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### THE CONDUCT OF SINNERS TESTED BY THE RULES OF WORLDLY WISDOM.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:15. *I speak as to wise men: judge ye what I say.*

MOST men are ready to claim a considerable share of worldly wisdom, and not a few, it must be acknowledged, possess it in an eminent degree. There are those who know how to make the most of their means of becoming rich; who are always on the alert to take advantage of every turn of circumstances; and whose sagacity in a single commercial speculation may bring into their possession a large fortune. There are those who understand well how to secure and advance their own fame; who, by simple management, attain some of the highest posts of worldly honor. And there are those who are sharp sighted to discern both good and evil as it respects the political relations of a community—men who will see a cloud in the distant horizon, and know that it is charged with lightning and tempest, when it is no bigger than a man's hand; men whose counsels in dark times are considered a safeguard to the public interests. In every department of human action there are indeed *pretenders* to wisdom; but there are also truly wise men;—men whose opinion on any subject which relates exclusively to this world is justly entitled to consideration and respect.

But while these men are sagacious to understand and secure the interests of the present life, in many instances at least, their wisdom utterly fails them in respect to the life that is to come. In the one case, they show themselves giants in wisdom; in the other, the merest dwarfs. In the one case, you may listen to what they say as if it were oracular; in the other, you may witness what they do, (for they generally *say* little,) and it will leave you wondering at their infatuation. My design, in this discourse, is to reason a little with this class—with all, indeed, who have a common degree of worldly wisdom, in respect to those great interests which they are prone to regard so lightly. I am going to speak to you as wise men; and ask you to judge of the course you are pursuing in respect to religion, by those common and acknowledged principles of wisdom which you are accustomed every day to apply, in your various professions and employments.

1. There is a large class who do not come to any definite and intelligent decision of the question whether the Bible is really a revelation from God; though they have all the means at hand for forming such a decision. I ask them, as wise men, honestly to pass judgment on their own conduct.

I can suppose there may be some danger here, that some of the class to which I refer, will not recognize this description as applicable to themselves.

Many of these persons no doubt take the comfort of thinking that they believe the bible because there is something in the thought of being an infidel that shocks them; but in order to ascertain the nature or the strength of this conviction, let them inquire whether they do not allow themselves in practices which they would not dare to allow, if they felt that it were absolutely certain that God had spoken in this book; and whether they do not feel less anxiety than they would feel, if the thought did not sometimes occur to them, that possibly the bible might turn out to be a mere matter of imposture. If conscience answers in the affirmative, then clearly they belong to the class I am now considering. But I doubt not there are many others who never slip a word in favor of infidelity during their lives, and who pass in the world for firm believers in the bible, who yet purposely leave this matter entirely unsettled; who never take the trouble to inquire whether the bible is true or false, but who run the hazard of living precisely as if it were a set of fables. Now listen and judge whether, in adopting this course, you maintain the character which, in other respects, you choose to claim for true wisdom.

The bible *professes* to be a revelation from God. This you do not question; you do not even deny that it really *is* so; but in respect to this, you neither affirm nor deny: you are willing to remain unsettled. But the fact that your mind is not made up on the subject, proves that in your own view at least, there is a possibility that God has spoken in this book; and if he has spoken, he has spoken to the world to which you belong; he has spoken to yourself, and you may be sure he would not speak, if he had not something important to say. If there be a possibility, then, as you yourself acknowledge, that the great God in whose hand your breath is, and who, if there be any truth even in natural religion, will hereafter be your Judge,—if there be a possibility that he has sent you a message in the bible, what is the language of your conduct when you close the bible, and say that you shall not inquire whether it was inspired by God or forged by man? Without saying any thing here of the nature of the message it contains, do you not run the hazard of offering an awful insult to the Majesty of heaven, for which, let your character in other respects be as it may, he would require the blood of your soul?

Suppose a message were to reach you, professedly bearing the signature of some exalted personage, to whom you were under great obligations, and who had you completely in his power; who, while he was disposed to be condescending towards you, was still jealous for his own honor; and who withal, from the relation you sustained to him, and the circumstances in which you were placed, might be expected to address you; and suppose you should take what purported to be a message from him in your hand; and without any just reason to suspect that it was a forgery, should coolly lay it by, and say that it might or might not be genuine—you should not give yourself the trouble to inquire;—I ask you whether such conduct would seem to you rational and prudent? If another person were guilty of it, would you hesitate to pronounce him a madman? But with all your wisdom, this is precisely the part you are acting towards the great God in relation to the bible. Here is something placed in your hand that professes to bear the stamp of his authority. You do not pretend that you have any particular reason to question its claims. Nevertheless, you are willing to lay it aside, and treat it with neglect, on the ground that, *possibly*, it may not have been of divine origin. I ask again, do you not treat God in relation to this matter as you would not dare to treat a fellow worm whose breath is in his nostrils?

But look farther at the nature of the message which the bible contains. If it were a matter of mere indifference on which it professes to address you—

something which could not in any way materially affect your happiness, let the case result as it might, why then there might be some apology for your neglecting to settle the question of its authority; though if the point that God has spoken be previously determined, this certainly is evidence enough that the message is an important cue. But, in the present case, there is surely no room for doubt: he who looks into the bible, must perceive at a glance that the message involves your most important interests; and that if it is really from God, the manner in which you treat it must decide your everlasting destiny. The most momentous interests of a state or an empire dwindle to nothing, compared with the interests which the bible professes to regard; for these are the interests of the soul; and the soul will live when all earthly states and empires are blotted out of being. Here again, what is the language of your conduct in remaining voluntarily undecided concerning the authority of the bible? It is that in a case in which you acknowledge God *may* have spoken, and spoken that in which your eternal all is bound up, you still will not take the trouble to inquire whether or not it is really God who has addressed you.

For the sake of further illustration, recur to the case I have already supposed. What if this message, purporting to come from some exalted personage to whom you sustained peculiar relations, should involve your highest worldly interests—your character—your fortune—your all—would not this be a consideration that would stand in the way of your lightly passing it over and treating it as if it were altogether questionable whether it was genuine? Or if there were actually some reason to doubt its genuineness, would not this consideration make you careful thoroughly to test it, and would you cast it from you, so long as you could see a shadow of ground for believing that it was not a forgery; or do you believe you would rest, till you had settled the point whether it were so or not? The course that wisdom would prescribe in this case is obvious. Believe me, the dictates of wisdom are uniform. She marks out for you precisely the same course in respect to your treatment of that momentous message which professes to come to you from the King of kings.

But it is supposable, in the case to which I have referred for illustration, that there might be nothing that should give you any just occasion to doubt that the message which reached you came from the individual with whose authority it was professedly stamped; and suppose, moreover, that many intelligent men had examined it, and had unhesitatingly pronounced it genuine; would not this be a circumstance that would render your indecision in respect to it more unaccountable and more foolish? It certainly ought not to be a reason why you should forbear to look at it for yourself; but surely it ought to remind you that the means of coming to an intelligent conclusion were within your reach, and that you were chargeable at least with singular stupidity if you did not avail yourself of them.

But wherein does your conduct in relation to God's word indicate greater wisdom than would be discovered by remaining undecided in the case I have just supposed? You do not yourself profess to believe that there is any thing in relation to the bible with which you are acquainted, that proves that it *may* not be the word of God. Those who have examined it most attentively, and under circumstances most favorable to arriving at the truth, have been fully satisfied that it is the word of God. You have all the means for coming to a decision which *they* have had, or which you could desire; especially you have the record itself, and the question of its divine authority is fairly within the scope of your faculties. If it were a question of extreme difficulty—one in respect to which your means of coming at the truth were altogether inade-

quate, why then, inasmuch as it is a matter of so much moment, prudence would dictate that you should tax your faculties to the utmost. Though you might with more show of reason, plead discouragement. But as it is a subject every way within the range of your comprehension, and on which the light shines as brightly as the sun at noonday, what semblance of an apology can you plead for remaining undecided?

I ask you now, in view of all that has been said under this article, whether, as wise men, you can approve your own course? If the message which comes to you in the bible, professes to come from God; if it involves the interests of your whole eternity; if those who have examined it most thoroughly are fully persuaded of its genuineness, and if you have every opportunity of ascertaining whether it be genuine or not, I ask again, where is the wisdom of your remaining thus undecided?

2. There is another class who advance a step farther than the preceding; while they admit the divine authority of the bible, they have not, and do not profess to have, any definite views in respect to the system of truth it contains. Persons of this description sometimes even value themselves upon not being infidels; and they will speak of christianity in the general as an excellent system; but they have not, after all, exactly made up their minds on the question, what christianity is. They are willing to believe that all who assume the christian name, may, in the main, be right; and on a subject upon which there are such various and contradictory opinions, they think they cannot hazard much by remaining without any definite opinion at all. I wish to inquire of *this* class, whether they discern any wisdom in this course; and if so, where it lies?

On the question whether the bible contains a divine revelation, you profess to have your mind made up; and if you were to hear that some body had whispered that you are an infidel, you would probably say, in a tone much above a whisper, that he is a slanderer. Well now, judge honestly, what does this belief, so long as it is disconnected with any distinct views of christian truth, amount to? Only let a man say that he believes the bible to contain a revelation from God, and whether he knows or believes a word of what God has spoken in it, becomes, in your estimation, an unimportant matter. But where lies the charm in believing the simple proposition that the bible is the word of God? Let me revert to the case which I have already used in the way of illustration. Suppose you should receive the message that should be brought to you from some earthly benefactor or potentate, and should express your full conviction that it was genuine, and should perhaps compliment him for having thus honored you; and to an inquiry which should then be made, what the message contained, you should reply that that was a matter of no moment, that it might contain one thing or another; and that as there would probably be different opinions in respect to its true import, you should not give yourself the trouble particularly to examine it, but should charitably presume that all might be substantially right, and that the whole benefit to be derived from it would be secured to you on your believing that it really came from the individual whose name it bore. Where is the man who would dare to hold up his head after having been guilty of such folly as this? But this is precisely a fair representation of your conduct in reference to the authority and doctrines of God's word. You make much of the one: you make nothing of the other. You will have it that God has spoken, and you would resent the imputation of believing the contrary; but as for what he has said, you regard that too unimportant a matter to trouble yourself about.

When we look into the bible, and contemplate the nature of the truths it

reveals, we have no difficulty in perceiving how it operates in the sanctification and salvation of man. There is that in the great truths of the gospel which must, when cordially received, exert the very influence which the gospel claims for itself; which must render it quick and powerful; a sovereign balm for every wound. But tell me what there is in the insulated fact that God has made a revelation to the world, which could produce this effect? What is there in it which the most depraved man on earth might not fully and cordially believe, and yet not lose a particle of his depravity? What is there which a heathen might not believe and be a heathen still?

3. Let me proceed to a third class, who are still a little upon the advance of the precedings;—who not only admit the authority of the bible, but intelligently give their assent to its doctrines; who nevertheless, in their heart and life, do not yield to its influence. Let us see whether, as wise men, *they* can justify their conduct.

Suppose the message of which I have been all along speaking, to have been addressed to a criminal under sentence of death, and to contain nothing less important to him than the offer of a free forgiveness, which yet he was at liberty to reject; and suppose he should not only be fully satisfied that it had come from the proper authority, but should examine it, and fully understand its nature; and then, instead of gratefully accepting the pardon which it professed, should indignantly or insultingly reject it, and should hug his chains, and seem determined that the law should have its course in his execution—would you have any doubt that that poor criminal, however it might have been with him when he committed the act for which he had been condemned, was *then* bereft of his reason? Would you not say, “the love of life is natural to man; but this man, in choosing death rather than life, does violence to the dictates of nature: he must be a maniac?”

Or suppose the message to be addressed to yourself, and to be nothing less than that there was an immense fortune, or if you please, an earthly kingdom, at your command, which would be made over to you in a formal way, provided you would consent to receive it as a free gift: you are perfectly satisfied of the authenticity of the communication, and the sincerity of the offer; but instead of taking measures to make it your own, you practically treat it with absolute indifference; and that too, when you profess in words to place upon it the highest value—would *this* conduct savor of wisdom? Should you dare stake your character for worldly prudence on such conduct?

The message which God sends you in his word, corresponds in its different aspects to both these cases. It comes to you as a criminal condemned by God's law, and contains the offer of a full and gracious forgiveness. It extends still farther, and contains the offer of a heavenly inheritance, an exceeding and eternal weight of glory. You profess to believe that the message comes from God; that your condition is just as bad as the message presumes it to be; that the provision made for your salvation is every way adequate; that there is a crown of life offered you, and a seat at God's right hand. And then with these sentiments on your lips, you fold your arms, and go to sleep over these amazing interests. You suffer yourself to be altogether engrossed with the things of the world; with objects which, by your own confession, compared with those you neglect, are as insignificant as the playthings of children. I surely need not stop to ask whether this is wise. You cannot dream that there is wisdom in acting contrary to your own convictions; in professing to believe that religion is every thing, and then acting as

if it were nothing. He who should do so in his worldly transactions would never get trusted after it; for he would be set down as a knave or a fool.

I observe, once more, that there is a class of men who not only admit the authority of God's message, and understand well what it means, but fully intend to yield obedience to it; though they are putting off such obedience to a future season. How will *their* conduct bear to be judged by the rules of wisdom?

You admit that religion is a matter of infinite moment, and that it must be attended to before you die. You have no expectation of getting to heaven in any other way than by repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; and if you should die before you have complied with these conditions, you fully believe that there could be no salvation for you.

Now in order to make it appear that this delay to which you are inclined to yield is marked by true wisdom, you must show at least two things:—First, that you are certain you shall have a future period for repentance; and, second, that that period will be more favorable than the present.

Show me, vain mortal, your security for a single day. Is it youth? Is it health? Is it beauty? Go with me to yonder sepulchre, and I can show you the death worm, revelling amid the ruins of each. Do you speak of early promise or of parental hopes? These also death mocks without distinction; and writes the father and the mother childless. The truth is, you have no security. You are living in a world where the arrows of death are flying in every direction; and there is not one of them of which you can say with certainty that it shall not pierce your own heart. When you put off the concerns of religion to a future day, you put it off to a day which, for aught you know, may dawn upon your grave. It is consummate folly to do this, even if you are young; for how many monuments are continually rising up to tell of the departure of those who had but just begun to live! And if it is folly for the young, what is it for the man of grey hairs? What for him who already walks tremblingly, as if he were near the borders of the grave?

But even if you were certain of a future day, would you be under better advantages to repent than now? Will repentance be an easier work? Is it the nature of habit to grow weak, or by indulgence? Do you really believe that you would enter upon the work with better hope of success than at this hour? Are you certain that God will give you grace to repent, after you have abused his grace by long delay and presumption? Are you sure that when the anticipated season shall come, provided you are yet among the living, your heart will not be as insensible as a rock; that the curse of reprobation may not have fallen upon you, and frozen up the very fountain of feeling?

I know, my friends, that I have your judgment and conscience on my side, when I enter a protest against this delaying spirit. I know you cannot but feel that in what you are doing in respect to this matter, you adopt precisely such a course as you would expect, in your worldly affairs, would lead to disaster and ruin. Let me entreat you then to do at present what you intend to do hereafter; because the difficulties of the work of repentance are constantly accumulating, and because *to-morrow* is a word which ought not to be found in the vocabulary of a probationer for eternity. I only ask you to act in accordance with your own honest convictions. I have spoken to you, my friends, one and all, words of truth and soberness. I have spoken to you as unto wise men: judge ye what I what I have said.