

DAY OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST; (SIRACH) ECCLESIASTICUS 15:1-8.

He that feareth the Lord will do good; and he that hath the knowledge of the law shall obtain her. And as a mother shall she meet him, and receive him as a wife married of a virgin. With the bread of understanding shall she feed him, and give him the water of wisdom to drink. He shall be stayed upon her, and shall not be moved; and shall rely upon her, and shall not be confounded. She shall exalt him above his neighbors, and in the midst of the congregation shall she open his mouth. He shall find joy and a crown of gladness, and she shall cause him to inherit an everlasting name. But foolish men shall not attain unto her, and sinners shall not see her. For she is far from pride, and men that are liars cannot remember her.

EXHORTATION TO PIETY AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

1. This lesson, apparently, is not designed to teach. Rather, its purpose is to present the advantages of right conduct. It does not enumerate certain works and the manner in which they are to be performed, but holds up the benefit accruing from right living. Its object is to admonish us and incite us to perform the duties we already recognize. Paul (Romans 12:7-8) classifies all discourse under two heads, doctrine and exhortation. Doctrine presents things we do not already know or possess. Exhortation recites and impels us to obey doctrine, and encourages to patience and perseverance. While the latter feature of discourse is less difficult than the former, it is no less necessary and profitable.

2. He who would incite one to action, would arouse, encourage, admonish him, must present good reason for action. This may be accomplished by reference to the need and the advantages, the pleasures and honors, consequent upon a certain course, or to the disaster and disgrace following neglect of it. Such is the method employed in this lesson. It points out numerous advantages and honors coming to them who fear God and love righteousness. Its message we will now consider.

3. No definition of righteousness and the fear of God is given here. We have frequently stated, however, that to fear God is not to depend upon ourselves, upon any goodness within us, nor to rely upon our honor, our power, our wealth, strength, advantages or skill – no, not even upon our good works and piety. We must be careful not to sin in any of these things. We are to fear – yes, we know – that should God deal truly and justly with us, we should a thousand times be lost. Therefore, we must not in any way exalt ourselves above the most insignificant individual on earth. We must be humble and gentle in all our conduct and purposes. No arrogance may we show toward anyone; we must be gentle and

affable. Humility will render our works good. Peter says (1 Peter 5:5), “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.” Whatsoever is done in that grace, then, is rightly done.

4. As we have heard, righteousness is simply faith. We experience faith in the following way: In the first place, being unable to stand before God’s judgment, man is filled with fear in all his nature and actions. Fear impels him to seek something outside himself whereon he may confidently build and stand. He finds that to be nothing else but the pure mercy of God, promised in Christ and revealed in him. Such reliance, such confident faith, renders us just and righteous before God. As Paul says (Romans 1:17), “The righteous shall live by faith.”

5. In proportion as one distrusts himself, his own abilities, and feels he is in all things a sinner before a just God, will he find consolation outside himself, in the grace of God, and thus become righteous in all his works. The two must be kept together; where judgment is, fear must be; where grace exists, confidence is found. Judgment produces fear; grace begets trust and confidence. Through judgment, fear divests us of self with all its powers. But confidence invests us with God and his every attribute. Not our merits, then, but the blessings of God have praise. This teaching is endorsed by Psalm 147:11: “Jehovah taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his lovingkindness.”

6. If man’s faith be right, he will conduct himself toward his neighbor in the way he believes God deals with himself. He will do all from pure grace, forgiving his neighbor, for-bearing, endeavoring to alleviate his wretchedness, ministering to him, showing hospitality, denying him nothing, risking body, life, property and honor for his sake and conducting himself in all respects as God has done toward him. For faith tells him that God has dealt with him purely in grace, regardless of his demerits, and he is confident God will verify his faith in him. As God pours blessings upon him in disregard of his shortcomings, so will the individual pour all possible favor upon his neighbor, notwithstanding that neighbor may be an enemy and destitute of all merit. He is satisfied the favors he bestows will not impoverish him, for in proportion as he bestows will God pour out upon him; the more he does for his neighbor, the more will God bless him.

7. Such, you perceive, is the true faith, the faith that justifies before God. It is the Christian’s righteousness, which receives blessings from above and delivers them below. We find a beautiful illustration of it in the piece of land Caleb, the holy father, gave to his daughter Achsah (Judges 1:13-15), from which issued beautiful fountains of water. The land was watered by springs above and springs below: hence it was very fertile and very valuable. As already stated, we cannot say too much concerning this faith.

8. The word “Achsah” means ornaments, or jeweled shoes. The lovely Maggie in scarlet shoes, the little daughter of God, is the believing soul. The soul that trusts may be likened to the maiden who trips fearlessly along in her beautiful scarlet and golden shoes. Paul says (Ephesians 6:15), “Having your feet shod” – with what? “With the preparation of the gospel of peace.” Note that when the heart, through faith, enters the Gospel and lives in the Word, it is Achsah, Maggie in her beautiful shoes. Solomon also speaks concerning the

bride (Song of Solomon 7:1), “How beautiful are thy feet in sandals, O prince’s daughter!”

MOTIVES TO FEAR GOD AND LOVE; RIGHTEOUSNESS

Now, let us consider what is offered to incite and urge us to fear God and to love righteousness.

First : “He will do good.”

9. All the world talks about doing good, but if you would know how, listen: Do not as the fools who consider various works with intent to choose such as are in their own conceptions good, and to reject such as they deem bad, thus making a distinction of the works themselves. Do not so. Let works be alike; regard one the same as another. Fear God and be just – as already advised – and then perform the duty that presents itself. Then all will be well done, it matters not if it be the duties of a hostler or a teamster.

10. The text is unalterable: “He that feareth the Lord will do good” – no matter what he may do. His works are good, not because of their character, but because of the fear that inspires them. Here, you see, is great comfort. Immediately you abound in good works, and your whole life is good, if you fear God. Whether it be eating or drinking, walking or standing, seeing or hearing, sleeping or waking – all your works are good. Who would not, by such advantage, be incited to fear God? Note, they who fear God are the lambs of God, for whom everything is useful, all their works are profitable.

11. But they who make distinction of works, the nice saints with their choice, selected deeds, really perform no good works. Why? Because they do not fear God. Attaching great value to their own efforts, they do not trust in him. Consequently these same highly-prized works are evil. It is a fixed truth that his works are good who fears God, but the unbeliever’s works are evil. “He that hath the knowledge of the law shall obtain her.”

Second : ”He holds to righteousness.”

12. He who holds to righteousness will obtain her. The thought here is the same as in the first incentive, but differently expressed. To have a knowledge of the Law, to adhere to righteousness, is to persevere in faith. The individual of steadfast faith will apprehend righteousness – will make it his own. Having attained to the heritage of righteousness, being enabled to dwell in it, all his deeds, his whole life, will be right. Therefore, he who would do right and live in righteousness must believe; he must persevere in faith, and then perform, without distinction, such works as present themselves. Endowed with the prerogative faith, it is unnecessary for him to inquire how his works shall be good. They are good to begin with. They are performed without distinction. Righteousness is already apprehended. For he perseveres in faith.

13. But, whatever the works of the unbelieving, righteousness will flee from them because they neglect faith. They may catch at righteousness as a dog snaps at flies, still it will elude them. Paul says of the Jews (Romans 9:31), “Israel, following after a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law.” Like the Jews are those unbelieving ones who pursue their

shadows, chasing after righteousness with their works. It flees from them. They cannot apprehend it for they did not first permit themselves to be made righteous in faith and then adhere to that righteousness. So doing, they would have been righteous in all works; the shadow would have followed of itself.

Third : “As a mother shall she meet him.”

14. What is meant here? It is a Hebrew expression. The Hebrews are wont to speak of a child of wisdom, child of wickedness, child of wrath, child of condemnation; so here the thought, child of righteousness. The child of sin, of unrighteousness, must have a disgraceful mother, of whom he must be ashamed and in whom he cannot rejoice. But the child of righteousness has an honorable mother. Of her he may boast and in her he can rejoice. A human mother, if she be a reputable woman, is an honor, a glory and comfort to her child. On the other hand, if she be disreputable, she is a disgrace to the child. One can hardly suffer a more stinging reproach than to be reminded of a mother’s disgrace or to be accused of illegitimate birth or ill-breeding.

15. Now, the wise man intends to say that Righteousness deals affectionately with her own, as a mother meets the wants of her child. The mother is always ready to do for her child to the full extent of her knowledge and power. Solomon designs thus to illustrate the security, comfort, peace, joy and glory the heart experiences before God, through faith. The human mother caresses and kisses her child; she supports and carries it, always ready to meet its wants and grant its desires. The kindness of a mother toward her child is unsurpassed anywhere. Similarly, Righteousness embraces and supports man, meeting his wants in every way and purposing to have him rest in peace and security of heart. Man is entitled to this great privilege of confidence and may boast of it before God, for he has an honorable mother.

Fourth : “And receive him as a wife married of a virgin.”

16. What do these words imply? The meaning is similar to that of the preceding phrase. The object is to illustrate the anxious care Righteousness manifests for her child. Solomon represents Righteousness as having affections like those of a new bride, one never before a wife. He means to say, “Precisely as a virgin in her new wifedom feels toward her bridegroom, so is the attitude of Righteousness toward her child.” I shall leave the description of the bride’s affections to those who have experienced them. It is well known, however, that nothing surpasses the desire, love and concern of a young bride for her bridegroom. The Scriptures abound with references to the love of brides. Sirach says “a wife married of a virgin,” meaning one just married and for the first time knowing love for a husband. A widow becoming again a wife has not such feeling toward her second bridegroom.

17. Note how carefully and thoughtfully the wise man makes his admonition. Does he not present a vivid picture, a burning incentive to faith and godliness? What simile could he have introduced more expressive of affection than these of a virtuous mother’s love for her child and a new bride’s love for her bridegroom? Woman is naturally more affectionate than man. Now, we cannot by works obtain such favor, affection and care on the part of

Righteousness for us. We must conceive it in the heart. Faith enables the conscience to feel in Righteousness all the security, desire and love that a child finds in its mother or a husband in his new bride.

Fifth : "With the bread of [life and] understanding shall she feed him."

18. Or, "She shall feed him with life and understanding." To explain the process: Just as natural bread sustains the body and also nourishes and increases it in growth until it becomes hale, robust and strong to labor; so, too, righteousness nourishes man, making him daily increase in the Spirit and grow in the knowledge of things divine and human. We know this from experience. Without experience the passage would not be intelligible. He who is nourished by righteousness improves his mind with everything coming under his observation. He grows in knowledge and increases in life and wisdom, especially when contemplating the Scriptures.

19. Solomon had learned much, as his Proverbs and Canticles show. He puts the word "life" before the word "understanding," for without life understanding would be of no significance. It is not that knowledge which is the product of the heathen and of natural reason, knowledge of temporal things – not this sort would Solomon have us regard; but the knowledge faith gives, concerning spiritual and divine things, knowledge making the soul alive before God. This sentence contains all necessary teaching in regard to salvation.

Sixth : "And give him the water of wisdom to drink."

20. The import of this clause is similar to the foregoing sentence. It refers to the increase of the Spirit. Particularly does it present saving knowledge and exclude worldly knowledge, the knowledge of men, which is not profitable. This figure of drinking is to be understood similarly to the figure of eating. Man draws wisdom from everything he observes. All things in heaven and earth afford him pasture, but particularly the Scriptures. From them alone he derives meat and drink in a real, saving knowledge.

Seventh : "He shall be stayed upon her."

21. Hitherto Solomon has been enumerating the blessings and advantages righteousness gives us to enjoy in ourselves and in times of peace. Now he enumerates its blessings in times of conflict, in contentions with enemies. He says, "He shall be stayed upon her." That is, righteousness will throw about us protections enabling us not only to receive blessings but to guard them against all attempts to wrest them away. At the same time, he recognizes here that he who fears God and would be godly must encounter labor, conflict and many misfortunes. Crosses are bound to come. As Paul tells us (Acts 14:22), "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God."

22. Thus Solomon meets the timid and faint-hearted who would readily be won by the great inducements presented, and would accept the benefits offered, were it not for their fear of having to risk property, honor, bodies, lives and all they have. Solomon does not deny the condition; he does not make any effort to relieve their minds on that point nor to offer flimsy comfort. But he strengthens them, admonishes them against viewing the

matter from that standpoint and affords them the consolation that if they cleave to righteousness it will give courage and stability to endure all ill so

Eighth : “And shall not be moved.”

23. Another expression of the thought in “He shall be stayed upon her.” With ability to overcome all things, what more is to be desired? The selfrighteous have not that ability. They do not stand securely – have no firmness. They only yield and vacillate, for they rely upon their own efforts. Their achievements may be easily taken away and themselves with them. But the believing righteousness of the Christian hangs upon the immovable lovingkindness of God. They who rely upon that lovingkindness cannot be moved even though they be deprived of everything else.

Ninth : “And shall rely upon her.”

24. That is, righteousness will sustain man’s honor. Solomon here acknowledges the pious believer must suffer many evils, and also endure shame and scandal. It is a peculiarity of the Christian’s sufferings that he not only has to endure the evils common to all men, but shame and scandal as the worst of evil-doers, just as Christ suffered. Such unmerited sufferings are called sufferings of Christ, or crosses. It is not so much temporal dishonor, but spiritual dishonor, disgrace of the conscience before God. All the martyrs were put to death, not for committing crime against the State, but as being extreme enemies and blasphemers of God. Lest anyone be deterred from Christianity by fear of spiritual dishonor, Solomon makes this declaration for the comfort and encouragement of all believers, an assurance of preservation, and of their ability to maintain their honor before God and the world.

Tenth : “And shall not be confounded.”

25. This is the same as the last clause only more clearly expressed. Righteousness may, it is true, permit her child to be overtaken by shame and disgrace, but merely to test her power. [But she never leaves him helpless and prostrate, if he only cleaves to her. Editions A, B, C.] As the Wisdom of Solomon 10:12 says: “In a sore conflict she gave him the victory; that he might know that godliness is stronger than all.” The heart must be continually tempted. As sure as existence, it must experience disgrace. So sensible of shame will it be, it will tremble and waver as if God were to leave it in disgrace. But in this promise it finds help to maintain a firm confidence. So sustained, it overrides shame; all this the self-righteous can by no means do.

Eleventh : “She shall exalt him above his neighbors.”

26. The Christian’s temptations and conflicts only give him distinction and elevate him in the minds of the people. Paul (1 Corinthians 11:19) says that by heresies the approved Christians are made manifest. Conflicts serve to distinguish the Christian, to raise him in the estimation of men unto great eminence and honor. In contrast with him, the self-righteous go on unnoticed, without experience, untried, dwelling in their own element and uninformed of the blessings and workings of God.

Twelfth : “And in the midst of the congregation shall she open his mouth.”

27. So the Christian’s experience makes him a good preacher and teacher. Faith helps him to a right understanding of all things, and conflict gives him the personal experience which brings perfect assurance. Therefore, he may speak with the utmost confidence and may instruct all men. Well may Tauler say the experienced Christian is able to judge and to teach the world. Without trials no one can ever become a successful preacher. He must remain a mere babbling, unknowing what to say or to what end to speak. As Paul has it (1 Timothy 1:7): “Desiring to be teachers of the law, though they understand neither what they say, nor whereof they confidently affirm.” He calls them useless babblers.

Thirteenth : “And shall fill him with the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.”

28. Solomon previously, in the third verse said, “With the bread of understanding shall she feed him, and give him the water of wisdom to drink.” The reference there is simply to receiving the gifts of God, while not yet exposed to temptations and trials. But after the Christian has experienced temptations, has been tried and proven, he shall have something more than the gifts of wisdom and understanding; the Giver of these gifts, the Holy Spirit himself, will fill him and render him wholly perfect. Not that the Holy Spirit did not before exist in the individual; assuredly where the gifts of the Spirit are, there he surely is. But while the individual is not exposed to temptations, he has not yet come to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. He will not reach that position until he is tried and proven. Then, though previously endowed with gifts, he will be filled with the Spirit. His gifts will not, as before temptation, serve only himself; from the period of his trial they will render him useful to others, enabling him to bring to men the same grace he possesses. Formerly he was chiefly useful in a temporal way, in distributing favors to his neighbors, as mentioned. He was prompted by faith and the gifts received. His was not, however, a spiritual usefulness, but a temporal one. After his experience in temptation, the Spirit enters and effects something more than his being fed with the bread of wisdom and understanding as before; he enables him to open his mouth – to feed others with that bread, thus rendering them spiritual service. Before Christ’s sufferings the apostles were merely the Lord’s guests, eating of his understanding and drinking of his wisdom, and leading pious lives. But no one was affected but themselves. After his resurrection, however, they became hosts; they fed others and rendered them godly through the Spirit of wisdom and understanding that filled them after their temptation.

Fourteenth : “With a garment of honor shall she clothe him.”

29. Righteousness will give the Christian an eminent reputation and a great name, far and wide; as God said to David: “I have made thy name great.” Righteousness will adorn the Christian until the world shall honor him for his wisdom and knowledge. “Honor” here means “glory,” which is a great and glorious name and distinction among men. Such honor Solomon terms a garment, for it adorns more than do ornaments and jewels.

Fifteenth : “He shall find joy and a crown of gladness.”

30. Up to this time Solomon has spoken of the blessings the Christian shall enjoy in this life. Now he concludes with the blessings reserved to the future life – eternal joy and

gladness. Here is the treasure Righteousness reserves for the Christian, an everlasting treasure.

Sixteenth : “And she shall cause him to inherit an everlasting name.”

31. Not merely during life, but after death, will the Christian’s name be perpetuated in honor. After such remembrance the self-righteous vainly strive. For they do not fear God and rely upon the righteousness of faith.

32. Note these precious fruits, these great blessings, so well calculated to give comfort and to constrain us to persevere in faith and in the fear of God. I have gone over this subject hastily, giving it the briefest consideration. An extended sermon might have been preached on each point, if one wished to develop it with the aid of Scripture passages.

33. We must not, however, infer from what has been presented that we are to fear God – believe in him – simply to secure the blessings named. That idea is deceptive. The passage is not written to induce us to seek these blessings; it is merely an assurance that such blessings await the believer. They alone shall receive them who do not seek them; that is, who fear God without seeking their own honor, and who constantly rely upon the grace of God. To them the blessings come unsought. The self-righteous with all their pretense cannot obtain them.

34. This epistle lesson harmonizes beautifully with the Gospel selection. Here Righteousness receives the individual as a virtuous mother receives her child, or the bride her bridegroom. Thus, too, Christ took John to his breast as the beloved disciple. In both selections the nature of faith is commended and illustrated.

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