

THE TWO BUILDERS;

OR,

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER,

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM SNODGRASS,

MINISTER OF ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, MONTREAL.

Montreal:

PRINTED BY JOHN LOVELL, ST. NICHOLAS STREET.

1863.

P R E F A C E.

The author of the following exposition knows that its publication accords with the wishes of some, and humbly ventures to hope that it may be instrumental in edifying others. If, by the blessing of the ever-adorable Word, any wise builder shall be made more wise ; if any foolish one, less foolish ; if any, wise or foolish, shall be led to some serious thought about the all-important work of spiritual edification, the object of these pages shall be gained.

THE MANSE OF ST. PAUL'S,

Montreal, 1st April, 1863.

SERMON.



Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock : and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house ; and it fell not : for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand : and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house ; and it fell : and great was the fall of it.

MATTHEW vii. 24-27.

These words are in the form of a parable—a favourite mode of teaching with our Lord, simple, engaging, and impressive—a similitude borrowed from a combination of realities in the natural world and human conduct, peculiarly suited to the minds of its original hearers yet wonderfully adapted to the instruction of all men, remarkably fitted to touch and stir the heart and to hold its place in the memory.

The relation of the parable in the text to the whole Sermon on the Mount is obvious and important. It is the great winding up, the grand practical conclusion, of that marvellous production. It is the final requirement of all the

requirements urged by the mighty word—*hear and do*. It is the crowning promise of all the promises addressed to the Christian's faith—of strength, steadfastness, peace, salvation, to the wise. It is the solemn climax of all the warnings from the lips of Jesus—of weakness, trouble, confusion, destruction, to the foolish.

The distinction drawn in the parable is between two men, the one wise and the other foolish. In human estimation and in regard to ordinary affairs, wisdom is a first-rate quality: foolishness excites contempt, and sometimes pity. It is considered the part of the former to reject what is evil, and to choose and follow what is good; of the latter, to do the very reverse of this. He is a wise man who seeks the best things in the most approved way, and by the most suitable means; he is a foolish man who is reckless in his aims and conduct. Soundness of judgment, promptitude of resolution, and diligence of action, are found with the first; inconsiderateness, rashness, and negligence, with the second.

The Lord does not change the meaning of these terms from their common acceptation, unless in the respect, that he applies them to the most momentous of all concerns. The qualities they express are with him the highest of the kind. A man is most eminently wise or most eminently foolish, according as he turns a willing or a deaf ear to the wisdom which Christ reveals by his word. The course of the one is assuredly justi-

fied by the magnitude of the personal interest which he perceives to be at stake—the true nobility of character, the substantial peace of mind, the exalted position of safety, the unending duration of purest happiness, which are involved in his acceptance of the teaching of Jesus: the course of the other is utterly unjustifiable, because he prefers worthlessness to dignity, misery to felicity, death to life. It is agreed to be the dictate of wisdom which leads a man to build his house upon a good foundation: we unhesitatingly condemn, as outrageous folly, the erection of a dwelling-place upon a bank of shifting sand. What a pity, to be sure, that the instinctiveness, accuracy, and certainty of this judgment are not extended to spiritual interests and relations, and promptly acted upon in regard to them! Men may be very wise or very foolish with respect to this world: they are all supremely wise or supremely foolish with respect to the world to come. The *choice* of objects makes all the difference. And the transposition of objects makes a wonderful inversion of personal qualities. That which is accounted, and justly, the greatest wisdom according to the human standard, is, in and by itself, the greatest foolishness. They whom the world frequently condemns as foolish, become, through the hearing and doing of the word, the approved servants of the Allwise One. The wisdom, which thus brings to naught the wisdom of this world, will one day be openly justified of all her holy and happy children.

But let us look more narrowly into the parable of the wise and foolish ones. Observe the exact point and line of action ascribed to each, the particular manifestation of wisdom and foolishness respectively. Out of the many ways and departments in which mankind exhibit these qualities in a worldly sense, one is chosen to embody the moral, and simplify its application. The Lord pictures their representatives in this instance as builders. Both propose for their ultimate object a good work, that is, if they have the means of carrying it through. The end of their plan is the same. Each would have a house of his own—a homestead for himself and family. The execution of this laudable project would have many advantages, such as necessary shelter and comfort, with an increase of independence. The inconveniences of being a mere tenant would be avoided. The trouble and expense of removals would be at an end. And it would be worth much to think that if sickness come, the father cannot be served with an ejectment, or if death remove him from his wife and children, they will have a roof over their heads at any rate.

Each is further represented as *having built* his house, and nothing is said in either case as to the wisdom or foolishness shown in the plan, in the style of construction, in the internal arrangements, in the amount and utility of accommodation, or in the general appearance when finished. In all these respects the same measure of wisdom may have

been displayed. Perhaps there was a prevailing standard of taste and utility, as is sometimes the case in particular localities, and the builders conformed thereto; or, it is even supposable that the foolish man excelled the wise one in these particulars, and had the satisfaction of entering into a finer and grander house than his neighbor's. In reference to all these points the Lord is silent. His silence is significant and instructive. Doubtless his design is to rivet our attention upon what he does notice. Yet we need to learn that the best things may not only cease to be for our good, but may become positively hurtful and ruinous through improper handling. That which is right in all particulars save one, may be entirely wrong because of that one. The best of materials may be misplaced. The greatest talents may be misapplied. The Gospel of peace becomes the savour of death to the unprofitable hearer. The superstructure of the foolish man, as well as that of the wise, may be without a flaw. Everything may indicate the very perfection of architectural design and sufficient workmanship, until the assailing elements discover its fundamental weakness; just as the hearing of the word may produce in two different persons the same appearance of the fruits of profession, until the day of trial discloses the reality of the one and the unsoundness of the other.

There is at least one particular in which the *situation* of the houses was the same. That parti-

cular is exposure to the elements of nature. Foolishness as well as wisdom may build a house to look secure in the calm, and beautiful in the sunshine; but wisdom takes the occurrence of storms into account. The very same causes played upon each building—*the rain descended and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house.*

Here is a combination of assailing elements resulting in a commotion not uncommon under the peculiar physical character of eastern countries. There storms frequently burst forth with great suddenness and violence; and no doubt many who listened to our Lord recognized the force of the natural similitude he employed. The attack is made from every quarter—from above by the rain, beneath by the swollen flood, around by the winds. The strain is upon the roof, walls, and foundation all at once. If there be weakness any where it will surely be discovered. If the foundation is good, well; if not, the greatest strength of materials and the wisest application of skilled labour will not give a sufficient resistance, to oppose the confederate elements.

In both cases the house is exposed to the operation of physical causes, natural ordinances,—falling rains, rising floods, beating winds—and these, verily, cannot be altered from their course. Wisdom equally with foolishness is impotent to prevent them. Nevertheless, wisdom is distinguished from foolishness in this respect, that it takes what precautions it may to resist what it cannot remove.

It is the same in the moral world. There are appointments and dispensations as inevitable as the phenomena of nature. The day of judgment is one of these; it is fixed and certain. The hour of death is another; it is sure to befall all men sooner or later; and it oftentimes cometh like a whirlwind, with startling and overwhelming suddenness. The happening of such dispensations cannot be arrested, cannot be evaded by any amount of skill or power. "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." The only mitigation of their fearfulness, which is possible to mortals, is a timely and diligent preparation for them. It is the part of christian wisdom to foresee by faith the certainty of their approach, and take shelter in the refuge which the word of God reveals. They may not, or they may, be calamities to overwhelm us, according as we use or do not use the precautions divinely prescribed and placed within our reach, to meet them. When death and judgment come we will fall amid surrounding ruin, or rise to yet greater security, just as we improve or misimprove the day of mercy and salvation. The wise builder will escape the storm of fiery indignation which shall overtake the wicked; the Lord, with the breath of his nostrils, will scatter the foolish and all their devices, as chaff is driven before the wind.

But now we come to the one great distinction between the conduct of the wise man and that of the foolish. The exposure to wind and weather

is taken notice of by the one, but overlooked by the other. The wise man's observation teaches him the necessity of a good foundation, as the one prime condition of security, without which the best materials and the most excellent workmanship are of no avail. The fool will not be taught. The example which he sees and the instruction which he hears are unheeded. The one founds his house upon a rock; the other builds upon the sand. In the first case the right beginning is made, and the superstructure is likely to be sound: in the second, the initiative, the most important step is neglected, and every stone and timber which is laid increases the hazard of a downfall. Here is the essential difference between folly and wisdom. There are many things in which the one may mimic the other. The out-works of folly may seem to be substantial. The proportions of its building may be faultless. There may be an air of finish without and a look of comfort within, to attract the spectator's eye and elicit the visitor's commendation. But a radical mistake has been committed, and that mistake endangers at every moment the lives of the inmates.

In religion, progress in which is *edification* or the process of spiritual building, the general principle thus inculcated is an important one. In the school of Jesus we must humble ourselves to the status of intrants before we can advance to the higher ranks of discipleship. We must be

content to begin at the beginning. The rudiments of the Gospel must be acquired. We have to go down upon our knees; we have to sit patiently at the feet of the Great Teacher, that we may receive his words and imbibe the principles of his holy doctrine. It is not the building, but the building erected upon a good foundation, which is to afford a comfortable habitation and a sure dwelling. In like manner it is not the word, but the ingrafted word received with meekness, which is able to save our souls.

The root of the matter on its human side is a willing mind, a teachable spirit, and a believing heart. If that be not in us, we may yield the showy leaves, but not the good fruits, of profession.

Nor is this firm footing in religion attained but by expenditure of effort, energy, and labour. Without these the beginning may be easier, and the work may advance more rapidly; and herein may be the inducement of the foolish one to build his house on the sand. He saves time and trouble, at least so he thinks. But the truly wise, who with much toil digs deep and cuts his foundation into the rock, is far more effectually redeeming time and averting trouble. This is the very point at which a man's religion costs him most, when it is sincere and real. It is no easy thing to divest the soul of its natural pride, to make it give up its inclination to selftrust and its love of selfrighteousness, to wean it from its cor-

rupt affections and lusts. It is easy to abstain from some sins, but not to die unto sin; easy to think of God betimes, but not to preserve always a sense of his fatherly presence; easy to commend religion by our words, but not to maintain the spirit of religion in our souls. It may take the whole of a most trying effort, and it may be the very hardest kind of religious work, to begin to follow Christ, in that way of daily crossbearing and rigid self denial whither he leads. But the progress which results from such a commencement is the only real and healthful progress in the divine life. The religion which is thus rooted in the affections of the heart, like the house which is built on a rock, will stand. By the grace of God it will yield the calm of untroubled peace and the security of a comfortable hope, when the worst afflictions arise and the greatest dangers threaten.

To such spiritual building two things are represented as necessary; and he only is a wise builder who makes them the beginning of his religious career, the means of acquiring fitness for eternal life. These things are first,—*hearing*, and second,—*doing*, the sayings of Christ. Hearing *and* doing are likened by our Lord to the wise course of building upon a rock; hearing *and not* doing, to the foolish course of building upon the sand. The object in building at all, is most desirable, most commendable. It is the enjoyment of shelter, protection, safety, and comfort. This corresponds, no doubt, to what the Lord has already, in

various ways expressed—laying up treasure in heaven, seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, keeping to the narrow way which leadeth unto life. It is a course which is the dictate of the highest wisdom, and the object of it is the greatest good which can be attained or conceived. The words of Jesus reveal the excellence of the object to be gained. These words the Lord addresses to the faith of his followers, and the true reception and faithful keeping of them at once determine the certainty of success, and constitute the distinguishing difference between wisdom and foolishness.

Now observe:—

1st. The Lord says nothing, at least expressly, of those who have no concern about this matter; who are utterly regardless how they build; who, in fact, do not build at all. Their fate is left to be inferred. And the unmistakable inference is, that it is the fate of all who remain in the broad and open way which leads to eternal destruction.

2nd. The end of those who may be said to begin the work of building on the good foundation, but **do** not proceed with the superstructure, is not directly declared. This too, is left to be inferred. The extreme folly of imagining, that hearing without doing is a sufficient building, amply justifies the condemnation of such as begin well, but, through lack of faithfulness and perseverance, leave the work undone. They enter the narrow

way, but diverge into the broad path before the strait gate is reached. They may have got the length of asking, of seeking even; but the door remains closed to them, because they do not knock.

3rd. The foolishness of the foolish builder consists in hearing and not doing the sayings of Christ. He has the privilege of hearing, and he makes a profession of doing; but, in the Lord's estimation, his religion amounts to nothing but supreme foolishness. He shows the appearance of obedience. He raises a superstructure of formal observances and outward proprieties. He enters it with pride, and looks out from its window with cheerful satisfaction. He gives proof of design, talent, zeal, and persistency. He says, Lord, Lord! In the name of Jesus he speaks good words, and in the name of Jesus does many wonderful works. He adheres to a creed which is orthodox; he belongs to a church which is evangelical; he makes munificent donations to support the ordinances of religion, and to feed and clothe the poor. To the eye of his fellowmen, his house is as finely proportioned, as securely built, as handsomely furnished, as beautifully situated, as that of any christian. He is a most foolish man nevertheless. His house is built on the sand, and must finally fall. In his heart and practice hearing and doing are disjoined. What he receives by the ear may produce some measure of both faith and feeling; but there is notwith-

Page 17, line 14, for *former* read *latter*.

standing, somewhere, a fatal defectiveness in the keeping of the requirements.

4th. The distinguishing characteristic of the wise builder lies in this, that he hears and does the word of Christ. He begins at the beginning of true religion, and he perseveres in it to the end. He lays or finds the right foundation, and erects thereon a structure which is firm and fast. The connection between hearing and doing is all-important. It is that of the germinating seed with the green fresh stalk shooting vigorously up towards maturity; that of the sound tree with the good fruit which it yields; that of the inner with the outer life, when the former is the holy and truthful exponent of a sanctified man. Both have respect to the word of Christ, and, through that word, to Christ himself. The wise builder's experience is that of unfeigned love and trust towards his blessed Redeemer. His character is carefully modelled after that of his gracious Master. His conduct is a cheerful and ready obedience to the will of his Father in heaven. The word of Christ is addressed to his faith. That great spiritual principle first brings him into alliance with the Saviour, and then produces in him the lineaments of likeness to the Saviour. Faith is the essential link of connection between hearing and doing; the effect of the first, and the cause of the second. The ear is the avenue to the heart with which the true Christian believes unto righteousness; and the actions of the life are the out-com-

ings of the heart, which testify that he is righteous. Not the word of Christ by itself; not the hearing or doing of the word of Christ by itself; but the word of Christ heard, believed, and obeyed—this threefold cord binding the disciple to his Master—this is true religion, spiritual edification, the building of an indestructible house upon the right foundation. To hear Christ's word and do it is to make the believing of his word the active principle of the new life of holiness; it is to form a real and fruitful union with Christ; it is to grow up in him to the measure of the stature of a perfect man. It is to receive edification from him; on him, to rest our peace and stay our hopes. And Christ, the living impersonation of his own word which gives spirit and life to his people, is the Rock of Salvation, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. Religion separated from the word of Christ will come to naught. The word of Christ apart from Christ himself cannot be truly believed and kept.

It only remains now to notice, that the two builders having finished their undertakings, in circumstances both present and prospective, which were the same inasmuch as they were external to themselves—the local surroundings of the district in which they built, and the commotions of nature to which they were exposed—but, having at the outset taken very different precautions in regard to the foundation, came together with their works to a very different end. When the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and

beat upon the wise man's house, it fell not; because it was founded upon a rock: when the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon the foolish man's house. it fell; because it was built upon the sand. The same dispensations, death and judgment, overtake the wise disciple and the foolish professor. The one remains secure through the trying ordeal; the other is overwhelmed in the ruins of his own building. The one reaches the consummation and crown of his faith, the great salvation from sin and misery published by the word of Christ; the other receives the reward of his extreme foolishness, everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. "Salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous;" but, "the hope of the hypocrite shall perish." They that hate knowledge, and do not choose the fear of the Lord, "shall eat of the fruit of their own way, and shall be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them: but who so hearkeneth unto Me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from the fear of evil."

We are left to picture to ourselves the blessedness of the wise man's confidence in view of the gathering storm, and the peacefulness of his security while the deluging torrents fall, and the angry floods lash his dwelling place, and the wild winds howl around it their violent blasts. No shock alarms him, no fear disturbs him. The earth on

fire reels and quakes, the rending heavens pass away with a great noise, the elements melt with fervent heat; but he feels unspeakably calm and even joyful throughout the terrible commotion. He knows that so long as the Rock of Ages endures, his foundation and structure will also stand.

But there is a notice of the extent of the catastrophe which removes the foolish builder and his house from their place—*great was the fall of it*. Every vestige of the once smiling homestead is obliterated. The tide carries away all the materials of which it was constructed, and the surging waters smooth the sandy bank on which it stood. As for the builder himself he perishes in the wreck of his own handiwork. Great is the ruin. Property and life are alike destroyed. There is no loss which can befall a man equal to the loss of his soul. And that loss is tremendously aggravated when it happens through foolish trifling with the means of salvation.

Learn from all this the stupendous folly of formality in religion and the awful perdition which is the decreed and righteous doom of the hypocrite and the self-deceiver. The sin of insincerity in the service of God is as destructive to the heartless professor as it is dishonouring to the Searcher of hearts.

And learn wherein lies your safety as professing followers of Christ. It is in the exercise of the wisdom which builds upon the right foundation—the wisdom not of hearing merely, not of doing

merely, but of both hearing and doing the word of Christ. These two the Lord hath joined together by the wedding ring of faith, to form an indispensable condition of meetness for His heavenly kingdom. "Let no man put them asunder." Let every one take heed whereon he buildeth and how he buildeth. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him," and, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Wise unto salvation is the man who hears the sayings of the blessed Redeemer and keeps them. If ye know these things happy are ye if ye do them. Let the testimonies of the Lord be the men of your counsel, for only such counsel as cometh of them can stand in the day of trial. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man."

A feature of many other verses of the Sermon on the Mount is especially discernible in these. The Great Teacher gives to his word a distinguishing function and dividing power. With the one unchangeable instrument—the sword of his spirit, always sharp, always powerful, always cleaving asunder—he lays open by broad characteristics respectively discriminating, two ways, two courses, two characters, two classes of men, two issues of life. The truest wisdom is partitioned off from the greatest foolishness; the faithful doer is determinately separated from the unprofitable hearer; the path of life is clearly marked out in contradistinction to the way of death.

This office and effect of Christ's word are not confined to the multitudes who first heard it, as they stood around the eminence from which the Divine Speaker addressed it to them. They extend, in the fulness of their reality, to all the ages of the New Testament dispensation, to all the localities, organizations, and audiences of Christendom. They everywhere and always establish the most important and enduring distinction, between the church and the world, between the members of a congregation, between the children of a family. They fulfil that saying of Christ, himself the living and eternal Word—*I came not to send peace but a sword*. True, he sends peace to his people and confusion to his enemies; but the progress in this world of his kingdom, which is not of this world, is necessarily marked by the occurrence of collisions, the evolution of differences, the establishment of permanent divisions, caused by the mutually repelling contact of light with darkness, and truth with error; and these, ever happening, though not always visible to human eye, unavoidably produce the greatest dissimilarity that can possibly exist between one individual and another. They set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Aye, aye, my brethren, peacefully as we live together amid all the distinctions of wealth and poverty, learning and ignorance, success and adversity, which characterize our present temporal state, and

underneath all the differences of opinion, temper, and character, which belong to us as individuals, there is a great and glorious work of separation ever advancing amongst us—secretly, silently, steadily advancing,—more radical, more irreconcilable, more permanently disuniting, than the feuds which keep hostile tribes apart, or the wars from which new nations spring! As our present mortal existence goes out, day by day, upon the ebbing tide of time, Divine Truth, like a rock in the midway of waters, cleaves in twain the current of our spiritual life, and the two streams of human souls, thus parted, flow on, each to its own ocean of eternal destiny—Heaven or Hell!

O thou blessed word of might and grace, seed incorruptible from the source of life, irrevocable mandate of happiness and woe, discerners of the thoughts and intents of the heart, How long shall the children of men esteem it a light thing how they hear thee? How long shall they dare to deal with thee as if thou wert the word of man, and not of God? How long shall it be deemed a matter of indifference or mere custom to wait upon thy ministrations? Awake, awake, put on strength, that the careless daughters of Zion may cease to be at ease, that the dwellers in the dust may be lifted up, that the nations of the earth may be converted to the Lord! *Amen!*