



THE BALANCE STRUCK: A NEW YEAR'S SERMON.

BY THOMAS GUTHRIE, D.D.

"I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do."—Eccles. ii. 11.

OUR Lord pronounced the children of this world wise in their generation; and who can doubt that thousands who are lost would be saved, did they bring the same prudence, and diligence, and energy to their eternal, as they do to their temporal interests? In how many people do we see consummate wisdom joined to the greatest folly! They are wise enough to gain the world, and fools enough to lose their souls.

Convince a man that the only way to save his life is to lose his limb, and he does not hesitate an instant between living with one limb and being buried with two. Borne in, pale, yet resolute, he bares the diseased member to the knife—and how does that bleeding, fainting, groaning sufferer teach us to part with our sins rather than with our Saviour. If a life is better than a limb, how much better is heaven than a sin!

Two years ago a man was called to decide between his life and the gains of his lifetime. He stood on the deck of a ship that, coming from Australian gold fields, had—as some all but reach heaven—all but reached home and her harbour in safety. The exiles had coasted along their native shores; to-morrow, husbands would embrace their wives, children their parents, and not a few would realize their dream of returning to pass the calm evening of their days, envied, and happy amid the loved scenes of their youth. It was never more true, that there is much between the cup and the lip. Night came lowering down; and with the night the storm which wrecked ship, and hopes, and fortunes all together. The dawning light but showed them death staring them in the face. The sea ran mountains high—no boat could live in her. One chance remained. Pale women, weeping children, feeble and timid men, must die; but a stout, brave swimmer, with trust in God, and disencumbered of all impediments, might reach the

shore—where hundreds stood ready to dash into the surf, and, seizing, save him. One man was observed to go below. He bound around him a heavy belt, filled with gold, the hard gains of his life, and returned to the deck. One after another, he saw his fellows leap overboard; a brief struggle, and head after head went down—sunk by the gold they had fought hard to gain, and were loath to lose. Slowly he was seen to unbuckle his belt. His hopes had been bound up in it. It was to buy him land; it was the reward of long years of labour and weary exile. What he had endured for it! The sweat of his brow, the hopes of day and the dreams of night, were there. If he parts with it, he is a beggar; but if he keeps it he dies. He poised it in his grasp. Balancing it for a while, his fate trembling in the balance, with one strong desperate effort he flings it into the sea. It sinks with a sullen plunge; and now he follows it—not to sink, but, disencumbered of its weight, to swim, to beat the billows manfully, and, riding on the foaming surge, to reach the shore. Well done! Ay, well done, well chosen; but if a man, as the devil said, who for once spoke God's truth, will give all that he hath for his life, how much more should he give all he hath for his soul. Better to part with gold than with God; to bear a heavy cross than miss a heavenly crown.

Such lessons the children of this world teach the children of the kingdom, and among these, not the least important lesson, the duty of careful self-examination. Was there ever a successful merchant who did not balance his books year by year? I have often noticed, in reading the details of Courts of Bankruptcy, that fortunes are as surely wrecked by carelessness as by wild speculations, or by boundless extravagance. Here is an honest trader bankrupt. Sober, industrious,

ANSWERING OUR OWN PRAYERS.

BY REV. T. L. CUYLER.

WE use this expression, not too literally, but simply for want of a better one. The idea we aim at is, that every Christian is bound to do his utmost for the fulfilment of his own prayers. He is never to ask God to give what he is not trying his utmost to obtain ; he is never to ask God to make him what he is not faithfully trying to become.

This is our idea. It is partially illustrated by the familiar fable of Hercules and the waggoner. When the overloaded waggon sunk into the mire, instead of labouring to pry out the imbedded vehicle, the waggoner fell to praying Hercules to interpose his brawny arm for his relief. The god of muscle thus appealed to, reminded the luckless teamster that, while he prayed for help, he had better put his own shoulder to the wheel, and help himself.

In one sense this heathen fable illustrates the true relation between the sovereign God and the child of prayer. On our side is complete dependence. On the side of Omnipotence is infinite mercy. From HIM cometh down every good and every perfect gift. And because we *are* so dependent upon our heavenly Father, and owe him so much of submission, obedience, and trust, therefore are we to "pray without ceasing." But while we pray we are to *work*: first, as a proof of the sincerity of our desires ; and next, in order to obey God, who commands us to become the very men that we ask him to make us by his grace.

Does every child of God do his utmost to secure the answers to his own uttered requests? Most emphatically we reply, No! With even the best men there is a sad disparity between prayer and practice—between the askings of the lips and the actings of the heart—between their *life* and their *liturgy*.

1. Take, for example, the oft-repeated prayer for *growth in grace*. This is a vital request, and the most formal Christian professor will utter it nearly every day of his life. If he would resist the continual gravitation of inward sin and surrounding worldliness, he must cry as continually for heart-grace. But just imagine the owner of a vast field of weeds kneeling down among the "johnswort" and Canada thistles, and praying God to give him from that field a plentiful corn harvest! Not a furrow has been turned. Not a kernel planted. But the insane husbandman implores from heaven a crop, toward the growing of which his sluggish fingers have not been lifted. My Christian brother, you never are guilty of such folly in the management of your secular

interests. You never expect cargoes without sending ships seaward ; you never count on crops without ploughing, manuring, and seeding your acres. No school-girl would expect to see her pet flower grow in the conservatory without water and fresh earth. She sprinkles the azalea leaves until they drip, and feeds the delicate tuberoses with new earth as often as its wasting leaves telegraph its hunger. God takes care of her plants ; but she takes care of them too, and does not expect him to work miracles for the benefit of lazy people. Her prayer for her flowers is in the brimming pitcher and the virgin earth which her careful hands bring to the greenhouse.

Carry this same principle into your religion. Do you pray with the lips for growth in holiness, growth in heavenly-mindedness, growth in spiritual *stamina*? Then to the work of cleansing the heart-field! Then to the cutting up of the tares of covetousness—the johnswort of pride—the nettles of selfishness—the briars of deceit—the overgrown burdocks of sloth—and the seed-scattering thistles of unbelief! Pull them by the roots. Give your inward lusts no quarter. Keep no terms with them. Make no compromise with some darling sin to sprout and grow unobserved in some back corner of your soul-garden. Clear out every weed, in order that the seed-corn of godliness may have the full strength of the affections and the energies to make it grow. Watch over that precious seed. Water it with prayers and penitential tears. Strengthen it with Bible truth. And as you pray for the growth of heart-piety, let no indulged lust, no pet sin, harboured in secret places, prove your uttered prayer to be an abomination in the sight of the all-searching God. "If I regard iniquity in my heart" (that is, if I cling to it and cherish it) "God will not hear me." Nor will the Lord of holiness answer with a *Yea* what we are practically answering with a *Nay*.

2. Let us illustrate and apply this principle, in the next place, to parents who are praying for the conversion of their children. No petition is more fitting than this ; none could be more acceptable to God. But what hope have you, my friend, for the renewal of your children's hearts, if you pray in one direction with the lips, and quite in the opposite direction with the life? We see constantly the two antagonistic types of parental influence. Both are nominally Christian : only one is really such. The one man pleads at the altar for the sanctification of his household—that his sons may become sons

of God, and his daughters may be as polished stones in the temple of Christ. He makes religion prominent in his family; it is visible, legible, and *above board*. The books that are brought home for the children to read, the newspapers that are taken, the amusements that are chosen, the society that is sought, the aims in life that are set before those children, all bear in one direction and in the right direction. God is not asked by that father to convert his offspring to godliness while he is doing his best to pervert them to sin and worldliness. Nor is God implored to convert them while the parent uses no agencies to effect the longed-for result. No more than the Lord would be asked to restore the sick boy from a typhus fever, and yet no physician called in and no medicine administered. How much worse if the father, having prayed that his child be restored, should fall to giving the poor boy strychnine or prussic acid in large doses!

Yet professed Christians do this very thing often in morals and religion. They pray for their children's recovery to holiness, and then poison them! They pray for a son's purity, and then dash the wine-cup before his eyes. They pray for a daughter's conversion, with a theatre-ticket in their pockets—a "family ticket" for the whole household! They go to church, look devout, and then come home to trifle, to gossip—to entertain Sunday visitors at a sumptuous feast, to talk politics, to do anything, in short, but follow up the teachings of God's minister with affectionate, faithful home instructions. The practical effect of their whole conduct and conversation, both on the Lord's day and *all* the days of the week, is to undo whatever good may have been done by the earnest labours of the pulpit. What must such children think of those fluent prayers that they hear every night at the family altar? What of the consistency of those parents who utter such solemn mockeries? Oh! it is better never to pray at all for the conversion of your offspring than to ask God, in solemn tones, to *save* them, while you are using your whole influence to harden and destroy them. "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou unfaithful servant."

In eternity it will be a terrible thing for many a man to meet his own prayers. Their very language will condemn him; for he knew his duty, but he did it not. Those fervent prayers, which the good man laboured to make effectual, will be "shining ones" in white raiment to conduct their author in to the banqueting-house of the GREAT KING. But the falsehoods uttered at the throne of grace will live again as tormenting scorpions in the day of the Lord's appearing. "Be not rash with thy mouth, nor let thy heart be hasty to utter anything before God," is an injunction that forbids more than irreverence in prayer. It forbids us, by implication, to ask for that which we do not sincerely desire. Above all, it forbids the asking from God those blessings which we are hindering by our neglect, or thwarting by our selfishness and unbelief.

THE FATHERS IN ROSS-SHIRE—THE MINISTERS.*

THE religion of the Highlands of Scotland, admirable in many respects, but in some peculiar, has received much illustration from an able book recently published by the Rev. Mr. Kennedy of Dingwall, which he entitles, with affectionate reverence, "The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire." Descended from a line of heroes of the pulpit, and himself a preacher powerful in English and famous in Gaelic, Mr. Kennedy, while restricting himself to the particular locality of Ross-shire, does not restrict himself to any one department of Ross-shire religion, but gives a comprehensive and faithful view of the whole. And as he depicts the whole, so he praises it all, without qualification or modification. Only in one paragraph of the whole book does he seem inclined to admit that there was a "type of religion peculiar to the north," and that the "peculiarity of the Celtic temperament" may have had somewhat to do with the peculiarity of the "Celtic piety." Yet we can hardly blame that love as too indiscriminating which has been the means of introducing us to so many holiest men, so near to God that all our approaches look like distance, and so humble that all our worship seems filled with flippancy and sin.

For the religion of Ross-shire—too little social on the one hand, and too subjective on the other—was, at least, characteristically and eminently *individual*. Men were not there saved in the slump, or tided over into heaven by the general wave of religious feeling that filled the community. One by one they dealt with God, and God took a dealing with them. Hence, too, in this part of the Church, that *supremacy of piety* over all other qualities and recommendations, both in the case of ministers and laymen, which is well brought out in these memorials. We shall at present confine ourselves to the ministers. "It was neither by talents, nor by learning, nor by oratory, nor was it by all these together, that a leading place was attained by the ministers in the Highlands, but by a profound experience of the power of godliness, a clear view of the doctrines of grace, peculiar nearness to God, a holy life, and a blessed ministry. Without these, without all these, a high place would not be assigned to them either by the Lord or by men." And again, "Each of them would have been distinguished as a Christian, though he had never been a minister. There are ministers who find all their Christianity in their office, having had none of it before in their hearts. Far otherwise was it with the godly fathers in Ross-shire. With two exceptions they had all been Christians before they were office-bearers, and some of them from their earliest years. Nor were they ordinary Christians. Their deep experience of the work of the Spirit, their clear views of the doctrines of grace, their peculiar nearness to God, and their holy watchful-

* "The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire." By the Rev. John Kennedy, Dingwall. Edinburgh: John MacLaren, 1861.