

THE
GOLDEN MEAN;
OR,
CAUTIONS AGAINST
PRODIGALITY AND COVETOUSNESS.

TWO MORNING LECTURES,

BY MR. ROBINSON.



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I. FRUGALITY.

JOHN vi. 12.

Gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost.

THE end of all instruction is to enable people to instruct themselves. With this view allow me to inform you how to edify yourselves by interpreting Scripture, which you read, by the world in which you live, and which you every day see.

All the comfort we derive from the gospel is on supposition the gospel is true: but we are not to suppose the gospel is true without examining whether it be so. Now what are we to examine it by? Suppose I should give you a letter, and require you to determine whose hand-writing it was, what would you say? We cannot tell, say you, by this single paper, we must compare it with other papers. Suppose by comparing it with some of your landlord's receipts, I should observe, that every word, and every letter, and every mark and flourish were alike in both, what would you say then? You would allow, for you know your landlord's hand, that he wrote the letter, and especially as all the contents agree with his known character.

Now apply this: I bring you a history of the glad tidings of an exemplary Saviour written by a Jew, named John, who says, God employed him to write it; and who adds that the Saviour was like God, and we must be like him. Am I to believe him? Yes, certainly, if I find that his book agrees with the works and the character of God, as I have remarked it in a world, which I am sure he created: but not else.

Let us try. Jesus fed a multitude. This is like God, who hath filled the world with mouths, and who daily fills the mouths of all with meat, and we should feed our families as he fed his. Jesus

taught frugality, and bade his servants, *gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost.* Another character of God, who, amidst all the profusions of his bounty, hath so constituted the world, that there should be no waste, and there is none. A prophet says, the Creator *weighed* the dust, and *measured* the water, when he made the world. He calculated to a nicety, and so much fire, so much water, so much air, and so on, went to make up such a world as this. The first quantity is here still, and though man can gather and scatter, move, mix, and unmix, yet he can destroy nothing; the putrefaction of one thing is a preparation for the being, and the bloom, and the beauty of another. Thus a tree gathers nourishment from its own fallen leaves, when they decay. Something *gathers up all fragments, and nothing is lost.*

Observe what passes in your own yards. The tasker in the barn takes down a floor of wheat-sheaves, and threshes. The head-corn he throws and dresses, and puts up for market. The tail he screens, and fans, and rics, or rids of its dust and rubbish, to grind for the use of the family. The chaff he carries to the horses, the straw he turns out for litter for the cattle, and manure for another crop. Mark how the small stock turn the straw over and over, beat out every grain that escaped the flail, and spread abroad all the rubbish, one class picking up the wheat, another the wild oats, a third the seeds of darnel, and other weeds, and all *gathering up the fragments that nothing be lost.* Hence we say, these animals live upon nothing, and there is no waste in a well-stocked farm-yard. We mean, Almighty God hath created for the honour of his goodness, and for the comfort of our lives, a set of animals on purpose to put every particle to use, and to turn, as it were, the whole mass of dead matter into animal life. One of old said, *go to the ant, thou sluggard*; we say, go to the fowls, thou unthrift; or rather, go to the Creator of fowls and ants, and learn that the voice that made the world spoke the text, *gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost.*

We are, then, to consider frugality as an imita-

tion of Christ, and of God. To be frugal is to resemble both. I shall not detain you long : but as frugality lies all along-side of covetousness, we must guard the path, lest we should step over the line : and as we are apt to loiter even in a right road, we must try to animate ourselves. We will therefore observe *what* frugality is, and *why* we should practise it.

Let us be frugal in our *dress*. Clothes are for the safety, or ornament of the body. Becoming ornaments may be allowed to youth : but ornaments become none except the handsome. To all others ornaments only attract people's eyes to behold infirmity and ugliness. Adorn your persons with natural flowers, they are cheap and perfect : or adorn yourselves with good, not gaudy needlework of your own. Neat work, on a ground of cleanliness, set off with the natural charms of innocence and virtue, is a character to a young woman, which all her neighbours can read. Most of us need only study the safety of our health in our dress. We should adapt this to our circumstances ; we should buy them and wear them, and repair them without waste, and without a passion for fashion and finery. To be neat and clean, and dressed in habits fit for our employments, is the true decency of a plain countryman.

Let us be frugal in our *diet*. The end of taking food is the preservation of health. If food doth any thing more than keep us well, it does too much. In the long hot days of harvest, we require much nourishment, because we expend much strength : but the plenty that abounds then should not tempt us to intemperance. Enough of a plain, cheap, wholesome diet to keep us in perfect health, and equal to our work, is all that is requisite : nor should we waste food or drink, for winter follows on the heels of harvest. Let us be frugal in our *furniture*, and not gratify a passion, excited in a market town, of filling our houses with expensive and useless lumber. There is a fitness between the house and its furniture. Strong, useful things, plain, whole and cheap, become the situation and the circumstances of inhabitants of villages.

Let us be thrifty of our *money*. There is a certain skill, which our forefathers used to call a *knack*, an art of doing things, and it is remarkably seen in many poor women's laying out the earnings of their husbands. Call it what we will, it is one of the highest qualifications of a poor man's wife, and nothing contributes more to the ease of his living than this female accomplishment. How she reckons I cannot tell: but she keeps out of debt, lives in cleanliness and plenty, and can always spare half a dozen turves to warm a cold sick neighbour's cordial. She says, my husband's harvest-wages clothe himself and the children, my gleanings pay the shoemaker, the orchard pays my rent, the garden does this, the flail procures that, the children's spinning-wheels yield so and so; and, good heart! she crowns all by saying, *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. He forgiveth all thine iniquities, and healeth all thy diseases. He redeemeth thy life from destruction, and crowneth thee with loving kindness, and tender mercies. He satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagles. Bless the Lord, O my soul! Bless the Lord in all places of his dominion.*

Let us be frugal of our *time*, and not spare one hour in the year for idleness or vice. Let us husband our *strength*, and not waste it in violent, imprudent, and unnecessary exertions. Let us be economists with our *reason* and *passions*. Let us leave others to wrangle about trifles, and let us save all our strength for the manly subjects of a Briton and a Christian. Let us habituate ourselves to understand and to defend this great truth, the foundation of government and good order: *Righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people.* Let us know how to reason for religion, *the mighty acts of the Lord.* Let us not waste our passions upon improper objects. Let us reserve fear for God, love for justice, despair for happiness in sin, and hope for a blessed immortality.

I do think, I may leave off. You all know, or may know of one another *why* you should be frugal. One can say, if you be not frugal, you will be

naked, and cold, and poor, and hungry, and without a friend to pity you : another will say, if you be wasteful, you will excite the indignation of all your neighbours for your barbarous treatment of your wife and children. The overseers will justly reproach you, when you ask for relief, and the rest of the poor will think your supply pilfered from their scanty tables. Others will tell you, your wastefulness deprives you of all the joy of doing good, and all the honour of giving the parish an example of virtue. We all say you are not like Jesus Christ, and you are a scandal to his name. But what will the Judge say at the last day ?...The clock strikes... Depart....Peace be with you....The first quarter of an hour you can spare, bid one of your children read to you the sixteenth of Luke ; it begins thus, *And he said also unto his disciples, there was a certain rich man, which had a steward, and the same was accused unto him, that he had wasted his goods.*Let us say the Lord's prayer, and depart.

II. COVETOUSNESS.

JOSHUA vii. 21.

When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them, and behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it.

LAST month we spoke of frugality, now let us turn our attention to covetousness ; for, as we have often said, there is only a thin partition between the last step of virtue and the first of vice. Justice carried too far becomes cruelty ; and excessive frugality is parsimony, or covetousness.

The man in the text, in one view, it should seem at first sight, was an object of pity ; for gold and silver, and fine clothes, to be had for carriage, formed a great temptation. Hence arises a question, why doth Providence put in our way such agreeable

objects, and yet forbid us to touch them? Let us give glory to God by acknowledging, that by such means we are exercised; first as creatures to discover the natural grandeur of our own passions, the incompetence of the world to make us happy, and, if reason be not asleep, the all sufficiency of God. Next, these exercises try us as servants, and by the emotions of depraved passions we become acquainted with the natural rebellion of an evil heart, that disputes dominion with God. By these we learn to *abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.* By these we discover the wisdom of him, who taught us to pray, *Our Father, lead us not into temptation.* By an habitual deadness to these, because God commands it, we discover the true religion of a renewed mind, and enter on the enjoyment of conscious rectitude, a preference of virtue, the felicity of heaven.

Why then do we blame Achan? Because he was not a boy, for none but men above twenty bore arms, and he was old enough to know that he ought not to have disobeyed his general, or his God. Because he was a Jew, and of the tribe of Judah, and had been brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Because he must have heard what mischief the golden calf, the iniquity of Peor, and the murmuring at Kadesh, had brought upon his countrymen. Because he knew God had expressly forbidden plunder. Had he exercised his understanding, some or all these reasons would have cooled his passion for perquisites. In like manner we say of ourselves. We have temptations and passions; but we have reason, too, to resist them. We have passions; but we have had a Christian education, and have been apprized of the danger of gratifying them. We have passions; but we have eyes and ears, and live among people, who daily die for gratifying the same passions which we feel. We covet; but God says, *thou shalt not covet any thing that is thy neighbour's.*

To covet is to desire beyond due bounds. God hath set these due bounds. He hath bounded passion by reason, and reason by religion and the na-

ture of things. If a man of twenty years of age, to whom Providence hath given both reason and passions, should lay aside his reason, and make use of only his passions, he would act as preposterously as if, having both legs and arms, he should resolve to walk with his legs but never to make the least use of his arms. May I say? Yes, let me say, reason is intended to poise the passions, and to prevent a fall. Perhaps all this is too general; let us in a short detail shew the unreasonableness of covetousness.

Covetousness is *unjust*. Let the prince enjoy the privilege of his birth; let the man, who hath hazarded his life for wealth, possess it in peace; let the industrious enjoy the fruit of his labour; to transfer their property to myself without their consent, and without putting something as good in the place would be an act of injustice. Only to covet is to wish to be unjust.

Covetousness is *cruel*. A man of this disposition is obliged to harden his heart against a thousand plaintive voices; voices of poor, fatherless, sick, aged and bereaved people in distress; voices that set many an eye a tickling, but which make no impression on a covetous man.

Covetousness is *ungrateful*. A covetous old man was once a child; has he no feelings of gratitude for his nurses; or, if they be dead, has he none for other poor women now employed in nursing such as he was, and whose tenderness and care will never be half paid for? He was once in business; hath he no feelings of gratitude for the old servants, who assisted him to get his wealth; or, if they be dead, are none of their children or grand-children left in want? Shall the whole world labour for this old miser, one to feed him, another to guard him, and all to make him happy, and shall he resemble the barren earth, that returns nothing to him that dresseth it? This is a black ingratitude.

Covetousness is a *foolish* vice; it destroys a man's reputation, makes every body suspect him for a thief, and watch him; it breaks his rest, fills him with care and anxiety, excites the avarice of a robber, and the indignation of a house-breaker; it en-

dangers his life, and, depart how he will, he dies unblest and unpitied.

Covetousness is *unprecedented* in all our examples of virtues. The Scripture shews us many sorts of good men; and honestly acknowledges their faults. One spoke unadvisedly with his lips, another cursed and swore, a third was in a passion, and a fourth committed adultery: but which of the saints ever lived in a habit of covetousness! It is Judas, who hanged himself, and not such as Peter, whom covetous men imitate.

Covetousness is *idolatry*. It is the idolatry of the heart, where, as in a temple a miserable wretch excludes God, sets up gold instead of him, and places that confidence in it, which belongs to the great Supreme alone. The fears and the hopes, the sorrows and the joys of a miser hover about his idol, as the spirits of the just wait round the throne of God. In effect, the blasphemy of such a criminal addresses that to gold, which good men say to God, *whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.*

After all this we affect to wonder, that God should choose to give us one example of the punishment of such a sinner. We are not shocked at Providence, when we see a miser starve himself to death: but should the judge of the world prevent his killing himself, and choose to make him edify the world by his death, after he had scandalized it by his life, why should we be astonished? This man in the text was doomed to be burnt, but not alive; he was therefore first stoned to death, then consumed by fire along with his accomplices, and his plunder, and the place was called, as the place of every miser deserves to be called, *the valley of trouble* to this day.

Achan, and all such as he, cause a great deal of trouble, and to pass every thing else, let us only observe what covetous men do with their wealth: *Behold it is hid in the earth in the midst of my tent.*

Observe a miser with his bag. With what an arch and jealous leer the wily fox creeps stealthily about and about to earth his prey! He hath not a friend in the world, and judging of others by him-

self, he thinks there is not an honest man upon earth, no, not one that can be trusted. Doth it not vex an ingenuous soul to see such an image of a beast in the shape of a man? Disgustful triumph: *Behold it is hid in the earth in the midst of my tent.*

Remark his caution. He turns his back on his idol, trudges far away, looks lean, and hangs all about his own skeleton ensigns of poverty, never avoiding people in real distress, but always comforting himself with the hope, that nobody knows of his treasure, and that therefore nobody expects any assistance from him. How vexatious to any upright soul to see a wretch feeding on falsehood, and revolving in his memory by way of pleasure, *Behold, it is hid in the earth in the midst of my tent.*

Take notice of the just contempt, in which mankind hold this hoary mass of meanness. He thinks his wealth is hid: but it is not hid, his own anxious side-looks betray the secret. People reckon for him, talk over all his profits, omit his expences and losses, declare his wealth to be double what it is, and judge of his duty according to their own notions of his fortune. One lays out this good work for him, another rates him at so much towards such a charity, and all execrate him for not doing what is not in his power. Prudent men cannot justify him, and even they are obliged to allow that half the popular contempt is just. How painful to a benevolent man to see a hoary head despised! How much is his pain increased by knowing that the scorn is just, for *behold*, be his wealth little or much, it is not used, *it is hid in the earth in the midst of his tent!*

Mark his hypocrisy. He weeps over the profligacy of the poor, and says, it is a sad thing, that they are brought up without being educated in the fear of God. He laments, every time the bell tolls, the miserable condition of widows and orphans. He celebrates the praise of learning, and wishes public speakers had all the powers of a learned criticism, and all the graces of elocution. He prays for the down-pouring of the Spirit, and the out-goings of God in his sanctuary, and then, how his soul would be refreshed! What a comfortable Christian would

he be then ! Tell this son of the morning, that there are schoolmasters waiting to educate the poor, tutors longing to instruct youth, and young men burning with a vehement passion for learning and oratory ; tell him that the gratitude of widows, the hymns of orphans, and the blessings of numbers ready to perish, are the presence of God in his church. Tell him all these wait to pour themselves like a tide into his congregation, and wait only for a little of his money to pay for cutting a canal. See, how thunder-struck he is ! His solemn face becomes lank and black, he suspects he has been too liberal already, his generosity has been often abused, why should he be taxed and others spared, the Lord will save his own elect, God is never at a loss for means, no exertions will do without the divine presence and blessing, and beside, his property is all locked up, *Behold, it is hid in the earth in the midst of my tent !*

Let us respect truth even in the mouth of a miser. This ignoble soul tells you, that he would not give a wedge of gold to save you all from eternal ruin : but he says, God is not like him, God loves you, and will save you freely. This is strictly and literally true. There have been thousands of poor people besides you, who have been instructed and animated, converted and saved without having paid one penny for the whole : but this, instead of freezing, should melt the hearts of all, who are able, and set them a running into acts of generosity. I conclude with the words of an ancient teacher in Italy, one Ambrose, more remarkable for his wit than the accuracy of his judgment. " Joshua," said he, " could stop the course of the sun : but all his power could not stop the course of avarice. The sun stood still, but avarice went on. Joshua obtained a victory when the sun stood still : but when avarice was at work, Joshua was defeated." Grace be with you all. Amen.