

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON XIX.

ON THE GRADUAL PROGRESS OF EVIL.

JAMES iii. 5.

Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

THE design of the proverbial expression which the Apostle here uses, is to intimate the importance of little things, which are apt to be despised and neglected, as being of little or no consequence; whereas, in the end, they are productive of the greatest effects. It is a great point of wisdom to know how to estimate little things. Of those which are evidently great, every one can see the importance: but true wisdom looks at these great objects before they have arrived at their full size. She considers, that it is principally in this earlier state that they come under the power of man, and can be arranged, modified, increased, or extinguished at his pleasure; whereas, in a more advanced stage, they set at defiance all his efforts. On the contrary, it is the part of folly to wait till evils have attained their maturity before they are attacked; for then, that which might at first have been easily crushed, becomes irresistible.

Behold a conflagration! With what dreadful fury it rages! The largest houses are devoured by it in a moment! The strongest fall victims to its uncontrollable power! Yet this fire, which now resists the united wisdom and power of man, originated from a small spark, and might at first have been extinguished by a child.

Look also at yonder tree, which is now so firmly rooted in the earth, which rears its lofty head so high, and bears its flourishing honours so thick upon it! It was once only a small seed: it was then a tender plant, so slender and so weak that the foot of accident might have crushed it, the overshadowing of a weed might have suffocated it, or the hand of negligence or wantonness have torn it up. Thus does Nature point out to us the growth of the strongest things from weak and almost imperceptible beginnings.

Behold also the traveller! He is at a long distance from the end of his journey. A step seems to be of no consequence to him. For what is a step, compared with the many miles which he has to travel? But it is by these successive steps he is carried on, till at last he arrives at his desired home. Mountains, valleys, and plains, the prospect of which even fatigues the eye, are all at length surmounted by the constant application of those little steps which appear at first to bear no proportion to the immeasurable distance.

Such a stress does the established order of nature teach us to lay upon little things. And if we look into the moral world, we shall find that they are not there to be considered as of less importance.

Behold an abandoned and hardened murderer, who is about to receive from the hands of public justice the ignominious punishment due to his crimes! You survey with astonishment and terror his vices; you are shocked while you consider his daring profligacy, his furious passions, his avowed defiance of God and man, his hardness of heart, and his universal depravity. Would you know by what means he arrived at such a dreadful pitch of sin? It was one little step taken after another, which brought him to it. He began with neglecting the worship of God, proceeded to breaking the Sabbath, resisted the remonstrances of conscience, indulged his passions without control; to gratify them, he pilfered and stole: one act led on to another: one crime prepared the way to another: till at length he became such a monster of criminality, that it was no longer consistent with the safety of mankind that he should be permitted to live. But would you know what was the seed which produced this evil fruit; what was the principle which uniformly operated upon him, and induced him to risk the loss of his wealth, his reputation, and his life: it was this, the desire of present gratification. Yes, it was this, which is thought of no consequence by almost all mankind; which is even cherished by many, as the chief source of pleasure; which, when it once prevails and overcomes the bounds of reason and religion, produces those dreadful effects that leave no hope of amendment, and almost necessarily terminate in irresistible ruin. Behold how great a matter a small fire kindleth!

Contemplate also the unhappy woman whose licentious conduct has banished her from the society of her own sex, and whose scandalous profligacy and shameless impudence make her shunned by all but the most worthless of the other. In her countenance and conduct appears not so much as a single trace of the amiable graces which should characterize her sex. See her brought to a state of sin, which excites disgust even in the wicked; and to a state of misery, shame, poverty, and ruin, which shock even the hardest heart! To what shall we attribute this dreadful accumulation of crime and wretchedness? What powerful cause has produced it? Perhaps it may have been one, the evil of which is little suspected. It is, indeed, a small spark which kindleth such a fire. It may have been only the love of admiration. That vanity which is seldom considered as any crime, which is even cherished while it does not become immoderate, as being in some respects pleasing; that vanity which teaches the arts of captivating, which studies the effect of dress, and is employed in adorning and decking the person; that vanity is the author of this wide-extended ruin. It is the little seed from which it has grown and arrived to such dreadful luxuriance. It is true, it does not always produce such deplorable effects; but we are to consider its tendency, if it were not restrained and counteracted as it generally is. The fear of shame, the opposition of better principles, the authority of those who are revered or dreaded, the clashing of

self-interest or evil passions, or the wholesome discipline of adversity, check in many cases its luxuriance, and stifle its growth: so that its proper tendency and effect are not discerned. Still the eye of Wisdom, and the light of Religion discover them, and show all the evils which afterwards may appear, if circumstances are favourable to their growth; which are already contained in it, and, if suffered to expand, will presently shoot forth and bear fruit.

Many useful remarks will present themselves to the reflecting mind upon this subject; some of which I shall venture to set before you, being assured that they are of considerable importance, as they relate to our conduct as men and as Christians.

1. Let me remark, then, that *evil passions, in their early stage, do not wear the disgusting appearance which they afterwards do when they are carried to excess.*—The buds even of the most noxious weeds appear pretty. The most savage animals, while yet young, only amuse us with their gambols as they lie in ambush for their prey or spring upon it. But however harmless their mirth may then be, it is easy to perceive in it the spirit which by and by will tear to pieces, with fury, the quivering victim. Pride and vanity, self-will and anger, lust and deceit,—all of them when yet in their infant state, exerting themselves only upon trifles and doing no material injury,—appear to have something pleasing in the eyes of the world, and, instead of being concealed, are often brought forward in order to produce admiration. Thus will unthinking parents often laugh at the vanity of their children, and please them, and amuse themselves by gratifying it. But, in the eye of a true Christian, every vice is still sinful, and ought to be checked. He considers its principle, which is equally corrupt whatever the fruits of it may be. He does not judge by the effects it has yet produced, but by those which it has a tendency to produce when it meets with no interruption; and he considers the principle as often the more dangerous, because it is not yet attended with any effects that are strikingly bad,—is then less suspected, and likely, therefore, to be less resisted.

2. I observe further, that *the foundation of all great vices is laid in those little things which often are scarcely noticed, or scarcely appear to need correction.*—It is by little things that habits are formed and principles become established. They may be considered as little in one sense, as producing immediately no very extensive mischief; but they are by no means little, if we consider the effect they have in producing the general habit, and in establishing those principles which lead to the worst consequences. Little things may be considered as indications of a bad habit and corrupt principles; and in this view, they are by no means unimportant. They resemble the spots or eruptions which sometimes appear in the human body, which are of no material importance in themselves, but are of great consequence when they are con-

sidered as indicating a general unsoundness of constitution. It should be remembered, that principle is as truly sacrificed by little offences as by great ones.

3. I remark also, that *little sins are the steps by which we travel on to greater acts of transgression*.—No one becomes extremely wicked at once. This would be as unnatural as it would be to travel a great distance without a number of intermediate steps. The gradations of sin are innumerable, and almost imperceptible. Now temptation has, in general, but little force, except when it solicits to those sins which have often before been committed, or which are but a single degree beyond what we have been accustomed to commit. And thus persons are brought, not suddenly, but gradually and imperceptibly, to practices and principles which would once have astonished and shocked them.

4. It follows therefore, that *little sins are what, most of all, ought to be attended to and resisted*.— Watch against the beginnings. The spark may soon be extinguished, but the conflagration rages with irresistible fury. The first channel by which confined waters run over their banks may soon be stopped; but by and by it becomes a torrent which tears down the mounds, and spreads itself with desolating fury. Here therefore religion will most successfully operate, in restraining at first, in preventing, in checking the evil disposition as soon as it arises; in watching against those little sins by which corrupt principles and corrupt dispositions are chiefly gratified and nourished. Here also Religion chiefly employs itself. Morality and the laws of men restrain from the commission of gross vices: on these accounts, a man will not steal or murder: but true grace discovers itself in opposing not those evils only, but all kinds of coveting, all kinds of hatred. It is the heart which true grace rectifies. It begins with cleansing and purifying the principles of action and the fountain whence all good or evil proceeds. The real Christian considers himself as bound to serve God with his spirit. A clean heart and a new spirit he seeks to obtain. He cannot be contented with a practice which, according to the usual standard of the world, is considered as blameless, while it permits worldliness of heart, love of filthy lucre, a desire of the applause of men, and a prevailing habit of self-indulgence. True grace discovers itself in resisting these, which are the parents and nurses of other sins. The Scripture says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do thereafter.” Now this wisdom and good understanding are very much displayed in observing and checking these common, and, as they are too often termed, little offences, which escape the notice and censure of others, though they are in truth only the issue of the most corrupt part of a most corrupt nature. It is the excellence of God’s law, that it is so spiritual as to admit of none of these. Human laws meddle only with the pernicious effects of evil principles; but the law of God goes to the

principle itself, and requires that to be mortified and annihilated. It admits of no composition with it. It charges with guilt that vanity which gratifies itself by the superior manner in which it has displayed some trifling accomplishment, and that pride which is even thought decent and respectable. These before God it accounts the symptoms of corruption and depravity. That emulation, which with many is the only source of energy, and which has been too inadvertently encouraged, it condemns as a work of the flesh, the offspring of false views, base ends, and corrupt motives. That inordinate desire of pleasing, which is often thought an essential part of the accomplishments of education, it censures as an undue preference of man to God, and frequently the cause of a sacrifice of truth to the prejudices and vices of men. That self-will, which wears the honourable guise of freedom and independence, it condemns as often originating in a proud spirit which can brook no control, and which is impatient of submission. In these and in many other such things, pointed out by the word of God to be sinful, and evidently originating, when traced up to their source, in a selfish gratification of the corrupt appetites of the flesh, the Christian sees and laments the depravity of his nature. In resisting these consists a great part of his employment. Here is his self-denial exercised. Here is the true spiritual warfare experienced,—the flesh against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. He says not of those transgressions which are passed over by the rest of the world without notice, that they are little sins or trifles: but he looks upon them as serious indications of a corrupt nature, which must be renewed; as cherishing and encouraging that corrupt nature, and strengthening its strength; and as leading on and habituating the mind to still greater and greater degrees of guilt and corruption. There is not a vice which is so destructive and odious as to be beheld with universal abhorrence but we may trace in ourselves the seeds of it, or even the plant growing up; and it is the business of religion to eradicate it, before it is advanced to its full size and strength.

5. *This subject presents useful lessons of instruction to parents.*—They form the minds of their children. And it is too much to be feared, that many of those unhappy persons who have been brought to ruin have been brought to it chiefly by the operation of those very principles which their parents instilled into them and encouraged. From them, perhaps, they imbibed the love of dress and the desire of admiration. Their parents nursed and fostered their infant vanity. From their parents they received the habits of indulgence which led them to consider wholesome restraint as an intolerable evil. By them they were encouraged to display their childish wit at the expense of the follies or infirmities of their neighbours, and taught to cultivate an uncharitable or deceitful disposition. The parents added fuel to their dawning resentments, adopted their trivial quarrels, and thus taught them malice and revenge. From their parents they imbibed the love of money: and by them were taught to

value others, not according to their real excellence, but according to their wealth and the advantages to be expected from them. From their parents they learned to make no account of religion, and to consider the Bible as a dull, useless, or a dangerous work. And can parents be surprised, if, after the pains they have thus taken to implant and to cherish evil principles in their children; can they be surprised, if they reap the fruits of it themselves? Can they be surprised, if by and by they see their children immersed in pleasure and sensuality, profligate and licentious, influenced by no good principles, or mainly instigated by the spirit of gain? Can they wonder if they find their children disobedient and irreverent to themselves, and injurious and cruel to others? Can they wonder if they see them live disliked and die unpitied? Surely these are but the consequences which might be expected from such an education. It was formed upon a plan which tended to cherish and cultivate vice; and the pains taken could not be expected to be otherwise than productive in a soil which is of itself so fruitful of evil, that we see the wisest and most judicious methods of instruction and the most pious education not always able to eradicate it.

6. *The consideration of the subject of my discourse should lead us also to deep humiliation on account of our great corruption, and to earnest prayers for the grace of Christ to pardon and to cleanse us.*—Persons who have superficial views of their duty, and low apprehensions of the evil of sin, are ready to look upon themselves as tolerably moral, while they are free from gross vices; and therefore they regard themselves as needing no repentance but what is occasional, no habitual watchfulness, no constant prayer, no daily endeavours to obtain the grace of God. But let those little sins which are every hour committed, those seeds of vice which are continually springing up in the heart, those ebullitions of a corrupt fountain from which the life is never free, be taken into the account, and we shall perceive the need we have to be earnest in our prayers to be sanctified and to be pardoned. Alas! when nothing appears wrong to the superficial observer, all may be wrong within. The state of the heart, the general system, may be totally wrong and corrupt. Every principle of action may be polluted. The fear of man, the love of applause, the desire of self-indulgence, the thirst of lucre, may be the springs and the only springs of action. One may succeed another, occupy the whole heart, and influence the whole conduct, without its being directed for one hour by the pure principle of love to God or real benevolence to man. Here in the heart is the lamentable power of corruption seen! Here we have need to be cleansed! The tree must be made good, before good fruit can be expected; the fountain must be made sweet, before its waters can be so. Here, therefore, we must begin. We must pray to God to give us a new heart. We must be engrafted into Christ Jesus, the living vine; and, by union to him, receive a new power to bring forth new fruit.

7. *And as we see evil arrive at its perfection by small gradations, so let us remember that good advances in the same manner.*—We should not despise little things, either in what is good or bad; for, as the apocryphal writer observes, “he that despiseth little things shall fall by little and little.” The character is formed very much from the repetition of little acts; and a progress in religion is made by small successive steps, none of which ought to be despised. And be not discontented, because you cannot at once arrive at those things which are most excellent. To attempt too great a height at once often tends to discouragement. Try to do a little, and that little will prepare you for more. Take the first step, and that will prepare the way for a second. Use the same rules of prudence in religion which you find useful in the ordinary affairs of life. In this respect, imitate the children of the world, who are often wiser in their generation than the children of light. Above all, seek to obtain that holy principle which respects God, and which acts out of love to his name and gratitude to him for his goodness. This will rectify the whole of your conduct, and each successive step you will then take will lead you nearer and nearer to Him who is the Source of all good.