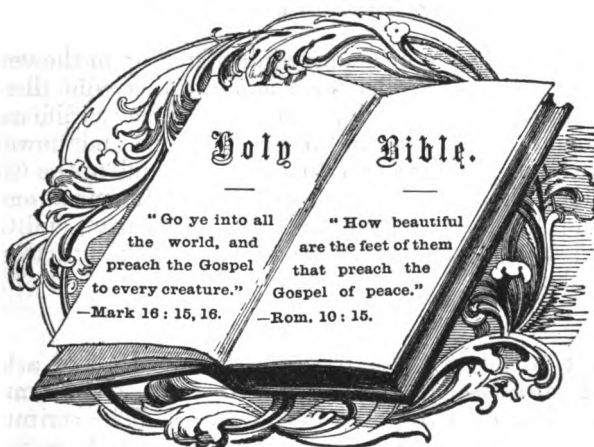




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SERMON XV.

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THE NATURE OF TRUE GREATNESS.*

"In thine hand it is to make great."—1 CHRON. 29: 12.

It is a very different view which we take of human life from its commencement and from its close. David uttered these words on the eve of his departure from this world. Some of my youthful hearers are about (in common phrase) to enter it. And since upon me, as one of your pastors, in the ordinary succession of our ministrations, it devolves to address to you the last Christian counsels from this place, can I do better than to lead you to a death-bed, to correct the anticipations of life by its retrospect, to correct the dictates of hope by those of experience, to show you how life, with all its events and vicissitudes appeared to the eye of an old and dying man, and to impress on your hearts a weighty and solemn

* Preached to a Graduating Class.

truth to which he gave utterance while standing on the very verge of eternity? With peculiar force and propriety did these words come from the lips of David, who had commenced life as a shepherd-boy and ended it on the throne of a great and powerful nation, after having bequeathed to the world and to the Church of God the most precious and imperishable monuments at once of his genius and his piety. Truly he was a great man, and God had made him so; and well might he acknowledge: "In thine hand it is to make great."

Let us inquire—

I. What is the nature of true greatness? It is of a holy and scriptural greatness that we are now to speak, and we must draw our conceptions of it from the word of God. The scriptural idea of greatness is essentially different from that which is formed by the world. It is more deep, more comprehensive and complete. That which is highly esteemed among men, is abomination in the sight of God. That which is great and exalted in the estimation of the world, is often mean and contemptible in his sight. To a few names the world has, by general consent, conceded and appended the title of *the Great*—Alexander the Great, Constantine the Great, Napoleon the Great. Perhaps not half a dozen names in all history enjoy this titular distinction. And what were they? Great in intellect; great in energy; great in the changes they wrought and the works they accomplished they certainly were. But these great qualities and works were degraded and vitiated by low aims. They did not exert their power for the general good and the glory of the Most High, else how vast and ever-extending and enduring had their greatness been! But self was the beginning and end of all their deep-laid plans and mighty labors. They were great men with little aims. Their greatness was like a tree of ample trunk and wide-extended foliage, not spreading a beneficent shade, but distilling a deadly poison on all beneath, and thus killing its own roots and insuring its own decay. The later and soberer judgment of the world has reversed its own estimate of these men, and though the empty title is still conceded to them, the lustre of their once glorious fame is already waxing dim, and instead of the bright and dazzling orbs which they once appeared, their pale and shadowy disk will ere long be scarce discernible, when the light of truth and the glory of holiness shall have filled the moral sphere of the world. It is hardly necessary to say that these mighty troublers and destroyers of the world are not the great men of the Bible and of Christianity.

There is another and undoubtedly a higher order of worldly greatness. It is that which consists purely in exalted genius and great intellectual power, whatever be the form of its manifestation—whether it be exerted in exploring the natural world, ascer-

taining its laws, classifying its facts, applying its forces, or direct its gaze into the mysterious depths of the soul itself, or give to its great thoughts and glowing emotions the wings of language to bear them down the deep tracts of time. Here is something more agreeable to the true nature and destination of man. It is a development of some of his highest attributes, though not all of them. It is truly admirable, for if the glorious adornment of the heavens proclaim the majesty and wisdom of God, much more does the outshining of his own natural image in man's wondrous intellect. This form of greatness has also been generally beneficent in its influence—favorable to peace and social happiness. It will, therefore, probably command some degree of the esteem and admiration even of a renovated and holy world. Still it is, in itself, incomplete, and unfinished. Without something to sanctify and ennoble it, it falls short of the full and perfect idea of greatness which is presented to us in the divine word.

The greatness of the Bible is a holy greatness. It is sanctified by its principle, exalted by its end and aim. Like the river which flowed out of Eden, often as its streams may be parted, and far as they may wander, they are still hallowed by the memory and blessed by the influences of Paradise. The fear of God is the source of its wisdom; the love of God is the spring of its activity and power; the glory of God is the end of its enterprises and labors. It doubtless includes within itself all the elements of greatness, even of a worldly kind—strength of intellect and strength of soul, knowledge, power, dignity, extensive influence, deeds of high and difficult achievement and lasting memory, all these are included in the scriptural as well as the worldly idea of greatness; but to these are superadded the charm of moral purity, the beauty of holiness, the harmony of well-ordered affections, of a soul centering, even to the most distant thoughts that float in its system, upon God, including innumerable motions of infinite velocity and power, yet all revolving around and receiving their light from God; even its comets in their devious and far-extending track, its very meteors in their explosive and irregular brilliancy, all feeling the control of one universal gravitating principle—the love and fear of God. This is scriptural greatness. This is complete, symmetrical, harmonious greatness—greatness not only of powers and of works, but of aims and motives, a moral based on and consummating an intellectual and natural greatness, the elevation of a holy heart as well as the expansion and the strong grasp of a mighty intellect; a greatness which glorifies God, vindicates his Providence, upholds his moral government among men, labors to lift up human nature from the degradation and error and misery of its fall, which, in a word, blesses its possessor and makes him a blessing.

II. Is this greatness a proper object of aspiration and pursuit. Is man capable of it? May man aspire to it?

We answer, Yes.

1. Because man was made for greatness—for *this* greatness. Our first reason is drawn from the nature of man. God made man in his own image—made him for dominion and power, for superiority and sway over the rest of creation. He stamped nobility, a high descent and glorious destination on his brow and attitude. "Adam was the son of God," and "we are also his offspring." There can be no presumption in the highest hopes and aims on the part of those whom God hath made but a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor and set them over the works of his hands, and made the fowls of the air and the fish of the sea and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the sea, to be their subjects, and where they become reconciled to him through his dear Son, maketh his angels to be ministering spirits to them, and himself to be **THEIR GOD**. Man is born great. Great powers, great duties, great expectancies, a great sphere of action, great hopes and promises are his. If he becomes little, it is by his own fault and sin.

2. The word of God exhorts us to it, "calls" us to "glory" as well as to "virtue," to be wise and strong and good in the highest degree of which our nature is capable, to covet earnestly the best gifts, to aim at a greatness which eclipses and throws into the shade all earthly glory and royalty, far more than the monarch's scepter of pure gold and diadem of priceless gems surpasses the toy of childhood. "He that overcometh shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be my son!" Here is a greatness whose spectators are worlds, whose theater is eternity, whose bestower is God; whose decorations are a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty in his kingdom of eternity! The ambition it awakens, therefore, is not only of the purest, but of the loftiest and most aspiring kind.

3. Because we are clearly taught that there will be a distinction in the rewards of eternity graduated to the different degrees of merit and earnestness in the service of God in the present life. One will "have authority over ten cities," another "over five cities." "As one star differeth from another star in glory, so will be the resurrection of the dead." While some will shine as the brightness of the firmament, others will be as the stars in that firmament. Is not all this calculated, is it not plainly *intended* to call forth a holy *emulation* in fidelity and earnestness? It shows that what men call ambition is only a perversion and degradation of what was originally a pure and noble tendency of the human soul, and which all the revelations of a future life are adapted at once to strengthen and exalt.

4. The examples of Scripture are justifications of the highest

aim. They are the strongest incentives to it. All history besides contains no such list of heroes as the eleventh chapter to the Hebrews. They were heroes in intellect, heroes in principle, heroes in unshrinking courage and self-denying toil and high achievement. The source of their heroism was faith in God and an immortal hope, and the spirit of their heroism was exalted, and its works were great and enduring because they were emanations of a divine and heavenly principle. They "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." Moses and David and Daniel, and he who, partaker of the like precious faith, here appreciates and draws their character, were great men, and are to this day the ruling spirits of the world. And is not our eye pointed to this great cloud of witnesses, and are we not bidden to lay aside every weight and set forth with the greatest ardor in the same race?

III. Let us dwell for a moment on the source of this greatness.

This is revealed in the text: "In thy hand it is to make great." The powers, the incentives, the occasions which make any course of human action memorable and important, are all from God. He gives the natural endowments, the strength of mind, the activity and force of character; his Providence opens the field of human exertion, and presents the objects which awaken and call forth the energies of the soul; his Spirit impresses on the heart the restless force of high and holy motives; his blessing gives wide extension and prolific virtue and long endurance to the labors of men. All things are of God. Even the world's heroes have felt and acknowledged this. The most striking of them perhaps, the prodigy of the last age, the man who made kings to tremble, and nations were astonished at him, distinctly expressed, near the close of his life, his belief in that sovereign and omnipotent Being who had lifted him up and made him irresistible. How devoutly and thankfully does David acknowledge the same truth. (Ps. 18.) "It is God that girdeth me with strength, and maketh my way perfect. He maketh my feet like hinds' feet, and setteth me upon my high places. He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms. By thee have I run through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall. Thou hast also given me the shield of thy salvation: and thy right hand hath holden me up, and thy gentleness hath made me great." God is here acknowledged as the inspirer of fortitude, strength, courage, and perseverance; the source of wisdom and skill; the giver of success, the sure guide, the almighty protector, the bestower of honor and exaltation—in a word, the author of greatness, whether of personal qualities, of rank and position, of influence or of fame.

Some of the most sublime passages in Scripture are those which describe this at once universal and particular disposal which God makes of the character and lot of men. God guided Cyrus, though he knew him not. He held his right hand to subdue nations before him; he loosed the loins of kings to open before him the two-leaved gates. He went before him and broke in pieces the gates of brass and cut in sunder the bars of iron. He gives to the labors of some men a facility and success which astonishes themselves, while he leaves others to combat with unseen yet insurmountable difficulties, and to "beat the air" with ineffectual endeavors. One finds himself borne onward to success and greatness by a strong current of favoring circumstances. Another rows *against* an equally strong current with hard and unavailing toil. The same efforts, the same measures which fail at one time succeed at another. The same man who is at one time overspread with a cloud of suspicion and disgrace, at another rejoices in the bright sunshine of honor and prosperity. The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. God chooseth out the lot of our inheritance for us. He appointeth unto men their times and the bounds of their habitation, that they may seek after him, that the observing mind may perceive that there is a great First Cause which overrules second causes, that men may be still and know that he is God. This is the lesson of all history—of all Providence. The sooner you learn it, the more deeply you apprehend it, the better. The Most High ruleth in the kingdoms of men and giveth them to whomsoever he will. Promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the king; he putteth down one and setteth up another. None can stay his hand. Thou, O Lord! art most high for evermore. In thy hand it is to make great!

A few general reflections offer themselves in connection with our subject.

1. If it is in God's hand to make great, then is he to be acknowledged and adored as the author of all the endowments of men. The golden gifts which have made and still make some men conspicuous and commanding, ought not to attract an idolatrous admiration to their possessor, but to call forth devout thankfulness and praise to God who has given such powers to men. Do we see and adore God in the lustre of a star, the fragrance of a flower, and shall we not in the matchless light, activity, and power of the human soul, that which of all created things bears in most distinct and radiant characters the impress of the Creator's image?

2. If it is in the hand of God to make great, what must be the guilt of those who have come from his hand endowed with great and powerful talents and energies, and have perverted and abused them to spread disorder, pollution, and misery among his moral subjects! When wit labors to make truth ridiculous, when great

reasoning powers are exerted to puzzle and mislead the understandings of men, when genius seeks to make vice attractive, how guilty as well as how fatal the perversion. The armor of light used to extend the kingdom of darkness! The most precious gifts of God made the occasion of a more conspicuous and mischievous impiety! How has the amount of human misery been swelled and the victims of perdition multiplied by those whom God has distinguished by his bounty, and who have distinguished themselves by their enmity to him and to truth and virtue and human happiness. Do not join in the senseless admiration which the world often lavishes on such men, but avoid the polluting contact of their conversation or their works, and regard them as the most fearful examples at once of depravity and of ingratitude.

3. If it is in God's hand to make great, then is greatness to be solicited and expected from him. His Providence is to be acknowledged, his will to be consulted, his guidance to be sought, his glory to be aimed at. Our plan of life is to be formed under his eye, and his counsel and blessing to be implored as the sole condition of success.

Finally, if it is in God's hand to make great, from him we must derive our idea of greatness, not from the public opinion of an apostate world, not from our own pride or vanity or selfish aspirations. We must look to God to learn what greatness is before we can look to him to bestow it upon us. And where has he revealed it to us? In his holy word, its precepts, its histories and its promises—above all, in the life of his Son, who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, in the fullness of time came down to these abodes of guilt and misery, took upon him our form, partaking of all our infirmities, was made under the law, subjecting himself to all its relations, that he might present a perfect and glorious exemplar of all the goodness and greatness which man is capable of—man the tabernacle of the divinity, man and yet God, God manifest in the flesh, the Prince of the kings of the earth, the root and offspring of David and the bright and morning star. A voice from the excellent glory has said: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Imitate Christ, then, and you will please God. Serve Christ and the Father will honor you. Strive to resemble Christ and you will be great. His character and life are the perfect realization of all the ideas we can form of the beautiful and the grand in human character. In the greatness of his aims, the greatness of his labors, the greatness of his sacrifices and self-denials, the greatness of the deliverance he achieved and the blessings he bestowed on men, which will multiply and extend throughout eternity, who can compare with him! O thou bleeding Love! thou infinite Sufferer! thou almighty Conqueror and Redeemer! May we look to thee that we may

learn what true greatness is! May we believe in thee that we may reach it! Breathe thy Spirit into us! Endue us with power from on high! May we walk in thy path of toils and tears through this life on earth, that we may be exalted and glorified with thee in the kingdom of thy Father and our Father, thy God and our God!

SERMON XVI.

BY C. VAN SANTVOORD, D.D.,*

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POWER IN THE PREACHER.

"AND my speech and my preaching were not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power."—1 COR. 2 : 4.

THE contrast in this verse is a pointed and expressive one, standing out, as is often the case in the Apostle's writings, in the light of boldest antagonism. Man's wisdom, on the one hand, in all its barrenness and insufficiency, the power of God, involving also his wisdom, on the other, in all the fullness of its energy and glory of its wonder-working exercise. The one, lying helpless, if not mute, before the grand problem, "How shall man be just with God," how shall a sinner find forgiveness? The other, able to meet every want of the soul, to throw open the prison-doors of the sighing captive of sin, strike off his fetters and gladden him with the words of liberty and pardon.

By the "enticing words of man's wisdom," the Apostle points specially at the philosophy of his day, as dogmatic as it was hollow and deceptive. But the idea may embrace, without forced construction, every description of merely human teaching, which, ignoring the Gospel, tends to puff man up with foolish conceits, and put his soul in jeopardy, by leading him to confide in a fleshly arm. By the "demonstration of the Spirit," he refers to the ordinary, and perhaps to some extent, the extraordinary gifts, which, by virtue of his apostleship, he was honored to offer and convey to men. By the word "power," the specific reference no doubt is, to the miraculous power, which was among Paul's special qualifications, not excluding, however, the power inherent in the Gospel, which Paul preached to every man, and which, itself the power and wisdom of God unto salvation, rises so grandly above

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