

IN COLLISION WITH SOCIETY

This morning, we listen to the voice of wisdom by the mouth of Solomon, whose words are apostolically commended to us as the words of the Spirit (Heb. 12:5; 2 Tim. 3:16), though the man by whom they were spoken did not in his latter days stand forth as a conspicuous illustration of those words obeyed. Let us select just a few of the leading points in the chapter read (Prov. 28) as the subject of the morning's contemplations in connection with the breaking of bread. They are not inappropriate to the breaking of bread, although it might not seem there was any connection. The fact is, whatever the Spirit of God has said, may be traced to a living connection with the central idea of the table of the Lord. Jesus, as that central idea, is the embodiment of wisdom for present action, and hope for those unsatisfied aspirations which continually impel us to the contemplation of the future for the prospect of their fulfilment. Consequently, the manifestations of that Spirit of wisdom and hope, in all the times that went before him, will be found of one nature with him.

Take for example the declarations of verse 4:

"They that forsake the law praise the wicked: but such as keep the law contend with them."

Here we have the case of Christ depicted, and a cue supplied for the guidance of all his brethren. Jesus was a keeper of the law. He was *"made under the law"* (Gal. 4:4), and was obedient in all things. And what was his relation to *"the wicked"* around him—the Scribes and the Pharisees, and leaders of the people, of whom he said that they outwardly appeared righteous unto men but were full of all unrighteousness? He contended with them. He both opposed them personally and warned the people against them (Luke 20:46; Matt. 23:13-39). In this he exemplified a line of deportment greatly in contrast with what is considered the right and the Christian thing in our day. To speak well of everybody and *"let other people enjoy their own opinions"*: this is the modern ideal of charitableness. To die without an enemy is considered the highest pitch of moral achievement. *"He died without an enemy"*: this is regarded as the finest thing that can be said of a dead man. What can we say but that such sentiments cannot be harmonised with the case of Christ who died in the midst and at the hand of enemies, and who, telling his disciples of the coming hatred they would experience, said,

"If the world hate you, ye know it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

From a divine standpoint, the fact of a man's having no enemies is a bad sign. Jesus says,

"Woe unto you when all men speak well of you."

The reason of this is germinally contained in the verse under consideration. The wicked love to be praised, and speak well of those who praise them. They hate those who do not praise them. A man who *"keeps the law"* cannot praise them. His own love of the law would disincline him: the commandment itself forbids it. Only those who forsake the law praise them, and there are many such. The world is made up of them. The world lieth in wickedness. Consequently, there is much praising of the wicked. It is to be heard all round: in the press, in public meetings, in the pulpit, in private conversation—everywhere. In this praise, it would be pleasant and advantageous to join, but the keepers of the law cannot join. Consequently, they are hated; but they are hated yet the more because of their attitude.

"Such as keep the law contend with them."

It may be said that as we are not under the law of Moses, the maxim cannot apply. This would be a short-sighted conclusion. Though we are not under that particular form of divine commandment, we are *"not without law to God, but under the law to Christ"* (1 Cor. 9:21). And the principles governing obedience to God are the same under one form of command as another. *"Such as keep the law,"* whatever it may be, *"contend with"* those who are not subject to it, and who are therefore the wicked. Paul's life is an example. His life was a continual contention with evil men; and Jude lays it down that we must *"contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints"* (verse 3). Of course there is such a thing as being *"contentious"*: this is a different thing. We must carefully distinguish between the mere pugnacity of the flesh and a faithful insistence on the will of God. Lovers of *"debate, wrath, strife, seditions, malignity, deceit,"* are themselves the wicked, even if the subject of their debate be furnished by themes of Bible origin. The contentions of such do not come within the commendation of Prov. 28:4. Those who are commended are *"those who keep the law,"* and men do

not keep the law who do not obey *“the first and great commandment”*: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,”* and the second which is like unto it: *“and thy neighbour as thyself.”* Men who are proud, backbiters, haters of God, spiteful, boasters, inventors of evil things, covenant breakers, implacable, unmerciful, are not keepers of the law, however much they may contend about the law or the gospel.

The passage we are considering contemplates a quiet, loving class, whose perception of right and sense of duty impel them to a contention with those who would lead men from the way of life. They contend with the wicked; they do not praise them, yet are they good men, kind men, gentle, faithful, loving men, whom the circumstances of the present evil world force into an attitude of hostility to all around them. Mere wranglers will make a mistake if they take any comfort from Solomon’s words: yet men of God in conflict with the outer darkness may take comfort; they need it. It would be much pleasanter to be on terms of harmony with the world in general. It would be agreeable to the natural man and advantageous every way to join in the general gratulations and mutual admiration that are characteristic of both public and private life as it now is. It is a constant mortification to be in collision with society on points of duty, points of faith, points of policy. The battle becomes harder as time advances and nature’s fainting force abates. Therefore we need the consolation to be found in the Spirit’s commendation by Solomon and in the exhibition of the same conflict, in unmistakable lines and colours in the case of the Lord Jesus, *“who endured such contradiction of sinners against himself.”* We may well be content to be in his company in whatever light we may be regarded by our contemporaries of the Gentiles.

Then we have to consider the solemn admonition involved in v. 9:

“He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.”

This is very unlike the doctrine to which the religious world is accustomed; but it is the only doctrine we need care to know, for it is true. For a man’s prayer to be acceptable, he must be subject to the will of God as revealed. This is God’s own declaration:

“To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word.”

There are times when prayer is an abomination to God, and we often see such times around us. James says: *“The prayer of a righteous man availeth much,”* which implies that in the opposite case—the case of an unrighteous man—prayer is what Solomon styles it, *“an abomination.”* This enables us rightly to estimate the moral character of the religious “services” of the present day in church and chapel. Religion is almost made to consist of praying, in the modern system. Little respect is had to the attitude to the commandments of God of those who pray. Though professedly subject to Paul, they have forgotten Paul’s declaration that the vengeance of Christ at his coming is *“for them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Thess. 1:8-9), and that he is *“the author of eternal salvation to all them that obey him”* (Heb. 5:9). The things Christ has commanded to be done are not done: while things he has forbidden are practised with all composure and assurance. We all know this flagrantly to be the case in the society in which we live, and move, and have our being. Our anxiety ought to be to stand clear of compromise in such a state of things.

“Keep ourselves unspotted from the world.”

“He that doeth righteousness is righteous” (1 John 3:7).

And righteousness is *“the keeping of the commandments of God.”* There is no other standard of well-doing than this. Philosophic conceptions of morality are misleading and the mere product of human speculation. The true philosophy is the revelation of the god of Israel. This, though deep as the fathomless ocean, is simple enough for the guidance of a child. What has God commanded us to do and not to do? This may be learnt by the diligent study of the Scriptures, and *“in the keeping of his commandments there is great reward”* (Psa. 19:11). If we obey not his commandments, we are unrighteous, on however good terms we are with ourselves. If we turn away from listening to them, for whatever reason, our very prayers will be abomination. So it is written.

The chapter, however, contains consolation in a direction where most of us may feel it is needed. We all know it is written that *“there liveth not a man that doeth good and sinneth not”*: that is, there is not a living man who is perfect. We can all confirm this from experience of ourselves and others. All must, some time or other, feel the wretchedness arising from the fact stated by Paul concerning himself, and which is true of all:

"I find a law that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (Rom. 7:21).

Now what shall we do with regard to this wretchedness? Shall we give in to it and abandon hope? There is only one case in which men may give themselves up to despair. Jesus says,

"All manner of sin shall be forgiven unto men except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which hath never forgiveness."

This blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was a speaking against and attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to other agency, in the face of incontestable evidence of its divine character. We are not in a position in our day to be guilty of this sin. The "works" by which the divinity of the Holy Spirit's work through Christ was attested, and the exhibition of which was the ground of the responsibility of those who saw them (John 15:24), have been suspended for generations. We have but the written testimony, unsupported by miracle. Whether speaking against the testimony in this state of circumstances is speaking against the Holy Spirit in the sense of Christ's words, is extremely doubtful. We may, therefore, freely rest on the first part of Christ's otherwise terrible words:

"All manner of sin shall be forgiven unto men."

Our shortcoming, our failings, our weaknesses, our sins, will receive merciful consideration. This is the consolation in the chapter. You will find the form of it in verse 13:

"Whoso confesseth his sins and forsaketh them shall have mercy."

Let us, however, realise the conditions. There are two things required: confession and abandonment. Sins will not be forgiven as a matter of course.

"He that covereth his sins shall not prosper."

This is the state of things with which mercy is contrasted: there must be no concealment: there must be no pretence of faultlessness: there must be admission of fault, yea, a humble, contrite, broken-hearted recognition of our unworthiness; and more than this, there must be amendment—a ceasing to do evil, a learning to do well (Isa. 1:16). We must not be always confessing and never forsaking our sins: there must be a growth in holiness—an increase of stature in Christ—a growing in the knowledge of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, that he might purify us unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works. The sins of the righteous will be forgiven: but—

"If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (1 Pet. 4:18)

There is political light of a practical character in one of the statements in verse 15:

"As a roaring lion, and a ranging bear, so is a wicked ruler over the poor people."

We know something of wicked rulers. The constitution of the world at the present time is, in fact, a constitution of wicked rulership. Here we have a simile illustrative of its character: a lion, a bear. The application in the verse is individual, but we may give it a wider scope. The same animals have been symbolically used in a larger way. They are two of the four Beasts used in the vision shown to Daniel to represent the four great Gentile monarchies. Their employment indicates **the divine estimate of the nature of Gentile government**. Imagine a lion in the street—a bear at large: how different from a father and a friend of the people. This is the difference between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God—a glorious man on a throne, a lamb on the Mount Zion, a city of geometrical symmetry and dazzling brightness, having the glory of God like unto a stone most precious. As the brethren of Christ, we belong to the latter. We are not of the Lion and the Bear and the Great Red Dragon party. We have here no continuing city. Our citizenship is in heaven, from whence we look for the Saviour to bless all the families of the earth. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, concerning the promises, we have become "*persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*" Those who take part in the politics of the world, confess that they belong to the wicked rulership of the present darkness, which is destined to flee away before the glorious sunrise of Christ's presence. We, who abstain, "declare plainly that we seek a country." We do not abstain because we have no interest in mankind and their affairs; but because by the gospel, we have been called out from among them during the Lion and Bear dispensations, to prepare for a place in the Glorious Shepherd dispensation of the age to come, when God will be glorified and mankind enlightened and blessed in all the earth. The establishment of that dispensation is connected with a

country—the country promised, which in the days of the fulfilment will be a heavenly country. In preparation for a permanent place in this heavenly country in the age to come, we accept a position of obscurity during the Lion and Bear ascendancy. We do so deliberately, in patient hope, and the turn of the saints will certainly come.

“Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart.”

“The righteous shall be glad in the Lord.”

In view of this time, Jesus said,

“Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.”

When this becomes fact, the world will see a sudden exemplification of one of the things Solomon says in this chapter:

“When righteous men do rejoice, there is great glory.”

“When the wicked perish, the righteous increase.”

When the saints reign with Christ, when the present governments shall have been broken to pieces by his powerful arm, men will be blessed everywhere, and the earth be filled with gladness. Righteousness will prevail like an ocean. No marvel that the prospect of such a consummation should find expression in David’s jubilant summons to all nature to rejoice:

“Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein: . . . Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together before the Lord; for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity.”

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