

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 158 WISDOM AND CHRIST

We have had our attention directed, in the reading this morning Proverbs 8, to a beautiful parable of wisdom. It is a parable deserving and requiring our closest attention. We are commanded to walk in wisdom; and we cannot do this if we do not know the way. The parable will help us to know the way, but to be helpful to us it must be discerned. We must “*understand the parable and the interpretation; the words of the wise and their dark sayings.*”

What is the wisdom so extolled? In a sense we can know, and in a sense not. We may know it in its expression—in its application. But in its origin, its nature, its essence, its mode, we cannot know. At this, we need not be distressed. It is the applications of wisdom that are important to us; and here, there is no obscurity.

The first idea that the subject exhibits is the common idea. We say a course is characterised by wisdom which leads to good results. We say a piece of mechanism is wisely constructed which is adapted to fulfil the object of its invention. In this sense David uses the term in its application to God:

“In wisdom hast thou made them all;”—

That is, all things in heaven and earth. We look around and see the truth of the statement. Everything is wisely constituted in the sense of being adapted to fulfil the object of its being. From the courses of the planets to the movements of animalculae in the blood, things are skilfully contrived to serve their purpose. Everything is wisely made, in the ordinary or common sense of the phrase. The face of the earth for life and beauty; the sun for illumination and warmth; the universe for being a glorious whole to every little part of it; the insects and flowers of a day, everything—absolutely everything—shows the stamp of wisdom. The very fools of the earth (and they are many) polluting the air with their folly and their blasphemy are illustrations of matchless wisdom if their anatomy be considered. The eye of any of them with its delicate and self-adjusting lenses is a masterpiece of wisdom with which the finest invention of the optician cannot be compared.

The origin of this wisdom, we need not ask in the philosophic sense. If we ask, we shall ask in vain. We could not be informed in any plainer manner than in the declaration of the Scriptures, God is wise; His understanding is infinite;

“WISDOM AND MIGHT ARE HIS.”

This is perfectly satisfactory. It meets every demand of reason. It accounts for all that IS: which no theory of human wisdom does. The talk of “force” and “tendency” is barbaric jargon. It is to take us back to a beginning that had no beginner nor power to begin: to a wisdom that was not wise: to a force that had no impact: to a skill that had no initiative. The demand to have an explanation of God if God is introduced, is not reasonable. The demand assumes that while God cannot be explained, “force” can. Consider how fallacious this is. Who can explain eternal force and wisdom even if the idea of God be excluded? You are with the inscrutable then, as much so as in the presence of the Eternal God—nay, more so: for if there were no God of Power and Wisdom to contrive, start, combine, unfold and guide things, then it is unaccountable how the process commenced.

Whatever view may be taken of the universe, the mind is bound to acknowledge that that which was at the beginning cannot be explained. It is therefore unreasonable to demand that God be accounted for. He cannot be accounted for. He is THE ETERNAL POWER, and of necessity, the Eternal Being, philosophically perceptible as a necessity, but philosophically undiscoverable. He has revealed Himself to us: and it is our glory and our joy to receive and believe in the revelation, as demonstrated in the work of Moses and of Christ, the prophet like unto him.

But it is wisdom **in its application to ourselves** that is all-important for present purposes. God is wise: are we? It is possible to be foolish although we are so wisely made. Yes, it is easier to be foolish than to be wise. We are not born wise, and we do not naturally become wise. Every form of wise attainment among men is the result of effort; and it is easier to refrain from effort than to put it forth. Refrain from effort and we remain foolish; and it is written:

“The foolish shall not stand in thy sight”:

“He taketh not pleasure in fools.”

“Wisdom,” then, as Solomon truly says, *“is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.”*

But the question recurs, what is wisdom? It is not knowledge. You cannot have wisdom without knowledge; but you may have knowledge and not be wise. **Wisdom is the right use of knowledge in all things.** Surely, it is the doing of those things—the adoption of those courses—the observance of those conditions, that will lead to life and well being. This definition will cover all thought and action. It will justify our assembly this morning and the concentration of our minds upon Christ. Yea, it will compel the attitude we now occupy: for the working out of the principle will show us that no man is truly wise who does not embrace Christ with all his heart and purpose.

True wisdom is a complete affair. If it only goes half way, it loses its character, like only half a bridge. To be wise in small things and foolish in those that are great is to be foolish on the whole. Some people are wise in those things that concern the flesh, and foolish in those that appertain to the Spirit; of what avail will their flesh-wisdom be in the long run? It is as if people should be wise on one side of facts only. It is wise to eat, but what if a man were to go on eating, —he would find death in that which gives life. It is wise to rest, but if a man go on resting, he is a sluggard, and on the road to ruin. It is wise to be warm, but death to have too much of it. So with everything under the sun. Wisdom means everything in its right place—no extremes in anything; observing the right measures to secure life and wellbeing—putting in every element that wisdom calls for. A man may be wise in business and make money; but if at the same time he is foolish in the way he uses himself, death comes, and his success in business goes for nothing. Folly in one point destroys the whole.

Here, we may bring the matter home. There is an application of wisdom to which the mass of mankind are totally blind. They are, many of them, disposed to be wise concerning life as it is for the moment, but almost all of them are foolish as to the bearing of futurity. The facts are simple enough for a child to receive and apply. Here we have a weak frail dying life that will certainly disappear from the face of the earth in a short time. But forward, as we gaze into futurity by the light shed on it by Christ, we see an incorruptible, perfect, everlasting life, which the risen Lord will give to those who have pleased him, when the gloom of the grave shall be chased away by his presence.

In view of these two simple and indisputable facts, who is the wise man? Is it he who labours for the present life alone, in disregard of the Lord’s will as to how it should be used? For the moment, such a man, especially if he succeed, is considered the wise man, and seems the wise man. But manifestly, it is a fallacious appearance. The successful man of the world seems wise, but is a fool. His wisdom is a partial affair. He secures good results for a moment at the sacrifice of the permanent results of an age that has no end. He lives not for God, but for himself; and he will reap as he sows. He has no life in himself. His life draws daily to its end: and the hour will strike at last when his power will fail him, when his eyes will glaze, when his heart will cease to beat, and when he will be carried from his house to the grave, leaving behind all he holds dear, no more to return.

Is not wisdom truly with the other man who redeems the present evil time by allying himself with the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved? He may have to appear a fool for the time. It often is so in the operations of wisdom. The man on board a sinking ship within sight of land who unbuckles and throws away a belt of sovereigns from his waist that he may swim for dear life, would appear a fool if his action were considered apart from its bearings. The day that is coming will show the wisdom of the man who loses the life that now is that he may obtain that which is to come. It is wisdom to lay hold of life everlasting.

“All that hate me,” saith Wisdom by Solomon, *“love death”—*

Not that they love death in the abstract, but loving the way that leads to death, they may be said to love death itself. Wisdom calls to the sons of men to come away from death: to embrace life.

“Hearken unto me, O ye children,” she says imploringly, in the chapter that has been read, *“My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold, and my revenue than choice silver. I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment. Riches and honour are with me, yea, durable riches and righteousness. Blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.”*

Is it possible for true intelligence to resist such enticing entreaty—the entreaty compared to that of a gracious and enlightened woman?

“Length of days is in her right hand: in her left hand riches and honour. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her. Happy is everyone that retaineth her.”

The parable is beautiful and the interpretation sweet. It is one of the desolations of the present age that it should be so disregarded. The man who follows wisdom is considered an undesirable person every way. The mass of people are wholly absorbed with the affairs of this fleeting existence, which while of some importance in their place, become positive evils when exalted out of their place. They are taken up with that which pleases the eye; that which fills the pocket; that which gratifies the sentiment of self-consequence. Speak of God to them, you strike no chord of the understanding; speak of Christ, you solemnise them with a superstitious solemnity; speak of the promises made to the fathers; of the day when there will be peace on earth, when the Lord will build again Jerusalem, and establish His kingdom, and govern the nations upon earth, —and you seem a fool in their eyes and worse—a person scarcely fit to be at large. Under such circumstances, the pursuit of wisdom is difficult. It requires determination as strong as iron and death. If you slack your grasp, you will inevitably be carried away with the current that is everywhere drawing all to folly and death.

Remember that in this CHRIST himself has set us an example. He was alone in the midst of many people, doing the Father’s will—hated of those around him because he did not and could not speak and act in harmony with the instincts and sympathies of the carnal mind. He held fast to the Father’s work in spite of the indifference and the opposition of such as had no sympathy with it. For the time success seemed with those who hated him. He recognised that it was their time to be up and prosperous and to prevail against the sons of light. *“This is your hour, and the power of darkness,”* said he to his enemies. In this he gave us a useful motto or watchword. We are often made to feel, and feel bitterly, that the way of error and the way of sin is the prosperous way. The wealth and the honour of success are with those who know not God and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we view the situation wisely, we shall not envy them. We shall say, *“Now is your hour; it belongs to you to shine now, and to carry all before you now. We are not of your world. We have here no continuing city; we seek one to come. We have accepted the position that still belongs to Christ in the present evil world, and we are content to wait the great reversal that will take place at his coming.”*

How greatly are we helped to endure the small share of the sufferings of Christ that comes to us when we contemplate what Christ himself went through on the occasion described in the portion read from the gospel narrative. The derision and crucifixion of Christ are so familiar to us as facts, that we are in danger of failing to realise how dreadful they were as realities. Think of the best friend you know, whom you have every cause to love and prize as your own soul. Think of him wrongfully getting into the hands of the authorities. Imagine him dragged before them by a jeering and relentless mob, who think it fine sport to insult him, and who are unrestrained in their murderous ferocity by the officers of the law. Imagine him spit upon and hustled; blindfolded and smitten; undressed and scourged. Realise the bitterness of a mock trial; imagine him, above all, condemned, and dragged again by the surging mob, in the company of convicted thieves, amid buffetings, to an eminence outside the city, and there impaled in the cruellest manner possible to a piece of carpentry with nails, as a murderer or a felon. If these things were to happen to a personal friend whom you knew to be the purest and best upon earth, you would not need the added horrors of prolonged agony—death—desertion by friends, and the heart-breaking shame of being held up to the gaze of all as a reprobate unworthy to live. Your heart would sink within you, overwhelmed in pity and grief.

Such were the dreadful realities attendant upon the finishing of the Lord’s course upon earth. The facts are ours to dwell upon. They whet our love for him: and they strengthen our resolution to fill up the measure of his sufferings: for his sufferings are not over till the last constituent of the body of Christ has finished his course. We were crucified with him on Calvary. We suffer daily with him in the self-denial and the dishonour that are associated with the profession and service of his name. We may be very bold and resolute. Our part is a light one compared with his. None of us will be called upon to go through what he endured. All the more ought we to take our little share with courage, and even enthusiasm.

We live in a day when we can assemble under the protection, instead of the fear, of human law. We are at liberty to devise, do, and speak as we like, for the name of Jesus. All we have to encounter is the contempt, pity, and perhaps avoidance, of worldly friends and neighbours. What if we play the coward in the presence of this? What if we shrink from that part of the shame and the cross left for us to bear? What if we weary in the slight labour and waiting that belong to our age? Shall we

be worthy to stand in the day of recompense and glory, with him who endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, and laid down his life for us? Our own hearts would condemn us. It is a rule of the service, and one that reason endorses, that—

“No man coming after Christ, is fit to be his disciple, unless he take up the cross daily, and follow him.”

“Take it up!” This is something more than waiting till it comes. It means deliberate and preferential initiative—a voluntary, earnest, and decided participation in all that belongs to Christ at the present time. Let a man set about obeying the commandments, and he will soon find out what taking up the cross is. Let him let the light shine which the darkness comprehends not, and thanks him not for, and in which our own flesh can find little pleasure. Let him do good to the unthankful and the evil. Let him refrain from all retaliation in speech, action, or suggestion. Let him keep himself unspotted from the world. He will soon find in such a course that a present life in the truth is a life of taking up the cross.

Often he will find it grievous. The flesh faints and fails under the discipline, but the Lord will uphold him, and there is a sweet end. The cross has only to be carried for a short time, and only as a preparation for what is to come. What is to come is everything that heart can desire—rest, peace, health, wealth, company, song, joy, honour, glory, beauty, and gladness for ever. The Lord brings it all with him at his coming, and for this we have to consciously wait no longer than death; for in death there is not a moment’s conscious interval. The vision, therefore, is but a little way ahead.

Be steady in the conflict then. The crown waits the victor, and the victory is not an impossible one. It requires but the constancy of a faith that works by love: that faith which is the confidence of things hoped for—hoped for because they are coming, and coming because they are promised: and promised because they are purposed as the only reasonable object in the framing of so glorious a world as this. God asks this honour at our hands—the honour of faith in His promised goodness. It is the highest honour mortal man can have—the honour of having it in his power to honour God; and it will be found in the glorious issue of things that no higher proof exists of the wisdom of God in requiring, as a basis of our friendship with Him, obedient faith, which not only honours Him, but purifies those who render it, and sows for them a harvest of unspeakable goodness and joy.

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