigour, and the contrast between the sweet bread and the gravel that fills the mouth and breaks the teeth, carries a solemn lesson which is perpetually insisted upon in this book of Proverbs, and confirmed in every man’s experience.

I. The first lesson here taught is the perpetuity of the most transient actions.

We are tempted to think that a deed done is done with, and to grasp at momentary pleasure, and ignore its abiding consequences. But of all the delusions by which men are blinded to the true solemnity of life none is more fatal than that which ignores the solemn ‘afterward’s that has to be taken into account. For, whatever issues in outward life our actions may have, they have all a very real influence on their doers; each of them tends to modify character, to form habits, to drag after itself a whole trail of consequences. Each strikes inwards and works outwards. The whole of a life may be set forth in the pregnant figure, ‘A sower went forth to sow,’ and ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’ The seed may lie long dormant, but the green shoots will appear in due time, and pass through all the stages of ‘first the blade, and then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear.’ The sower has to become the reaper, and the reaper has to eat of the bread made from the product of the long past sowing. Shall we have to reap a harvest of poisonous tares, or of wholesome wheat? ‘If ‘twere done when ‘tis done, ‘twere well it were done quickly’; but since it begins to do when ‘tis done, it were often better that it were not done at all. A momentary pause to ask ourselves when tempted to evil, ‘And what then?’ would burst not a few of the painted bubbles after which we often chase.

Is there any reason to suppose that these permanent consequences of our transient actions are confined in their operation to this life? Does not such a present, which is mainly the continuous result of the whole past, seem at least to prophesy and guarantee a similar future? Most of us, I suppose, believe in the life continuous through and after death retributive in a greater degree than life here. Whatever changes may be involved in the laying aside of the ‘earthly house of this tabernacle,’ it seems folly to suppose that in it we lay aside the consequences of our past inwrought into our very selves. Surely wisdom suggests that we try to take into view the whole scope of our actions, and to carry our vision as far as the consequences reach. We should all be wiser and better if we thought more of the ‘afterwards,’ whether in its partial form in the present, or in its solemn completion in the future beyond.

II. The bitterness of what is sweet and wrong.

There is no need to deny that 'bread of deceit is sweet to a man.' There is a certain pleasure in a lie, and the taste of the bread purchased by it is not embittered because it has been bought by deceit. If we succeed in getting the good which any strong desire hungers after, the gratification of the desire ministers pleasure. If a man is hungry, it matters not to his hunger how he has procured the bread which he devours. And so with all forms of good which appeal to sense. The sweetness of the thing desired and obtained is more subtle, but not less real, if it nourishes some inclination or taste of a higher nature. But such sweetness in its very essence is momentary, and even, whilst being masticated, 'bread of deceit' turns into gravel; and a mouthful of it breaks the teeth, excoriates the gums, interferes with breathing, and ministers no nourishment. The metaphor has but too familiar illustrations in the experience of us all. How often have we flattered ourselves with the thought, 'If I could but get this or that, how happy I should be'? How often when we got it have we been as happy as we expected? We had forgotten the voice of conscience, which may be overborne for a moment, but begins to speak more threateningly when its prohibitions have been neglected; we had forgotten that there is no satisfying our hungry desires with 'bread of deceit,' but that they grow much faster than it can be presented to them; we had forgotten the evil that was strengthened in us when it has been fed; we had forgotten that the remembrance of past delights often becomes a present sorrow and shame; we had forgotten avenging consequences of many sorts which follow surely in the train of sweet satisfactions which are wrong.

So, even in this life nothing keeps its sweetness which is wrong, and nothing which is sweet and wrong avoids a tang of intensest bitterness 'afterwards.' And all that bitterness will be increased in another world, if there is another, when God gives us to read the book of our lives which we ourselves have written. Many a page that records past sweetness will then be felt to be written, 'within and without,' with lamentation and woe.

All bitterness of what is sweet and wrong makes it certain that sin is the stupidest, as well as the wickedest, thing that a man can do.

III. The abiding sweetness of true bread.

In a subordinate sense, the true bread may be taken as meaning our own deeds inspired by love of God and approved by conscience. They may often be painful to do, but the pain merges into calm pleasure, and conscience whispers a foretaste of heaven's 'Well done! good and faithful servant.' The roll may be bitter to the lips, but, eaten, becomes sweet as honey; whereas the world's bread is sweet at first but bitter at last. The highest wisdom and the most exacting conscience absolutely coincide in that which they prescribe, and Scripture has the warrant of universal experience in proclaiming that sin in its subtler and more refined forms, as well as in its grosser, is a gigantic mistake, and the true wisdom and reasonable regard for one's own interest alike point in the same direction,—to a life based on the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, as being the life which yields the happiest results today and perpetual bliss hereafter. But let us not forget that in the highest sense Christ Himself is the 'true bread that cometh down from heaven.' He may be bitter at first, being eaten with tears of penitence and painful efforts at conquering sin, but

even in the first bitterness there is sweetness beyond all the earth can give. He 'spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies,' and the bread which He gives tastes as the manna of old did, like wafers made of honey. Only perverted appetites loathe this light bread and prefer the strong-favoured leeks and garlics of Egypt. They who sit at the table in the wilderness will finally sit at the table prepared in the kingdom of the heavens.

Proverbs 23:15-23 A CONDENSED GUIDE FOR LIFE

The precepts of this passage may be said to sum up the teaching of the whole Book of Proverbs. The essentials of moral character are substantially the same in all ages, and these ancient advices fit very close to the young lives of this generation. The gospel has, no doubt, raised the standard of morals, and, in many respects, altered the conception and perspective of virtues; but its great distinction lies, not so much in the novelty of its commandments as in the new motives and powers to obey them. Reverence for parents and teachers, the habitual 'fear of the Lord,' temperance, eager efforts to win and retain 'the truth,' have always been recognised as duties; but there is a long weary distance between recognition and practice, and he who draws inspiration from Jesus Christ will have strength to traverse it, and to do and be what he knows that he should.

The passage may be broken up into four parts, which, taken together, are a young life's directory of conduct which is certain to lead to peace.

I. There is, first, an appeal to filial affection, and an unveiling of paternal sympathy (verses 15, 16). The paternal tone characteristic of the Book of Proverbs is most probably regarded as that of a teacher addressing his disciples as his children. But the glimpse of the teacher's heart here given may well apply to parents too, and ought to be true of all who can influence other and especially young hearts. Little power attends advices which are not sweetened by manifest love. Many a son has been kept back from evil by thinking, 'What would my mother say?' and many a sound admonition has been nothing but sound, because the tone of it betrayed that the giver did not much care whether it was taken or not.

A true teacher must have his heart engaged in his lessons, and must impress his scholars with the conviction that their failure drives a knife into it, and their acceptance of them brings him purest joy. On the other hand, the disciple, and still more the child, must have a singularly cold nature who does not respond to loving solicitude and does not care whether he wounds or gladdens the heart which pours out its love and solicitude over him. May we not see shining through this loving appeal a truth in reference to the heart of the great Father and Teacher, who, in the depths of His divine blessedness, has no greater joy than that His children should walk in the truth? God's heart is glad when man's is wise.

Note, also, the wide general expression for goodness—a wise heart, lips speaking right things. The former is source, the latter stream. Only a pure fountain will send forth sweet waters. 'If thy heart become wise' is the more correct rendering, implying that there is no inborn wisdom, but that it must be made ours by effort. We are foolish; we become wise.

What the writer means by wisdom he will tell us presently. Here he lets us see that it is a good to be attained by appropriate means. It is the foundation of 'right' speech. Nothing is more remarkable than the solemn importance which Scripture attaches to words, even more, we might almost say than to deeds, therein reversing the usual estimate of their relative value. Putting aside the cases of insincerity, falsehood, and the like, a man's speech is a truer transcript of himself than his deeds, because less hindered and limited by externals. The most precious wine drips from the grapes by their own weight in the vat, without a turn of the screw. 'By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.' 'God's great gift of speech abused' is one of the commonest, least considered, and most deadly sins.

II. We have next the one broad precept with its sure reward, which underlies all goodness (verses 17, 18). The supplement 'be thou,' in the second clause of verse 17 , obscures the close connection of clauses. It is better to regard the verb of the first clause as continued in the second. Thus the one precept is set forth negatively and positively: 'Strive not after [that is, seek not to imitate or be associated with] sinners, but after the fear of the Lord.' The heart so striving becomes wise. So, then, wisdom is not the result of cultivating the intellect, but of educating the desires and aspirations. It is moral and religious, rather than simply intellectual. The magnificent personification of Wisdom at the beginning of the book influences the subsequent parts, and the key to understanding that great conception is, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.' The Greek goddess of Wisdom, noble as she is, is of the earth earthy when contrasted with that sovereign figure. Pallas Athene, with her clear eyes and shining armour, is poor beside the Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, who dwelt with God 'or ever the earth was,' and comes to men with loving voice and hands laden with the gifts of 'durable riches and righteousness.'

He is the wise man who fears God with the fear which has no torment and is compact of love and reverence. He is on the way to become wise whose seeking heart turns away from evil and evil men, and feels after God, as the vine tendrils after a stay, or as the sunflower turns to the light. For such wholehearted desire after the one supreme good there must be resolute averting of desire from 'sinners.' In this world full of evil there will be no vigorous longing for good and God, unless there be determined abstention from the opposite. We have but a limited quantity of energy, and if it is frittered away on multifarious creatures, none will be left to consecrate to God. There are lakes which discharge their waters at both ends, sending one stream east to the Atlantic and one west to the Pacific; but the heart cannot direct its issues of life in that fashion. They must be banked up if they are to run deep and strong. 'All the current of my being' must 'set to thee' if my tiny trickle is to reach the great ocean, to be lost in which is blessedness.

And such energy of desire and direction is not to be occasional, but 'all the day long.' It is possible to make life an unbroken seeking after and communion with God, even while plunged in common tasks and small cares. It is possible to approximate indefinitely to that ideal of continually 'dwelling in the house of the Lord'; and without some such approximation there will be little realising of the Lord, sought by fits and starts, and then forgotten in the hurry of business or pleasure. A photographic plate exposed for hours will

receive the picture of far-off stars which would never show on one exposed for a few minutes.

The writer is sure that such desires will be satisfied, and in verse 18 says so. The 'reward' (Rev. Ver.) of which he is sure is the outcome of the life of such seekers after God. It does not necessarily refer to the future after death, though that may be included in it. But what is meant is that no seeking after the fear of the Lord shall be in vain. There is a tacit emphasis on 'thy,' contrasting the sure fulfilment of hopes set on God with the as sure 'cutting off' of those mistakenly fixed upon creatures and vanities. Psalm xxxvii. 38 , has the same word here rendered 'reward' and declares that 'the future [or reward] of the wicked shall be cut off.' The great fulfilment of this assurance is reserved for the life beyond; but even here among all disappointments and hopes of which fulfilment is so often disappointment also, it remains true that the one striving which cannot be fruitless is striving for more of God, and the one hope which is sure to be realised, and is better when realised than expected, is the hope set on Him. Surely, then, the certainty that if we delight ourselves in God He will give us the desires of our hearts, is a good argument, and should be with us an operative motive for directing desire and effort away from earth and towards Him.

III. Special precepts as to the control of the animal nature follow in verses 19-21

First, note that general one of verse 19 , 'Guide thine heart in the way.' In most general terms, the necessity of self-government is laid down. There is a 'way' in which we should be content to travel. It is a definite path, and feet have to be kept from straying aside to wide wastes on either hand. Limitation, the firm suppression of appetites, the coercing of these if they seek to draw aside, are implied in the very conception of 'the way.' And a man must take the upper hand of himself, and, after all other guidance, must be his own guide; for God guides us by enabling us to guide ourselves.

Temperance in the wider sense of the word is prominent among the virtues flowing from fear of the Lord, and is the most elementary instance of 'guiding the heart.' Other forms of self-restraint in regard to animal appetites are spoken of in the context, but here the two of drunkenness and gluttony are bracketed together. They are similarly coupled in Deuteronomy xxi. 20 , in the formula of accusation which parents are to bring against a degenerate son. Allusion to that passage is probable here, especially as the other crime mentioned in it—namely, refusal to 'hear' parental reproof—is warned against in verse 22 . The picture, then, here is that of a prodigal son, and we have echoes of it in the great parable which paints first riotous living, and then poverty and misery.

Drunkenness had obviously not reached the dimensions of a national curse in the date when this lesson was written. We should not put over-eating side by side with it. But its ruinous consequences were plain then, and the bitter experience of England and America repeats on a larger scale the old lesson that the most productive source of poverty, wretchedness, rags, and vice, is drink. Judges and social reformers of all sorts concur in that now, though it has taken fifty years to hammer it into the public conscience. Perhaps in another fifty or so society may have succeeded in drawing the not very obscure

inference that total abstinence and prohibition are wise. At any rate, they who seek after the fear of the Lord should draw it, and act on it.

IV. The last part is in verses 22 and 23 .

The appeal to filial duty cannot here refer to disciple and teacher, but to child and parents. It does not stand as an isolated precept, but as underscoring the important one which follows. But a word must be spared for it. The habits of ancient days gave a place to the father and mother which modern family life woefully lacks, and suffers in many ways for want of. Many a parent in these days of slack control and precocious independence might say, 'If I be a father, where is mine honour?' There was perhaps not enough of confidence between parent and child in former days, and authority on the one hand and submission on the other too much took the place of love; but nowadays the danger is all the other way—and it is a very real danger.

But the main point here is the earnest exhortation of verse 23 , which, like that to the fear of the Lord, sums up all duty in one. The 'truth' is, like 'wisdom,' moral and religious, and not merely intellectual. 'Wisdom' is subjective, the quality or characteristic of the devout soul; 'truth' is objective, and may also be defined as the declared will of God. The possession of truth is wisdom. 'The entrance of Thy words giveth light.' It makes wise the simple. There is, then, such a thing as 'the truth' accessible to us. We can know it, and are not to be for ever groping amid more or less likely guesses, but may rest in the certitude that we have hold of foundation facts. For us, the truth is incarnate in Jesus, as He has solemnly asserted. That truth we shall, if we are wise, 'buy,' by shunning no effort, sacrifice, or trouble needed to secure it.

In the lower meanings of the word, our passage should fire us all, and especially the young, to strain every muscle of the soul in order to make truth for the intellect our own. The exhortation is needed in this day of adoration of money and material good. Nobler and wiser far the young man who lays himself out to know than he who is engrossed with the hungry desire to have! But in the highest region of truth, the buying is 'without money and without price,' and all that we can give in exchange is ourselves. We buy the truth when we know that we cannot earn it, and forsaking self-trust and self-pleasing, consent to receive it as a free gift. 'Sell it not,'—let no material good or advantage, no ease, slothfulness, or worldly success, tempt you to cast it away; for its 'fruit is better than gold,' and its 'revenue than choice silver.' We shall make a bad bargain if we sell it for anything beneath the stars; for 'wisdom is better than rubies,' and he has been cheated in the transaction who has given up 'the truth' and got instead 'the whole world.'

Proverbs 23:17-18 THE AFTERWARDS AND OUR HOPE

'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. 18. For surely there is an end and thine expectation shall not be cut off.'— PROVERBS xxiii. 17, 18

The Book of Proverbs seldom looks beyond the limits of the temporal, but now and then

the mists lift and a wider horizon is disclosed. Our text is one of these exceptional instances, and is remarkable, not only as expressing confidence in the future, but as expressing it in a very striking way. 'Surely there is an end,' says our Authorised Version, substituting in the margin, for end, 'reward.' The latter word is placed in the text of the Revised Version. But neither 'end' nor 'reward' conveys the precise idea. The word so translated literally means 'something that comes after.' So it is the very opposite of 'end', it is really that which lies beyond the end—the 'sequel,' or the 'future'—as the margin of the Revised Version gives alternatively, or, more simply still, the afterwards. Surely there is an afterwards behind the end. And then the proverb goes on to specify one aspect of that afterwards: 'Thine expectation'—or, better, because more simply, thy hope—shall not be cut off. And then, upon these two convictions that there is, if I might so say, an afterclap, and that it is the time and the sphere in which the fairest hopes that a man can paint to himself shall be surpassed by the reality, it builds the plain partial exhortation: 'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.'

So then, we have three things here, the certainty of the afterwards, the immortality of hope consequent thereon, and the bearing of these facts on the present.

I. The certainty of the hereafter.

Now, this Book of Proverbs, as I have said in the great collection of popular sayings which makes the bulk of it, has no enthusiasm, no poetry, no mysticism. It has religion, and it has a very pure and lofty morality, but, for the most part, it deals with maxims of worldly prudence, and sometimes with cynical ones, and represents, on the whole, the wisdom of the market-place, and the 'man in the street.' But now and then, as I have said, we hear strains of a higher mood. My text, of course, might be watered down and narrowed so as to point only to sequels to deeds realised in this life. And then it would be teaching us simply the very much needed lessons that even in this life, 'Whatever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' But it seems to me that we are entitled to see here, as in one or two other places in the Book of Proverbs, a dim anticipation of a future life beyond the grave. I need not trouble you with quoting parallel passages which are sown thinly up and down the book, but I venture to take the words in the wider sense to which I have referred.

Now, the question comes to be, where did the coiners of Proverbs, whose main interest was in the obvious maxims of a prudential morality, get this conviction? They did not get it from any lofty experience of communion with God, like that which in the seventy-third Psalm marks the very high-water mark of Old Testament faith in regard to a future life, where the Psalmist finds himself so completely blessed and well in present fellowship with God, that he must needs postulate its eternal continuance, and just because he has made God the portion of his heart, and is holding fellowship with Him, is sure that nothing can intervene to break that sweet communion. They did not get it from any clear definite revelation, such as we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has made that future life far more than an inference for us, but they got it from thinking over the facts of this present life as they appeared to them, looked at from the standpoint of a belief in God, and in righteousness. And so they represent to us the impression that is made upon a man's mind, if he has the 'eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality,' that is made by

the facts of this earthly life—viz. that it is so full of onward-looking, prophetic aspect, so manifestly and tragically, and yet wonderfully and hopefully. Incomplete and fragmentary in itself, that there must be something beyond in order to explain, in order to vindicate, the life that now is. And that aspect of fragmentary incompleteness is what I would insist upon for a moment now.

You sometimes see a row of houses, the end one of them has, in its outer gable wall, bricks protruding here and there, and holes for chimney-pieces that are yet to be put in. And just as surely as that external wall says that the row is half built, and there are some more tenements to be added to it, so surely does the life that we now live here, in all its aspects almost, bear upon itself the stamp that it, too, is but initial and preparatory. You sometimes see, in the bookseller's catalogue, a book put down 'volume one; all that is published.' That is our present life—volume one, all that is published. Surely there is going to be a sequel, volume two. Volume two is due, and will come, and it will be the continuation of volume one.

What is the meaning of the fact that of all the creatures on the face of the earth only you and I, and our brethren and sisters, do not find in our environment enough for our powers? What is the meaning of the fact that, whilst 'foxes have holes' where they curl themselves up, and they are at rest, 'and the birds of the air have roosting-places,' where they tuck their heads beneath their wings and sleep, the 'son of man' hath not where to lay his head, but looks round upon the earth and says, 'The earth, O Lord, is full of Thy mercy. I am a stranger on the earth.' What is the meaning of it? Here is the meaning of it: 'Surely there is a hereafter.'

What is the meaning of the fact that lodged in men's natures there lies that strange power of painting to themselves things that are not as though they were? So that minds and hearts go out wandering through Eternity, and having longings and possibilities which nothing beneath the stars can satisfy, or can develop? The meaning of it is this: Surely there is a hereafter. The man that wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, in his sceptical moment ere he had attained to his last conclusion, says, in a verse that is mistranslated in our rendering, 'He hath set Eternity in their hearts, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.' That is true, because the root of all our unrest and dissatisfaction is that we need God, and God in Eternity, in order that we may be at rest. But whilst on the one hand 'therefore the misery of man is great upon him,' on the other hand, because Eternity is in our hearts, therefore there is the answer to the longings, the adequate sphere for the capacities in that great future, and in the God that fills it. You go into the quarries left by reason of some great convulsion or disaster, by forgotten races, and you will find there half excavated and rounded pillars still adhering to the matrix of the rock from which they were being hewn. Such unfinished abortions are all human lives if, when Death drops its curtain, there is an end.

But, brethren, God does not so clumsily disproportion His creatures and their place. God does not so cruelly put into men longings that have no satisfaction, and desires which never can be filled, as that there should not be, beyond the gulf, the fair land of the hereafter. Every human life obviously has in it, up to the very end, the capacity for

progress. Every human life, up to the very end, has been educated and trained, and that, surely, for something. There may be masters in workshops who take apprentices, and teach them their trade during the years that are needed, and then turn round and say, 'I have no work for you, so you must go and look for it somewhere else.' That is not how God does. When He has trained His apprentices He gives them work to do. Surely there is a hereafter, But that is only part of what is involved in this thought. It is not only a state subsequent to the present, but it is a state consequent on the present, and the outcome of it. The analogy of our earthly life avails here. To-day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the yesterdays and to-day are the parent of tomorrow. The past, our past, has made us what we are in the present, and what we are in the present is making us what we shall be in the future. And when we pass out of this life we pass out, notwithstanding all changes, the same men as we were. There may be much on the surface changed, there will be much taken away, thank God! dropped, necessarily, by the cessation of the corporeal frame, and the connection into which it brings us with things of sense. There will be much added, God only knows how much, but the core of the man will remain untouched. 'We all are changed by still degrees,' and suddenly at last 'All but the basis of the evil.' And so we carry ourselves with us into that future life, and, 'what a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' Oh that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their afterward!

II. Now, secondly, my text suggests the immortality of hope.

'Thine expectation'—or rather, as I said, 'thy hope'—'shall not be cut off.' This is a characteristic of that hereafter. What a wonderful saying that is which also occurs in this Book of Proverbs, 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' Ah! we all know how swiftly, as years increase, the things to hope for diminish, and how, as we approach the end, less and less do our imaginations go out into the possibilities of the sorrowing future. And when the end comes, if there is no afterwards, the dying man's hopes must necessarily die before he does. If when we pass into the darkness we are going into a cave with no outlet at the other end, then there is no hope, and you may write over it Dante's grim word: 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.' But let in that thought, 'surely there is an afterwards,' and the enclosed cave becomes a rock-passage, in which one can see the arch of light at the far end of the tunnel; and as one passes through the gloom, the eye can travel on to the pale radiance beyond, and anticipate the ampler ether, the diviner air, 'the brighter constellations burning, mellow moons and happy stars,' that await us there. 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' 'Thine expectation shall not be cut off.'

But, further, that conviction of the afterward opens up for us a condition in which imagination is surpassed by the wondrous reality. Here, I suppose, nobody ever had all the satisfaction out of a fulfilled hope that he expected. The fish is always a great deal larger and heavier when we see it in the water than when it is lifted out and scaled. And I suppose that, on the whole, perhaps as much pain as pleasure comes from the hopes which are illusions far more often than they are realities. They serve their purpose in whirling us along the path of life and in stimulating effort, but they do not do much more.

But there does come a time, if you believe that there is an afterwards, when all we desired

and painted to ourselves of possible good for our craving spirits shall be felt to be but a pale reflex of the reality, like the light of some unrisen sun on the snowfields, and we shall have to say 'the half was not told to us.'

And, further, if that afterwards is of the sort that we, through Jesus Christ and His resurrection and glory, know to be, then all through the timeless eternity hope will be our guide. For after each fresh influx of blessedness and knowledge we shall have to say 'it doth not yet appear what we shall be.' 'Thus now abideth'—and not only now, but then and eternally—'these three—faith, hope, and charity,' and hope will never be cut off through all the stretch of that great afterwards.

III. And now, finally, notice the bearing of all this on the daily present.

'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' The conviction of the hereafter, and the blessed vision of hopes fulfilled, are not the only reasons for that exhortation. A great deal of harm has been done, I am afraid, by well-meaning preachers who have drawn the bulk of their strongest arguments to persuade men to Christian faith from the thought of a future life. Why, if there were no future, it would be just as wise, just as blessed, just as incumbent upon us to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' But seeing that there is that future, and seeing that only in it will hope rise to fruition, and yet subsist as longing, surely there comes to us a solemn appeal to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' which being turned into Christian language, is to live by habitual faith, in communion with, and love and obedience to, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Surely, surely the very climax and bad eminence of folly is shutting the eyes to that future that we all have to face; and to live here, as some of you are doing, ignoring it and God, and cribbing, cabining, and confining all our thoughts within the narrow limits of the things present and visible. For to live so, as our text enjoins, is the sure way, and the only way, to make these great hopes realities for ourselves.

Brethren, that afterwards has two sides to it. The prophet Malachi, in almost his last words, has a magnificent apocalypse of what he calls 'the day of the Lord,' which he sets forth as having a double aspect. On the one hand, it is lurid as a furnace, and burns up the wicked root and branch. I saw a forest fire this last autumn, and the great pine-trees stood there for a moment pyramids of flame, and then came down with a crash. So that hereafter will be to godless men. And on the other side, that 'day of the Lord' in the prophet's vision was radiant with the freshness and dew and beauty of morning, and the Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings. Which of the two is it going to be to us? We have all to face it. We cannot alter that fact, but we can settle how we shall face it. It will be to either the fulfilment of blessed hope, the 'appearance of the glory of the great God and our Saviour,' or else, as is said in this same Book of Proverbs: 'The hope of the godless' shall be like one of those water plants, the papyrus or the flag, which, when the water is taken away, 'withereth up before any other herb.' It is for us to determine whether the afterwards that we must enter upon shall be the land in which our hopes shall blossom and fruit, and blossom again immortally, or whether we shall leave behind us, with all the rest that we would fain keep, the possibility of anticipating any good. 'Surely there is an afterwards,'

and if thou wilt 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' then for evermore 'thy hope shall not be cut off.'