

W. D. L. Lacy - 1892

“WHEREWITHAL SHALL A YOUNG MAN
CLEANSE HIS WAY?”

BACCALAUREATE SERMON

PREACHED IN THE CHAPEL OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA COLLEGE,
JUNE 27TH, 1892,

BY
JAMES WOODROW,
PRESIDENT.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE BOARD OF
TRUSTEES.

COLUMBIA, S. C.

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A few years ago, my young friends, you left your homes, where you had been nurtured and guarded by the love and care of your fathers and mothers—you left those homes to come to form part of this community, which is in many ways only a larger family living in a somewhat different home. In the earlier one, a mother's hand, moving in obedience to a mother's heart, provided for your wants, soothed your sorrows, and guided your feet in the pathway of virtue and truth; the strength and wisdom, the good counsel and admonitions, of a father were always yours to protect you from harm from without and to keep you from straying from right ways. Here, though deprived of this loving tenderness and watchful guidance, you placed yourselves under the care of those who have daily felt in you only less than a parent's interest and desire for your welfare, and who have been ready, not merely to aid you in the training of your minds and in the gaining of knowledge, but in that which is so much better—to become good, upright, pure, honorable men.

And now you are about to leave this second home. When leaving the first, you must have looked forward with some apprehension, as you could not know how well the second might deserve the name, so often given it, of bountiful fostering mother. You could not see the arms open to receive you, the safeguards to be thrown around you, the warm friendships you would form with those whom you would meet, so that *brotherhood* is by no means too strong a word to describe your relationship with many of your companions. But now, after having for a few years enjoyed all these, and being again about to leave your companions and friends, those who love you and have ever been ready to help you, it would not be strange if you should look out into the world you are about to enter with misgiving and even with fear. You have heard that that world is cold, and selfish, and hard; that

on every side you will be beset by those who will strive to injure and, still worse, to corrupt you; and you know that you must face all difficulties and dangers *alone*. You have now reached the coveted rank of men, and in this you no doubt rejoice. You are no longer to be under the direction or control of others; you will be *independent*, and will choose for yourselves the paths you are to pursue. And it is not inconsistent with profound gratitude for parental care and for that which is only second to it, not inconsistent with true loyalty to the past, that you rejoice that you have reached that stage in life when you are to act for yourselves, and that henceforth, instead of being subject to the authoritative guidance of others, you will choose your guides for yourselves. You will still have guides; for no sane man can imagine it possible to find his own way through a world covered over with a labyrinthine net work of paths leading in every conceivable direction. Your independence will consist, not in having no guides, but in having sole power to choose your guides. And with this power comes the *responsibility*.

May it not be profitable, then, to pause on the threshold where you stand, and seek to choose wisely who and what shall be the guides of your pathway through life?

Besides the reason I have just hinted at why we need guides—that we are too ignorant to recognise the paths which lead in the directions in which we wish to go—there is another which is even more important: that is, that we are not fit to guide ourselves even when we know the right way. We need some one to *control* us as well as give us the needed knowledge. He knows little of himself who does not know this to be true. All men unite in asserting it, the heathen philosopher and poet as earnestly as the apostle of Christ. If a Paul has said, "That which I do I allow not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I"—an Ovid has said, "I see and approve the better things: I follow the worse." Hence our need of a guide to lead as well as to point out the way.

It is not enough to cause us to avoid them, to know where the miry ways are; we need to be inspired with the desire to walk only in the clean paths. The good, the right, is constantly

spoken of as the pure, the clean, the untarnished and untainted, the spotless, the stainless; while the evil, the wrong, the base, is called impure, corrupt, unclean, polluted. Since, then, you find in yourselves a tendency to do wrong, and since you know there is so much in the world to tempt you from the right—corruption within, temptation without—the most important question that you, my young friends, can possibly ask at this moment is, “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?”

Now, is this question merely a despairing cry, forced from you by a sight of the dangers before you, but without any expectation that a helpful answer will be heard? Often in the face of impending peril, in view of the approach of what we look upon as terrible calamity, we utter such a cry, calling for help, though we may well know that no help will come—that the dreaded blow must fall. Or may we hope for an answer on which we may with confidence rely; which will bring us to a guide ready and able to conduct us at every moment in the right path—at once freeing us from all inward tendency and desire to go astray, and rendering powerless all outward temptation that would turn us from the clean pure way? Thank God, we have such an answer; suggested in connexion with the question when it was written long ago, “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?” That answer is, “BY TAKING HEED THERETO ACCORDING TO THY WORD.” Ps. cxix. 9.

But what and whose word is this of which so positive a statement is made, and on which we are thus called to rely with such implicit confidence? Is it the word of some erring mortal like ourselves, which is likely to be sometimes wrong even though generally right? No, it is the word of God; not of an “unknown God,” such as the learned Athenians ignorantly worshipped of old; but of the almighty personal God, who created the heavens and the earth; who created man in his own image, forming him of the dust of the ground, breathing into him the breath of life, and causing him to become a living soul; for whom he has every moment since manifested his care; for his sake sparing not even his only-begotten and well-beloved Son; yes, it is the word of God, who is the God and Father of

our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; and who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, and hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son; it is the word of this God, thus spoken, and through his goodness transmitted to us. If you examine this word, with open and candid minds, subjecting it to every test by which truth is distinguished from falsehood, you will most assuredly find it true in every syllable, wholly free from error, the very word of the Lord God of truth and righteousness; and therefore a guide on which you may most securely rest.

Should anything more be needed, I might safely appeal not merely to *your* limited experience and observation, but to the experience and observation of all men, in all ages, the world over. In many of your studies here, you have been encouraged to submit to experimental proof the principles taught you; you have tried the experiments yourselves, and you have listened to the trustworthy testimony of those who had done likewise; and if the results always, without exception, corresponded with the predictions, you no longer had the slightest doubt of their truth. Now, with many years of experience and observation, I testify to-night that no man whom I have known or of whom I have ever heard has taken heed to his way according to God's word, whose way was not thereby made spotlessly clean. I am sure that with your briefer experience you are ready to bear the same testimony. And no man ever lived, whatever his opinion of this word in other respects, who could truthfully bear any other. Where the way has not been cleansed, where there has been corruption, impurity, vileness of any kind, it has been where heed thereto was not taken according to this precious cleansing word.

Let us now look at some of the methods by which this word produces its cleansing effects; or, in other words, leads to holiness in character and life.

We have already seen that in order to *do* right, it is not enough to know what *is* right. Yet, while it is not enough, it is nevertheless necessary. We learn here, then, first of all, that God himself is the standard of right, and that in us obedience to his

will and conformity to his image constitute the right. He created our first parents in his own image; and the restoration of that image in us embraces and involves all else that is desirable. We are to "put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." Through the "exceeding great and precious promises" "given unto us," we may be "partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." We are to be "perfect, even as our Father which is in heaven is perfect." "Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God, *to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments.*"

Having taught us that perfection with the Lord our God is to walk in his statutes and to keep his commandments, we ask our guide what these are and receive as the all-comprehending reply, "What doth the Lord thy God require of thee but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?" This, first given us by the mouth of Moses, is repeated by Him who is greater than Moses, when asked, "Master, which is the great commandment?" "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind; this is the first and great commandment." And then he adds, "And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

But our guide does not leave us with these general rules. It goes on to tell us what is involved in these two great commands. It gives us the Ten Commandments and explains and illustrates these in numberless ways to show us more particularly the paths in which we should walk.

First, then, our love to God, the place he holds in our hearts, must be supreme; he is a jealous God—he will suffer no rival on the throne of our affections.

Next, in the expression of our love and adoration, in our worship, we are not to use methods of our own devising, but to confine ourselves strictly to the modes he has prescribed. "Behold,

to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." In vain will be our worship, if we teach or accept for doctrines the commandments of men.

Then our way cannot be clean if we fail profoundly to reverence and honor the Lord our God, if we take his name in vain, or profane in any way his titles, word, or works, or anything whereby he maketh himself known. Possibly we may think lightly of this sin, attributing it to thoughtlessness, committed without any intention of wrong doing; but so God does not regard it; the All-Powerful Judge not merely does not look upon it as consistent with love to himself, but says with emphasis that He "will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain."

It is next pointed out to us that while all our time is to be spent in pure and holy acts, yet one day in seven is to be devoted more especially to the worship of God and communion with him, and to deeds of love and merey to our fellow-men. To this end, while it is our imperative duty to labor diligently six days of the seven, we are under special obligation to abstain from our ordinary employments and pursuits on the seventh, that we may spend it in the services which the Lord of the Sabbath hath assigned us.

Having thus warned us against violations of the first and great commandment, the word puts us on our guard also against the transgressions of the second, to which the Omniscient Eye sees we are prone.

You are now near an age at which you will no longer be under the legal control of father and mother; but the day will never come when you will not owe love and honor to those who so eagerly welcomed you at your birth. The frivolous, foolish, light-minded youth sometimes forgets this; but the guiding word is at hand to recall him from his ingratitude by this first commandment with promise.

As the youth mingles day by day with his fellow-men, he is sure not infrequently to meet with those who disregard his rights, it may be with some who offer him insult or do him wanton injury, or in other ways excite him to flaming anger. Tempted by his unrestrained passion to avenge himself, he attacks the

offender, he is ready even to take his life. His monitor's voice may then be heard, "Thou shalt not kill." "Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath." "Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord, and He shall save thee." It goes further, and warns against the cause of murder. You are told that hatred, malice, desire for revenge, lead to murder; that in the sight of God they are murder. Let this advice be heeded, and murder, in thought as well as in the shedding of blood, must disappear from the earth: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice; and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

But besides the temptations which assail the young man, inciting him to anger and unrestrained wrath, to murder in thought if not in deed, there are others which beset him on every side, seeking to entice him from the paths of purity by every alluring promise, inflaming him by the prospect of unholy pleasures to walk in forbidden ways, while skilfully concealing the death in which they end. Against these the guide utters precept after precept, warning after warning, in tones of entreaty and exhortation that surely the most insensible must hear. The folly, the danger, the sin are shown; woe to him who hears and heeds not; who, void of understanding, listens to the stranger with flattering words, forsaking the guide of the youth; who enters the house that inclineth unto death, and paths that descend unto the dead; who goes, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; deaf to the warning that they are in the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death; not knowing that the dead are there, and that they are amongst guests who are in the depths of hell. Nor are the warnings given against outward acts alone, but the youth is also cautioned against the wanton look, imagination, or desire; so earnestly, that he is urged, if his right eye do cause him to offend, to pluck it out and cast it from him; for the reason that it is better to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

In taking your places amongst men, no longer to be directly dependent upon others for your support, you expect to seek, with other good things, the possession of property; by your labor and skill, you look forward to making your own living by engaging in some kind of business, and even to accumulate wealth, if you can. And the word I am commending to you as your guide does not forbid nor discourage such desires; it encourages them instead, and shows how they may most effectively be realised. It describes riches as a good—not the highest, by any means—but still a good; and then it tells how they may be gained—namely, by diligence, industry, thrift. The hand of the diligent maketh rich. He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread. In all labor there is profit. Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men. We command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.

Then as a rule to control us in our gains as part of that which bids love to our neighbors as ourselves, it gives us this: "Thou shalt not steal." Possibly we may at first be inclined to resent the giving of such a rule to us. But let us remember that this commandment, like all the others, is exceeding broad. It does not merely forbid one's being a vulgar thief; but it forbids our doing anything and everything that directly or indirectly interferes with the rights of our neighbors or in any way regards them as less sacred than our own. It forbids not merely embezzlement, the gaining of money by false pretences, fraud, cheating, gaming, taking advantage of others, but also all misappropriation or waste of the money of others, whether those others are private persons, corporations, or the State. It requires the most scrupulous integrity. It requires the payment of debts, and the prompt payment of them. It requires a strict observance of all contracts in their true meaning. It requires perfect honesty and uprightness in the sight of men and of God who sees and knows our inmost thoughts. By taking heed to these requirements, the young man will effectually cleanse his way in respect to all these things.

But there are still other directions in which protection from

defilement is needed. There is one evil to which the corrupt heart is especially prone, which combines with all others, which towers above most others in its enormity, and of which God expresses his peculiar *abhorrence*. It is the sin of falsehood. Temptations to commit most other sins are not constantly assailing you; you are hardly ever free for a moment from temptation to commit this one. Bearing false witness against our neighbor is the form of it mentioned in the Ten Words; but this includes every form. That against which we are warned is falsehood, deceit, lying, hypocrisy, misrepresentation, dissimulation, perjury—all and every departure from perfect and absolute truth. Now, the word to which the young man is invited to take heed, is full of incentives of every kind to lead him to hate and avoid the false, to love and practise the true. It declares that lying lips are an abomination to the Lord; that the Lord hates the lying tongue; that all liars have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone; that into the holy city, the New Jerusalem, there shall in no wise enter anything that maketh a lie; that without are dogs, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie. It sets forth not only God's hatred and detestation of lying, but that which is felt also by all good men. Then on the other hand it holds up to view the beauty and attractiveness of truth, and exalts the character of him who speaks the truth. This is the answer to the question, "Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?" "He that speaketh the truth in his heart; he that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. He that doeth these things shall never be moved." And "they that deal truly are his delight."

What a changed world would this be if the truth and nothing but the truth were spoken; if slander, detraction, malicious gossip, evil-speaking of every kind, were unknown. How far can you rely on the representations of the seller of property as to its real value and its defects? How many buyers are there who say, It is naught, it is naught; but who when they have gone away, utter their boastings? How far can you trust the statements even of one who professes to be contending for the truth of God, when he formulates the creed and describes the practices

of an antagonist? How much have we a right to believe of the assertions of a political partisan respecting the principles of the other party, the character and aims of the other candidate, the probable result of the coming election? How can we learn the number of soldiers engaged in certain battles and wars? So we might go over the whole range of human affairs, and ask, Where can truth be found? The world is covered with wrecks resulting from broken promises, deceit, falsehood, and treachery.

The tenth utterance in that part of the word we are considering, to which the young man does well to take heed, specifically forbids an unlawful desire for that to which we have no right; but it is based on the broader thought which the Lord Jesus Christ, himself the divine Word, so fully brought to view in his teachings while on earth. It is the state of the heart that determines the outward act; and even if not followed by the outward evil act is itself sin—uncleanness. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. The unlawful desire leads to murder, to theft, to impurity, to lying; it leads away from the love of God. As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.

In seeking to cleanse our way, therefore, it is not enough to consider the stream; we must more earnestly strive to secure purity at the source, the fountain head. As is the source, such will be the stream; as is the heart, such will be the life.

As we saw at the outset, it is not enough for us to *know* the right; we must also have the desire and the will and the power to do it. But here, unhappily, we find by looking into our hearts, that, while in a general way we think we would always prefer doing right, we are ever ready, when the special temptation presents itself, to yield and to do what we know to be wrong. The explanation of this sad fact is also given us in this precious word. The heart, the mind, by nature is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. Here is the disease; the same word tells us of the remedy. The heart must be renewed; we must be born again. The prayer is set before us, that we may adopt it as our own: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." This prayer cannot be offered in vain. The Hearer of Prayer says:

"I will give them an heart, and I will put a new spirit within them; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh." The effect and object of this gift, of this new creation, is thus stated: "That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God." The new birth that we need, the new creation, the quickening that *we* must have who are dead in sins, is given us through Christ Jesus our Lord; we are "quickened together through him."

And here is another part of the cleansing brought to our view. Even if we should now know perfectly the will of God, and should with a new heart and new spirit keep all his commandments, should thus preserve our way clean according to his word, we cannot forget that it is already defiled. Now comes to us the glorious revelation from this same word that Jesus Christ took on himself our nature that he might suffer and die in our stead, and thus cleanse us from *all* sin. Here is offered us the complete cleansing we need—from the guilt of sin and from its power—that through the "blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, our consciences may be purged from dead works to serve the living God."

I have now pointed out to you, my young friends, the answer which God gives in his own word to your anxious question as to your way through life, as you are about to enter on its higher activities. If you choose a way so guided and directed, you will find it to be full of pleasantness and peace and happiness. Whatever afflictions may come upon you, whatever trials and persecutions may be your lot, if only you are walking in wisdom's ways, happiness, the truest, highest, most constant happiness, will every moment be yours, even when suffering the most.

Then see whither it leads. However it may appear to our imperfect sight, its course is continually onward and upward; it ends at the open doors of glory, at the gates of the New Jerusalem, the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, where to all who have walked therein an entrance shall be abundantly ministered.

And now, permit me to entreat you, by my increasing interest in you and affection for you, by the goodness and mercy of God, by the love and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, to decide to-night, if you have not already done so, that for the cleansing of your way, you will take heed thereto according to God's holy word.

May the Holy Spirit graciously incline and enable each and every one of you so to do.



