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SERMON

DELIVERED AT THE CAPITOL, ON SABBATH, APRIL 30th, 1899,

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE

Female Humane Association

OF THE CITY OF RICHMOND.

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BY THE REVEREND CONRAD SPEECE, A. M.

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Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy : that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate ; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

MY BRETHREN,

CHRISTIANITY is a religion of love. The sum of its doctrines is, that God loved us, and gave his Son for our redemption ; of its precepts, that we love God supremely, and our neighbours as ourselves. Love is the vital principle of all the duties which the gospel prescribes. Of these, some are common to all mankind without distinction ; others are peculiar to the several classes, according to the relations which they sustain, and the abilities with which they are endowed.

My text is a charge to those who are rich in this world. In commenting upon it, I shall endeavor to ascertain who are the rich, to illustrate the charge, and to enforce it by the motive assigned in the text.

I. Our first enquiry obviously is, who are the rich ? Now if they only are to be deemed such who covet no more than they possess, who feel no discontent, no envy, in contemplating the larger possessions of others, the number is extremely limited. But we must appeal from covetousness and from irregular fancy to a more rational criterion. They are the rich who possess for themselves, and for their families, if they have any, more than the necessities of life. They who do not possess these are the poor. But what are the necessities of life ? I answer, such lodging, food, drink, and cloathing as are suited to preserve the health and decency of the body ; the aids of medicine and attendance in sickness ; together with such education, using the word in a large sense, as may qualify for usefulness in this world and eternal felicity in the world to come. This description is, I acknowledge, not very precise. But it is sufficient for every man of common understanding, who cultivates in himself the spirit of benevolence, who conscientiously wishes to do his duty, and implores the direction of Heaven in his conduct.

It seems to result from this account, that the middle class between the rich and the poor cannot be very numerous : in other words, that, according to a sound estimation, for the purposes of

Chris ian morality, there are many more of the rich than is commonly apprehended.

Those enjoyments which are not included in the necessities of life may be denominated, in general, its luxuries. It is far from my intention to assert that every thing of this kind is of course sinful. The bounties of Divine Providence are given that they may be enjoyed. But to indulge in luxuries, especially the more expensive, while our fellow creatures are suffering around us the want of necessities, surely cannot be justified. Consider then, as in the presence of God, what your circumstances in life are : and if the description of the rich which has been given applies to you, attend seriously to the charge of the text. Let me add, that if, for the supposed credit of the thing, you pretend to be rich, consistency forbids you, whether you are so or not, to screen yourselves from the claims of charity by the plea of having nothing to spare.

II. Our charge begins with prohibitions. It is enjoined upon the rich, in the first place, that they be not high minded ; that is, proud of their riches, and contemptuous towards others. Common as this kind of pride is, it is peculiarly destitute of the means of justification. If you are rich by inheritance, what merit can you claim to yourselves on that account ? What does it add to your personal worth ? If your possessions have been accumulated by methods which religion and conscience do not fully approve, it is a subject of reproach, and ought to excite repentance instead of pride. And even if you have acquired wealth in the path of irreproachable industry, what does this prove ? Only that you have actively employed the faculties which God gave you in the pursuit of wealth, without mingling positive wickedness with your activity ; and that his Providence has indulged you with success. Here is much reason for gratitude, but none for pride. Still, however, it will be pleaded that riches constitute power. This is true. But power, though it may excite wonder or fear, is not in itself an object even of the lowest degree of just esteem. It is only the proper use of power that can render it venerable. Moral rectitude is, in fact, the only reasonable ground for valuing ourselves, or being valued by others. But for this best endowment the praise is properly to be rendered to God, and not to us ; for it is peculiarly the gift of his bounty. The gospel of Christ, while it elevates us to the highest dignity of which our nature is capable, strikes at the root, and achieves the annihilation of human pride. If God hates and resists pride of every description, that of riches must be eminently odious in his sight. To be rich in this world is no mark of real worthiness. It is oftener the lot of God's enemies than of his friends to have abundance of earthly possessions. And instead of making it the incentive of arrogance and haughty behaviour, the

rich should at once thank God for investing them with so large a trust for the general good, and tremble at the extended responsibility which that trust impose upon them.

In the next place, the rich are charged not to trust in uncertain riches; that is, not to depend upon them for happiness. Make a wise estimate of the nature of happiness. Study the means necessary to produce it: and you will see how small a portion of them wealth can procure. It may command objects suited to gratify the senses and the fancy. But it cannot preserve these faculties from the assaults of disease and age, nor restore them when they are lost.— And if it could, shall a rational, moral, and immortal mind confine its scheme of happiness to things like these? It cannot, without a shameful degradation of its powers. The heart desires enjoyments more noble, enjoyments beyond the power of gold to purchase. Gold may make dependants, but cannot create friends.— It may buy hypocritical smiles and compliances, but cannot be the price of love. It may clothe a man in purple and fine linen, & enable him to fare sumptuously every day, but cannot allay the tumult of tormenting passions. Much less can it give peace and communion with God, the testimony of an approving conscience, the hope of immortal glory; blessings without which, let men of the world say what they will, true and permanent felicity does not exist upon earth. But suppose that wealth could purchase a thousand times more than it can purchase; remember that its duration is precarious even to a proverb. Wilt thou, says the wise man, set thine eyes upon that which is not? For riches certainly make to themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle towards Heaven. The occurrences of every day prove that the assertion is true and the expostulation just. Will you rely for happiness upon a thing so fleeting, exposed every moment to innumerable accidents? As well may you attempt to build a stable habitation upon a quicksand or a wave of the sea. Besides all this, the hour of death is approaching. Can riches save their possessor from the grasp of the King of terrors? Can they avail him before the tribunal of God? Can they avert the stroke of his displeasure from the head of the proud, the sensual, the irreligious? Beware, ye rich, O beware of the inexpressible folly of trusting in your riches so as to forget God and your eternal interests. Compared with objects like these, all the possessions, and distinctions, and pleasures of the present transitory world sink into insignificance, and vanish from the view. There is indeed one way in which riches may become the means of happiness to us, both here and hereafter, namely, by the wise and beneficent application of them. But I will not anticipate what will more properly come to be considered in another place.

Instead of trusting in uncertain riches, the rich are admonished, as well as others, to put their trust in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy. The temporal blessings of his Providence are but samples of his boundless munificence. Even these, by the way, are but half enjoyed, until we learn to receive them with gratitude to him, and to use them under the salutary restrictions of his law. But were it otherwise, God never intended this world, with all its furniture, to constitute our rest, our ultimate felicity. He has infinitely better blessings in store, blessings pure, exalted, and everlasting, reserved for those who love him and put their trust in his mercy. He proposes himself, with all his glories, to be our highest good; our God, our friend, our portion forever. Let the mighty, therefore, as well as the weak, the rich as well as the poor, approach the throne of divine grace in the spirit of humility and absolute dependance. Let them confess their sins before God with contrition of heart; receive, by faith in his Son Jesus Christ, a free and full pardon at his hands; and commit themselves with filial confidence to his care, for time and for eternity.

My text now proceeds to prescribe the right disposal of riches. It is required of the rich, that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate. What simplicity of language is here! What strength, what beauty of sentiment! You are commanded to do good. And is not this as much your privilege as your duty? Can you hesitate about obeying a law which directs you to employ your abilities in the alleviation of distress, the diffusion of happiness? Do you not feel that God has conferred upon you a distinguished honor by enabling you to imitate his glorious goodness? I trust that not one who hears me is capable of answering these questions in the negative. Farther; you are enjoined not merely to do good in a few instances, but to abound in this heavenly practice; not to dispense your kindness with a sparing hand, but to be rich in good works. Happy transmutation of silver and gold into acts of piety and benevolence; the transient possessions of this world into a treasure, a still increasing treasure, of works of righteousness, whose remembrance and whose value shall endure forever! You are appointed to act as the stewards of God; diligently searching out the needy of his human family, and readily distributing to them the provisions committed to your care for their relief. Feeling yourselves members of this great family, and taking a lively interest in their pleasures and their pains, you are to communicate, to impart with alacrity to them a portion of the blessings which, without any singular merit on your part, the Father of all has so liberally bestowed upon you. Were it permitted, as it is not, to envy the rich for any thing, it

would be for the power which they possess of doing good, and of knowing by experience how much more blessed it is to give than to receive.

How much you ought to devote to works of charity, cannot be determined by specific rules. It depends upon your abilities, and the calls made upon you. For the wants of those whom nature has put immediately under your care, you are to provide in the first place; and then to consider and relieve the wants of others.—But the measure of distribution must be left to your own consciences in the sight of God. Only let me remark, that the larger your possessions and incomes are, you ought to employ not only the greater sum, but the greater proportion of the whole, in deeds of beneficence. Through inattention to this idea, it is to be feared that often the richer men are, the less charity do they really practise in the estimation of reason and of God. Be reminded, moreover, in general, that he who soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly, and he who soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.—Every man, according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

The objects and the modes of charity are innumerable. They who are able and willing to do good can never be at a loss for opportunities. For instance,

Much may be done by founding and endowing seminaries of learning. Is it not desirable that useful knowledge should be rendered more universally accessible to the community than it now is? Does not the preservation of our civil and religious liberties depend greatly upon the diffusion of knowledge? We have schools indeed, not a few, of one kind or another; but they are, almost without exception, very scantily provided. The business of education labours under many disadvantages; and much genius is lost to the public for want of the large means requisite to its cultivation.

The rich may do inestimable good in extending the influence of religion: by assisting young men of talents and piety, but of narrow circumstances, to prepare for the holy ministry; by building churches, and maintaining the regular dispensation of the word and ordinances of God; by distributing the book of God to those who would not otherwise possess it; by promoting the circulation of cheap religious tracts calculated for general utility; by sending out missionaries to preach the gospel in destitute parts of our country, and among the heathen on our borders and elsewhere. Here is an immense field for the exertions of the most exalted philanthropy; exertions which tend to meliorate the condition of man not only in this world, but through eternal ages.

The rich may do much good by alms, by liberality to the poor. To this duty I would at present particularly engage your attention. The poor, says our Lord, ye have always with you. In this great family of mankind are always to be found the unfortunate, whom calamity has reduced to want, after having seen better prospects, and perhaps enjoyed better days. You have the poor stranger, far from his friends and his home; the aged poor, whose infirmities have rendered them incapable of labouring for a subsistence; the diseased poor, languishing without suitable attendance, and without medicine for the restoration of health or the softening of pain.— You have the wandering poor, destitute of needful cloathing and food, and even of a place where to rest their heads, and a shelter from the inclemency of the weather. You have the poor widow, from whom death has torn her natural protector; the poor orphan, defenceless in the midst of a selfish and malignant world, exposed to the innumerable evils of idleness, ignorance, and vice. To you who are rich the poor lift up their cry, and stretch their suppliant hands for relief: and God, who is the maker of us all, commands you to relieve them out of the abundance which he has given you for this very purpose.

The pleas of luxury in bar of charity to the poor deserve not an answer. But if it be pleaded that the laws make provision for the poor, I answer, much distress exists of which the laws do not and cannot take cognizance. It ought to be considered too, that legal provisions for the poor, however honorable to a community, are not matters of individual charity, of spontaneous beneficence. Whosoever, therefore, uses this plea avows a disposition to do no more good than the law of the country compels him to do; a disposition unworthy alike of a man and a Christian. Nor are you permitted to withhold relief from any who need it on the plea that their distress is the fruit of their own negligence or vices.— Their bad habits render special prudence necessary in the mode of relieving them; but cannot justify you in making them outcasts from your compassion. For how shall you expect God to forgive your offences against him, if you refuse to look with a merciful eye upon those of your fellow creatures?

III. Having seen the duties enjoined upon the rich, let us now consider the motive by which they are enforced. You are required to perform these duties in order to lay up in store for yourselves a good foundation against the time to come, that you may lay hold on eternal life. To eradicate the pride and confidence of riches, and to fix your trust rightly in God for happiness, is the work of religion alone. For relieving the poor there are some inferior motives, on which it may not be amiss to bestow a little attention.

Some give alms to gratify their vanity. The effect is useful; but the cause is such as few or none will avow. If you choose to barter a portion of your wealth in this way for the applause of the world, you may indeed obtain your end, provided you conceal the motive. But let it be remembered, that if you desire this only as your reward, you can never justly complain if you receive no other.

A much more respectable motive, though not a religious one, is natural sympathy or humanity. By the constitution which God has given us, we participate in the joys and the sorrows of others; and are prompted of course to endeavor the promotion of their joys and the removal of their sorrows. To imagine that this instinct of our nature is the same thing with religious love to our fellow creatures, and even that it warrants the neglect of all other religion, are, I apprehend, not very uncommon errors. Unquestionably they are errors of most dangerous tendency in relation to our eternal welfare. Yet as God intended humanity to be an aid to religious principle, and in the absence of the latter, its best substitute for temporal purposes, he has annexed to the exercise of it a very exquisite pleasure. It may, therefore, properly be urged on the rich as a motive to acts of liberality. Are you not men of like passions with those who suffer around you? Do you not feel their distresses to be in some measure your own? Administer, then, the relief which their necessities require; and reap the rich harvest of delight which is the reward of humanity. When the ear heard me, said an ancient worthy, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me: Because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. Is there any pleasure in the whole circle of fashionable dissipation which can vie with this? O how insipid, how contemptible, are the luxuries of the table, the gaities of dress, the expensive and perilous amusements of the theatre, compared with the joyful song of the widow, and the blessing of him that was ready to perish!

They, however, who consider religious motives to beneficence unnecessary, display not more their want of religion than their ignorance of human nature. Alas, sin has debased the noblest powers of the soul. The injunctions of humanity are often evaded with very little trouble, and its pleasures postponed to the low gratification of sense or of avarice. It has pleased God, therefore, to enforce his law of love with sanctions infinitely more weighty.—Against the selfish, the unmerciful, he denounces eternal punishment: and he annexes to benevolence, practised under a regard to his authority, the promise of eternal life. He that hath pity upon

the poor lendeth unto the Lord ; and that which he hath given will he pay him again, with no less than everlasting happiness in Heaven. It ought to be observed, though it can hardly be matter of information to any in this audience, that our good works are not the meritorious ground of our acceptance with God, the price of our title to eternal life. The best of them are too imperfect to abide the scrutiny of his holy law : much less can they atone to his justice for our past transgressions. It is a fundamental principle of the gospel, that for every blessing included in our salvation we are absolutely indebted to the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Such is our native alienation from God, that we have not even the disposition to obey any of his commandments aright, but by the influence of his holy spirit. Nevertheless good works are indispensably necessary, if they are at all practicable, to our obtaining a part in the Kingdom of Heaven : and eternal life may, in a secondary sense, be denominated their reward. They are the natural fruits, and therefore the appointed evidences of our union with Christ by a living faith ; and are to be required in this view at the day of judgment. By good works we are to adorn our Christian profession, and extend the influence of religion around us ; imitating our Divine Master, who went about doing good, whose whole life was a series of acts of the most exalted benevolence, terminated by the sacrifice of himself on the cross for our redemption. By the practice of duty holy dispositions are cultivated, and advanced to perfection : Consequently good works are necessary in this way to qualify us for the enjoyment of Heaven. Finally, our works of righteousness are to constitute the measure of that happiness which will be conferred upon us in the eternal world. In these respects they are a good foundation against the time to come ; and shall give joy to the faithful disciple of Christ when this world and all its concerns have passed forever away. Such is the result of a persevering course in the duties of religion. Animated, then, by the glorious hope of Eternal Life, let it be your chief care to serve God in spirit and in truth ; to do good according as he has given ability to every one of you. Let those who are rich in this world make it their ambition to be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate. And let all be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that their labour is not in vain in the Lord.

Suffer me to add a few words, and but a few, respecting the charitable institution which at this time solicits aid from your liberality. The Female Humane Association was formed, as you all know, for the relief and comfort of distressed females, and the maintenance and instruction of destitute white female children, residing in this city or its suburbs. Is it possible to conceive a design of

beneficence having stronger claims to your regard than this? The dispensers of this bounty are not strangers of doubtful integrity. They are your acquaintances, your neighbours; and they sustain to many of you the dearest relations of life. Estimable women! They understand and they exhibit the true glory of their sex, in visiting the abodes of sorrow, with sympathy in their eyes, and relief in their hands. You have seen the fruits of their labours.— At this moment you see a part of them in these children, rescued from the complicated miseries and dangers of poverty, and trained in the paths of industry, virtue and happiness. A spectacle precious to the benevolent heart! The society use my voice to-day, an office most pleasing to me, in asking your assistance to their truly charitable purposes. They invite you to participate with them in the luxury of doing good. Has God given you wealth, and preserved to you the possession of it, notwithstanding all the casualties to which it is exposed? Remember the children of want. Does he continue to you the blessing of health, the basis of every earthly enjoyment? Compassionate the destitute sick. While death walks on every side, dissolving the most tender and valuable connexions, are you still surrounded with relatives and friends, loving and beloved? Open your hands to relieve the friendless, the widow, and the orphan. The preacher feels that he has not eloquence to do justice to the subject. But it is in itself most eloquent; and with this audience he confidently trusts that it will not plead in vain!

To the God of Mercy, the giver of every blessing, be all glory ascribed forever and ever.—Amen.