

David Watkinson
to Rev. Wm. Ward

THE CHARACTER OF A VIRTUOUS AND GOOD
WOMAN,



A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED BY THE DESIRE

AND IN

THE PRESENCE OF

The Female Beneficent Society,

IN HARTFORD,

October 4th, A. D. 1809.

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PASTOR OF THE NORTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN HARTFORD.



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SERMON, &c.

PROVERBS xxxi, 20.

She stretcheth out her hand to the poor ; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.

THE great object of the writer, through the whole of the chapter from which this passage is taken, was to describe the character of a virtuous and good woman.—The description is more perfect than could have been drawn by an uninspired pen, and more copious than we find in any other part of the sacred oracles. It is called a prophecy, denoting the divineness of the sentiments expressed, and whether we consider the subject in relation to the well-being of mankind ; the inditer of them, a female of high rank in life ; or the person to whom they were addressed, the prince of a great nation ; all add to their dignity and force. “ The words of king Lemuel ; the prophecy that his mother taught him.” By king Lemuel is doubtless meant Solomon, the wise prince of Israel, the writer of the book of Proverbs : His mother was a great and good princess, whose advice on the important subjects, afterwards mentioned, thro’ the direction of the spirit of God, he thus perpetuated for the use of mankind.

Hear the tender introduction of her advice, “ What my son ? and what the son of my womb ? and what the son of my vows ? ” Her mind being deeply impressed with her own obligation, with the dangerous and responsible situation of her son, and perhaps also, with such modesty as a virtuous mother would feel in speaking on the subjects which succeeded, she begins in expressions broken, yet expressive ; incomplete, yet intelligible. What my Son ? How shall I address you on subjects so interesting to your fu-

ture welfare as a man, as a prince who is destined to govern many people for the glory of God, and as a saint? But I remember that I am a parent, that I have been the instrument of that life which cost me all a mother's pangs, and for which you must answer before God.—I remember the tears I have shed over your infancy, and the prayers and vows I have offered for you before the throne of grace. My obligation is solemn, and I will not be deterred from giving a mother's advice. How dignified, how christian like was the conduct of the parent? Every one who is a faithful mother in her own household will be an ornament in Israel, and become a mother to the poor, the needy and the orphans around her; her compassions will diffuse where there are objects of mercy to attract attention; her christian love will glow where there is a soul she can save by extricating it from penury and such vices as are its common attendants.—The mother of Lemuel knew her son was born to great riches and power, which are common temptations to vice, and as if she had a foresight of what would be his shame and the cause of vengeance on his people, particularly exhorted him against every kind of dissipation. If he had followed her monition, he would not have been drawn away to the worship of strange gods; a notable instance of the danger there is in forming intimate connexions with the sinful: Neither would he have heard the sentence of the Lord “Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee and give it to thy servant.”

Knowing that those who are dissipated in one way, rarely fail of becoming so in another, she also added, “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: Lest they drink, and forget the Lord, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted.” I presume there is not a hearer, but will recognize the justice of this sentiment: That which disqualifies for the common duties of life, must be more disqualifying for the dis-

charge of any confidential trust. Dissipation of any kind kills the body, destroys the energies of the mind, and renders the victims of its power unhappy in themselves, and dangerous in society.—Every good mother in a family, thro, the circle in which she hath influence, will join in this advice of Lemuel's mother.

When this pious princess had dehorted her son from those vices by which she saw he would be endangered thro' his condition in life, she did not fail to mention the purposes to which his power and riches ought to be applied—" give strong drink to him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy heart. Let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more. Open thy mouth for the dumb, in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy." Power and property are instruments in the hands of men for doing much good, or much evil, and they never remain unimproved to one or the other of these purposes. They are either the means of corruption or of virtue ; of oppression or beneficence ; of grinding the face of the poor, or comforting them under their many oppressions. How excellent the character of those, who, abstaining from all excess, use the bounties with which God hath favored them, to comfort the heavy hearts of such as are ready to perish ! How important the duty of opening the mouth in favor of those who are dejected and dumb thro' distress ; and pleading the cause of the poor and needy ! The clamorous beggar is often unworthy of any notice, except it be such correction as will reclaim him to industry and decent manners : but there is a great body of virtuous poor spread thro' society, who are silent under their troubles ; they are dumb in prospect of destruction thro' want. Perhaps it is a mother who after a day of hard labor, enters the destitute cottage, with nothing more than tears to clothe and feed the darlings of her heart. These, the offspring of poverty, are also the offspring of God, the work

of his creating power, and proper objects of redeeming love.

Blessed be the holy spirit of grace who moves the hearts of such as have ability, to wipe away the mother's tear, and feed and clothe her suffering babes.

We will next consider the character of a virtuous and good woman, as it is given by one of the most eminent of the sex and confirmed by the spirit of God. The character here drawn, beginning at the 10th verse, extends thro' the chapter, and includes all the virtues civil, moral, and pious; it describes a person both accomplished and religious; fitted to do good in this world, and prepared for the blessedness of the world to come. In the formation of character, regard must be had to the whole of our expected existence. It is possible for persons to be useful in certain states of this life, while they are wholly destitute of a fear of God: they may be respectable with the worldly, while they have neither a name or place among christians. But this defect cannot be found in the character we are considering. Civil and social virtues, so far as they are exercised with understanding, are evidential of the moral; therefore they are enjoined on the christian.—The christian is a good person in every situation of life. Whether in riches or in poverty; in the state of honor or debasement; in the place of trust to distribute the beneficence of others, or as the private dispenser of personal bounty. The christian is faithful in all the social virtues which prevent the miseries and advance the happiness of human life. Of such a virtuous person we may say "her price is far above rubies."—By her virtues her own character is respected, her neighbor is benefitted, and her maker is honoured.

Industry, in such employments as by the providence of God fall to her share, and a most faithful use of time, furnish her with the means of doing good. She is never destitute of a bounty to bestow, so long as her fingers minister to the goodness of her heart. "She seeketh wool and flax and worketh diligently with her hands. She layeth her hands to

the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. Her candle goeth not out by night. She is like the merchants ships, she bringeth her food from afar. She considereth a field, and buyeth it : with the fruit of her hand she planteth a vineyard." Industry is an excellent quality of character. The diligent use of time, for some good purpose is a christian duty. The indolent person cannot be a practical christian. The sinful may be industrious from motives of shameful parsimony ; but christians have never a right to be indolent and misuse time : what they can spare from the support of the body, is necessary for the improvement of the mind : what they can redeem from the supply of their own wants, is sacred to the benefit of the Lord's poor, who are always scattered around them. Time is our season for action, and losing it is a practical renunciation of the powers God hath given us to do good ; it is neglecting our opportunity of preparation for eternity. Although industry, be not of itself, one of the chief graces ; still, when united with them and acting under the laws of integrity, it ministers both opportunity and means for their extensive influence.

If we consider the virtuous woman as having others under her care and maintenance, it is said of her " She riseth also, while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her houshold and a portion to her maidens." She is a good mistress, unto all who are under her care, giving unto each one that which is just and equal, knowing that she hath a master in heaven.

Let us view the virtuous woman in the more tender relations, of the Wife and the Mother. It must be interesting to every one, who hath any just idea of social life, to see her acting properly in these characters. It is to her discharge of these relations, my hearers, that I call you to consider the dignity of the sex, and its immense influence on the promotion of happiness, and the formation of public and private morals. Whoever hath had a good mother and a good companion, cannot think without feeling on the subject ; although he may not do it justice, it can-

not be from a want of conviction of the truth. But let the Princess of Israel again speak.—“The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil, all the days of her life.—For her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also and he praiseth her.” Between the sexes, there ought to be no emulation for exclusive dignity and usefulness—Each hath its part, its appropriate part for the perfection of human life, in the discharge of social virtues, and in the exercise of christian kindness, by such means as will subserve the interest of the kingdom of Jesus, and the felicity of mankind.

“The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, and he is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.” She so manages the concerns of the family, that nothing of the bounty of God is lost, and nothing which is due to christian charity is wanting. Her prudent and just sentiments, formed in the retirement for contemplation, and away from the passionate bustle of the world, have an irresistible influence on the common opinions of life. Although she doth not wield the sword, on her tongue dwell the powers of tenderness and humanity, of persuasion and piety. Though she appeareth not in the gates or seat of judgment, thro’ her influence her character is known in the place of public justice.

“Her children arise up and call her blessed!” How admirable a description of a virtuous parent! Her children arise up and call her blessed! And how do they make the declaration? In their words undoubtedly, and if they have profited by their advantage, by their practice also. By their words they acknowledge, this parent corrected my vices, enlightened my mind, formed my sentiments of religion, and guided me in the practice of moral and evangelical virtue. Whenever I behold the face of this parent,

I feel reproved for all my defects, and encouraged to the practice of every duty.

By their practice also they discover the blessed parent. Their regular conduct, their sober deportment, and correct manners are the highest evidence, that they have been under the tutelage of a discreet and pious instructress, in those early years, when sentiments of virtue are most deeply impressed.

Further, In doing good there is the manner as well as the matter of grace. Austerity of manner may destroy the benefit of intended kindness ; it may depress rather than exhilarate the afflicted ; but the virtuous woman hath the natural softness of her sex to aid her hand and tongue in discharging the duties of beneficence. " She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness."

But unfeigned piety is the crowning part of the character we now consider. " A woman that feareth the Lord she shall be praised." Religion is the first quality and highest display of excellence ; and the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom or religion. Whatever powers of natural genius, whatever improvement of science and education, whatever elegance of person, whatever of that softness in manner, which for a few moments of time attracts the eye, soothes the ear and seems to invade the heart ; the whole, without religion, is but an illusion. A love of God, and where there is a love there will be fear of him also, and obedience to his commandments, is the essential principle, the sum and the commanding display of such moral excellence as is useful in life and will continue thro' eternity. This love and fear of God purifies the whole nature of a creature, excites to every social duty in this life, triumphs over temptation, danger and death, assists us to abide in Jesus Christ by faith, and is the bond which holds the intelligent universe in sweet subjection to the great Creator. It was this principle which animated the little company of pious women, who ministered to the necessities of our Redeemer in his life, stood at a distance spectators of his death, and became witnesses

of his resurrection. It was this which moved those honorable women, and we are told they were not few, who heard the preaching of the apostles with joy, and became select instruments of introducing the gospel into their several cities and nations.

I have reserved one part of the character of the virtuous woman, to the last of my discourse, as it is appropriate to the occasion of the evening—and with this I shall conclude.

It is contained in the words of our text—“ She stretcheth out her hand to the poor, yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.” Where all the virtues before mentioned are united, there never can be a want of beneficence to the poor and afflicted.

When God gave his law to Israel he told them the poor should always be in their land, and many of the civil ordinances delivered by him were designed for their benefit. If there be any sins awfully denounced in the word of God, one of them is denying kindness and judgment to the poor. This sin, my hearers, is a practical denial of the Lord's sovereignty in his providence and of our own demerits.—If there be any virtue to which high promises are made, it is beneficence to the afflicted and forlorn thro' poverty.—We live in a land of plenty, yet in this land, there are children of want. In this land there are families, individuals and children over whom the christian, when acquainted with all their circumstances, must weep, as Jesus did at the grave of Lazarus.—Compassion and tears are not a disgrace to human nature, when properly excited.—My hearers I am not ashamed to weep, when I read that my Saviour wept.—If you can find no other evidence for the propriety of charitable institutions, ask your parish ministers, whose inevitable duty, altho' it be with pained hearts, often calls them to pray by the dying bedside of a poor parent, and after they have commended the departing spirit to the grace of God, turn to look on the offspring tattered thro' want of cloathing, meagre thro' want of food, and hopeless thro' want of a beneficent society to take them under its care. We

wish you not, my friends, to see such scenes, but in this world you must expect to meet them, and if you are christians, you will be willing in obedience to the providence of your heavenly father, to meet them with your bounty. And who shall alleviate these misfortunes of human life? The civil law of the State hath done all that can be done in this manner; but blessed be God! there are institutions which derive their force from his law and the tender consciences of individual christians.—Blessed! blessed from the presence of the Lord be those institutions, which are designed to wipe the tear from the eye of indigent affliction; to say to the widow, I am appointed by God, to mourn with thee, and administer to thy present needs.—Under the banner of the institution, of which I am an organ, trust thy fatherless daughter, that she may be educated in decency and the fear of the Lord, that she may in her time become a virtuous matron, and speak the same words of comfort in the divine promises to others, which we now speak to thee.—Ye mothers and ye daughters in our Israel, may the Lord prosper you in your pious attempt.—If there be one who hath come to this assembly thro' curiosity, let him remember that the providence of God hath led him to a place, where his own liberality may draw down upon him the blessings of both worlds. And if there be a man in this congregation, who doth not hear the call, we will mark him, not indignantly, but we will follow him with our prayers, that his heart may become good and pitiful.

AMEN.

Constitution of the Hartford Female Beneficent Society.

THE name shall be the "Female Beneficent Society."

The primary and general object of the Society, shall be, to relieve the distressed, and to promote knowledge, virtue and happiness, among the female part of the community.

The particular design shall be to raise funds for the benefit of the poor belonging to the City of Hartford, but relief may be extended to others if it is deemed necessary.

The next object shall be to seek out and assist such persons as wish for regular employment, or have been reduced by misfortune, and are prevented by diffidence, or delicacy of feeling, from soliciting aid.

Another object shall be to devote a part of the money contributed to the education of young females, who shall be placed under the care of such serious person or persons, as will give them instruction in reading, sewing, and good housewifery, and impress them with moral and religious principles. At a proper age, the Society shall endeavour to place them in a situation to obtain a living for themselves.

Every subscriber who shall pay 25 cents per quarter, can be a member of the Society, and any female who will advance 15 dollars, shall be a member without any further payment.

The Officers of the Society shall be,

1st, A President, whose duty it shall be to preserve order, to propose questions named for discussion, and to declare the decisions. She shall have the casting vote. With the advice of the managers, she may call special meetings of the Society. When the President is absent, the chief Manager presides.

2d, A Secretary, who shall keep a register of the names of the members, receive the subscriptions quarterly at her house on the third Tuesday in August, November, February and May, and pay them to the Treasurer; she shall attend the meetings of the Society, and record their proceedings.

3d, A Treasurer, whose business it shall be to take charge of the monies collected for the Society, and when called upon to render an account of the funds, and of her receipts and payments. She shall pay out no money without a written order from the chief Manager.

4th, Thirteen Managers, whose business it shall be to seek out proper objects of relief for the Society. They shall have a right with the advice of the chief Manager, to draw upon the Treasurer for such sums as she shall deem necessary, and shall give account to the Society how those sums have been applied. They shall meet once a month on such days as they shall think best, and choose from among themselves a chief manager who shall preside at their meetings. At a meeting where three are present, business may be transacted.

5th, A Committee of two, who shall meet on the week before the meeting for choosing officers, and examine the accounts of the Secretary and Treasurer, and make report to the Society.

There shall be two stated meetings in a year, viz. on the first Wednesday in October, and first Wednesday in April. Ten members shall form a quorum.

The officers are to be chosen annually on the first Wednesday in April. Every meeting of the Society shall be opened with prayer.

Any member may withdraw her name by paying what is due, and giving orders for that purpose to the Secretary.

The Society have agreed to have a sack provided, which shall be placed in a situation where each member may, if she pleases, put in at any time, cloathing or other things which may be useful to the poor. This sack will be lodged at the house of the chief Manager; who with the assistance of a majority of the Managers, may dispose of the contents in such a manner as shall by them be thought best.