**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**PROVERBS-025. A CONDENSED GUIDE FOR LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"15. My son, if thine heart be wise, my heart shall rejoice, even mine. 16. Yea, my reins shall rejoice, when thy lips speak right things. 17. Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. 18. For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off. 19. Hear thou, my son, and be wise, and guide thine heart in the way. 20. Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: 21. For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags. 22. Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old. 23. Buy the truth and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding."*

*Proverbs 23:15-23*

The precepts of this passage may be said to sum up the teaching of the whole Book of Proverbs. The essentials of moral character are substantially the same in all ages, and these ancient advices fit very close to the young lives of this generation. The gospel has, no doubt, raised the standard of morals, and, in many respects, altered the conception and perspective of virtues; but its great distinction lies, not so much in the novelty of its commandments as in the new motives and powers to obey them. Reverence for parents and teachers, the habitual fear of the Lord, temperance, eager efforts to win and retain the truth, have always been recognised as duties; but there is a long weary distance between recognition and practice, and he who draws inspiration from Jesus Christ will have strength to traverse it, and to do and be what he knows that he should.

The passage may be broken up into four parts, which, taken together, are a young life's directory of conduct which is certain to lead to peace.

**I. There is, first, an appeal to filial affection, and an unveiling of paternal sympathy (verses 15, 16).**

The paternal tone characteristic of the Book of Proverbs is most probably regarded as that of a teacher addressing his disciples as his children. But the glimpse of the teacher's heart here given may well apply to parents too, and ought to be true of all who can influence other and especially young hearts. Little power attends advices which are not sweetened by manifest love. Many a son has been kept back from evil by thinking, What would my mother say? and many a sound admonition has been nothing but sound, because the tone of it betrayed that the giver did not much care whether it was taken or not.

A true teacher must have his heart engaged in his lessons, and must impress his scholars with the conviction that their failure drives a knife into it, and their acceptance of them brings him purest joy. On the other hand, the disciple, and still more the child, must have a singularly cold nature who does not respond to loving solicitude and does not care whether he wounds or gladdens the heart which pours out its love and solicitude over him. May we not see shining through this loving appeal a truth in reference to the heart of the great Father and Teacher, who, in the depths of His divine blessedness, has no greater joy than that His children should walk in the truth? God's heart is glad when man's is wise.

Note, also, the wide general expression for goodness--a wise heart, lips speaking right things. The former is source, the latter stream. Only a pure fountain will send forth sweet waters. If thy heart become wise is the more correct rendering, implying that there is no inborn wisdom, but that it must be made ours by effort. We are foolish; we become wise.

What the writer means by wisdom he will tell us presently. Here he lets us see that it is a good to be attained by appropriate means. It is the foundation of right speech. Nothing is more remarkable than the solemn importance which Scripture attaches to words, even more, we might almost say than to deeds, therein reversing the usual estimate of their relative value. Putting aside the cases of insincerity, falsehood, and the like, a man's speech is a truer transcript of himself than his deeds, because less hindered and limited by externals. The most precious wine drips from the grapes by their own weight in the vat, without a turn of the screw. By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned. God's great gift of speech abused is one of the commonest, least considered, and most deadly sins.

**II. We have next the one broad precept with its sure reward, which underlies all goodness (verses 17, 18).**

The supplement be thou, in the second clause of verse 17, obscures the close connection of clauses. It is better to regard the verb of the first clause as continued in the second. Thus the one precept is set forth negatively and positively: Strive not after [that is, seek not to imitate or be associated with] sinners, but after the fear of the Lord. The heart so striving becomes wise. So, then, wisdom is not the result of cultivating the intellect, but of educating the desires and aspirations. It is moral and religious, rather than simply intellectual. The magnificent personification of Wisdom at the beginning of the book influences the subsequent parts, and the key to understanding that great conception is, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom. The Greek goddess of Wisdom, noble as she is, is of the earth earthy when contrasted with that sovereign figure. Pallas Athene, with her clear eyes and shining armour, is poor beside the Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, who dwelt with God or ever the earth was, and comes to men with loving voice and hands laden with the gifts of durable riches and righteousness.

He is the wise man who fears God with the fear which has no torment and is compact of love and reverence. He is on the way to become wise whose seeking heart turns away from evil and evil men, and feels after God, as the vine tendrils after a stay, or as the sunflower turns to the light. For such wholehearted desire after the one supreme good there must be resolute averting of desire from sinners. In this world full of evil there will be no vigorous longing for good and God, unless there be determined abstention from the opposite. We have but a limited quantity of energy, and if it is frittered away on multifarious creatures, none will be left to consecrate to God. There are lakes which discharge their waters at both ends, sending one stream east to the Atlantic and one west to the Pacific; but the heart cannot direct its issues of life in that fashion. They must be banked up if they are to run deep and strong. All the current of my being must set to thee if my tiny trickle is to reach the great ocean, to be lost in which is blessedness.

And such energy of desire and direction is not to be occasional, but all the day long. It is possible to make life an unbroken seeking after and communion with God, even while plunged in common tasks and small cares. It is possible to approximate indefinitely to that ideal of continually dwelling in the house of the Lord; and without some such approximation there will be little realising of the Lord, sought by fits and starts, and then forgotten in the hurry of business or pleasure. A photographic plate exposed for hours will receive the picture of far-off stars which would never show on one exposed for a few minutes.

The writer is sure that such desires will be satisfied, and in verse 18 says so. The reward (Rev. Ver.) of which he is sure is the outcome of the life of such seekers after God. It does not necessarily refer to the future after death, though that may be included in it. But what is meant is that no seeking after the fear of the Lord shall be in vain. There is a tacit emphasis on thy, contrasting the sure fulfilment of hopes set on God with the as sure cutting of of those mistakenly fixed upon creatures and vanities. Psalm xxxvii. 38, has the same word here rendered reward and declares that the future [or reward] of the wicked shall be cut off. The great fulfilment of this assurance is reserved for the life beyond; but even here among all disappointments and hopes of which fulfilment is so often disappointment also, it remains true that the one striving which cannot be fruitless is striving for more of God, and the one hope which is sure to be realised, and is better when realised than expected, is the hope set on Him. Surely, then, the certainty that if we delight ourselves in God He will give us the desires of our hearts, is a good argument, and should be with us an operative motive for directing desire and effort away from earth and towards Him.

**III. Special precepts as to the control of the animal nature follow in verses 19-21.**

First, note that general one of verse 19, Guide thine heart in the way. In most general terms, the necessity of self-government is laid down. There is a way in which we should be content to travel. It is a definite path, and feet have to be kept from straying aside to wide wastes on either hand. Limitation, the firm suppression of appetites, the coercing of these if they seek to draw aside, are implied in the very conception of the way. And a man must take the upper hand of himself, and, after all other guidance, must be his own guide; for God guides us by enabling us to guide ourselves.

Temperance in the wider sense of the word is prominent among the virtues flowing from fear of the Lord, and is the most elementary instance of guiding the heart. Other forms of self-restraint in regard to animal appetites are spoken of in the context, but here the two of drunkenness and gluttony are bracketed together. They are similarly coupled in Deuteronomy 21:20, in the formula of accusation which parents are to bring against a degenerate son. Allusion to that passage is probable here, especially as the other crime mentioned in it--namely, refusal to hear parental reproof--is warned against in verse 22. The picture, then, here is that of a prodigal son, and we have echoes of it in the great parable which paints first riotous living, and then poverty and misery.

Drunkenness had obviously not reached the dimensions of a national curse in the date when this lesson was written. We should not put over-eating side by side with it. But its ruinous consequences were plain then, and the bitter experience of England and America repeats on a larger scale the old lesson that the most productive source of poverty, wretchedness, rags, and vice, is drink. Judges and social reformers of all sorts concur in that now, though it has taken fifty years to hammer it into the public conscience. Perhaps in another fifty or so society may have succeeded in drawing the not very obscure inference that total abstinence and prohibition are wise. At any rate, they who seek after the fear of the Lord should draw it, and act on it.

**IV. The last part is in verses 22 and 23.**

The appeal to filial duty cannot here refer to disciple and teacher, but to child and parents. It does not stand as an isolated precept, but as underscoring the important one which follows. But a word must be spared for it. The habits of ancient days gave a place to the father and mother which modern family life woefully lacks, and suffers in many ways for want of. Many a parent in these days of slack control and precocious independence might say, If I be a father, where is mine honour? There was perhaps not enough of confidence between parent and child in former days, and authority on the one hand and submission on the other too much took the place of love; but nowadays the danger is all the other way--and it is a very real danger.

But the main point here is the earnest exhortation of verse 23, which, like that to the fear of the Lord, sums up all duty in one. The truth is, like wisdom, moral and religious, and not merely intellectual. Wisdom is subjective, the quality or characteristic of the devout soul; truth is objective, and may also be defined as the declared will of God. The possession of truth is wisdom. The entrance of Thy words giveth light. It makes wise the simple. There is, then, such a thing as the truth accessible to us. We can know it, and are not to be for ever groping amid more or less likely guesses, but may rest in the certitude that we have hold of foundation facts. For us, the truth is incarnate in Jesus, as He has solemnly asserted. That truth we shall, if we are wise, buy, by shunning no effort, sacrifice, or trouble needed to secure it.

In the lower meanings of the word, our passage should fire us all, and especially the young, to strain every muscle of the soul in order to make truth for the intellect our own. The exhortation is needed in this day of adoration of money and material good. Nobler and wiser far the young man who lays himself out to know than he who is engrossed with the hungry desire to have! But in the highest region of truth, the buying is without money and without price, and all that we can give in exchange is ourselves. We buy the truth when we know that we cannot earn it, and forsaking self-trust and self-pleasing, consent to receive it as a free gift. Sell it not,--let no material good or advantage, no ease, slothfulness, or worldly success, tempt you to cast it away; for its fruit is better than gold, and its revenue than choice silver. We shall make a bad bargain if we sell it for anything beneath the stars; for wisdom is better than rubies, and he has been cheated in the transaction who has given up the truth and got instead the whole world.