

A S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, YORK;

ON SUNDAY, MARCH, 17th 1835,

IN AID OF

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL SOCIETY,

FOR THE DIOCESE OF QUEBEC:



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TO THE HONORABLE AND RÍGHŦ REVEREND,

THE LORD BISHOP OF QUEBEC,

THE FOLLOWING SERMON,

PUBLISHED AT HIS LORDSHIP'S REQUEST,

IS MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED.

S E R M O N.



MATTHEW, xviii. part of v. 10.

“ Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones.”



FROM the occasion on which these words were spoken, it is plain that our LORD, by the term “ little ones,” which He thrice makes use of, not only (nor indeed chiefly) had in view those young in age, and, in that respect alone, resembling the little child whom he “ set in the midst of his disciples” ; but he evidently referred it, in a more extensive application, to all, who, whether from weakness, or ignorance, or imperfect information, had yet advanced no further than to the stature, and understanding of “ little children,” in the Christian life. And the caution of the text was intended to warn his disciples, of that, and all future periods, who might imagine themselves of fuller growth in grace, against any appearance of neglect, or assumption of superiority, which might prove an offence, or a hindrance to humbler brethren in their religious progress.

Though however all this was doubtless implied in our Saviour’s admonition, I propose to confine the consideration of the text, on this occasion, to that single application, which belongs to the primary sig-

nification of the term "little ones," namely, *the young* ; and also to apply the expression of "despising" them, more especially that slighting opinion, which deems it a matter of no importance to teach such "little ones" the fear of God, and the knowledge of Salvation, through Christ Jesus.

"Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones." We may imagine from the impressive terms in which this caution is conveyed, that to neglect it is no slight offence against Almighty God ; as is yet more plainly declared in the assurance, that it were "better that a mill stone were hanged about a man's neck, and he were drowned in the depths of the sea," than that he should in any way obstruct the progress of one of these little ones ; of whom, it is not the will of our Father which is in heaven, that one should perish.

There have not been wanting those who have "despised little ones," by maintaining that it is vain to pretend to teach them any thing about religion, till their reason is mature enough to judge of its obligation, and necessity. I know not if there be many, who professing themselves Christians, would now avow this opinion in its extent ; but there are, it is to be feared, too many who *act* upon it, to a much later period, of their children's life, than is either safe, or justifiable.

Now, without pretending to fix any age as the earliest, at which a child may be taught the first prin-

ciples of religion (which must vary much with the variety of talent, and disposition, and of example set before him,) there is no doubt but that he may be very soon made sensible of his relation to God, and of his obligations to the Saviour. I do not mean that he can, with his childish faculties, conceive the *nature* of God, His infinite perfection, and attributes ; nor yet the mysterious mercy of redemption, even to nearly the extent, (limited as it is) in which the maturer powers of man can embrace it : but as soon as he is conscious of a fault, and knows what it is to disobey, and offend his earthly parent, he may certainly be made to understand, that there is a great and good Being above, who sees all he does, and knows all his thoughts ; who is angry with him when he does that which is wrong, and approves of his endeavours to do well. Soon too, will the fruits of his fallen nature sufficiently manifest themselves in his conduct—in acts of petulance, or falsehood, or vindictiveness—to enable the watchful parent to make him understand that he has a wicked heart, and is of himself more prone to evil than to good. Hence, by an easy step, he may be convinced that he has often offended the great and all seeing God, who will dreadfully punish every one, whether young, or old, that has done evil in his sight : and then the child may be told, that though he has so thought, and acted, as to incur God's anger, and deserve punishment, yet the mercy of God has been so great as to induce Him to give his only Son to suffer, and to die upon the cross, that all who

pray for pardon for Christ's sake, and love *Him* for his love of them, shall not only be released from the punishment due to their sins, but shall be forgiven, and received into the favour of God, and His dear Son.

Is any one disposed to argue here, what can a young child understand of atonement, of the sufferings of one being making satisfaction for the sins of another, or what is the need of perplexing a child with such subjects? Let us first meet the question, as to the *necessity* of drawing a child's attention to these things.

If a child be old enough to distinguish between right, and wrong, it is old enough to sin, and if its age *permit*, we are too sure that its nature will *incline*, it, to be guilty of sin; and having sinned, it is liable to God's wrath, should it die conscious of offence, but unconscious of pardon through Christ. There is then every need that the youngest child, who is capable of sin, should be taught the only way by which sin can be forgiven. To enquire precisely when such accountability begins, or what is the latest period to which such instruction may be deferred, without danger, is not only an unprofitable enquiry, but is itself dangerous, inasmuch as it is always dangerous to approach the verge of danger. Rather answer the question, can a child be too soon brought to know Christ, or be too soon made meet for the kingdom of heaven? And if it cannot, seek not to know how

long you may safely keep your offspring in ignorance ; but by what course you may most speedily, and successfully engage their infant attention, and affections to Him, who, when on earth, gave such proofs of his affection for them.

The necessity for the earliest inculcation of religious principles on children being established, it would be questioning, not only the mercy, but the justice of God, to question the possibility of their understanding what is sufficient to Salvation : it would be an insinuation that God has made that necessary, which is impracticable, or has imposed conditions which it is impossible to perform. But so far from this being the case, it is the distinguishing feature of the Gospel, that it is especially adapted to the young and unlearned, whose simple and uncavilling disposition is that, to which the Gospel of Christ most readily and congenially recommends itself. “ Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, thou hast perfected praise.” “ I thank thee, O Father,” (says the Saviour) “ that thou hast hid these things from the wise, and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.” “ Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven. It is precisely this teachable simple-mindedness of a child, to which the proudest intellect must be reduced, before it can receive the things of God ; and he who refuses to embrace the Gospel till he can answer every how? and why? which curiosity, or scepticism may pro-

pound, must live and die an infidel. "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no wise enter therein." It is necessary then that the man should become the child in disposition, ere he can enter the kingdom of Heaven, but by no means necessary that the child should attain to man's judgment before he can learn the way thither.— "Take heed then that ye despise not one of these little ones," so as to neglect any opportunity of sowing the least seed of heavenly knowledge in their minds. The smallest grain you now sow, may at once spring up in the tender, and lovely blade of infant piety ; or should it lie, for a time, unproductive, it may, by His blessing, who gives every increase, hereafter burst through the soil, and grow up into a vigorous, and deep rooted tree of vital religion.

At the early age of which we are now speaking it is generally a mother's task, to nurture, and inform the opening mind. Christian mothers, think of the consequences which depend on your discharge of this duty ! Think, that, though the plant you tend, is as yet so young in time, it is destined to live throughout eternity ; and *that* eternity *may* be, of happiness, or misery, as you shall give the first direction to the tender shoot. Watch then, and seize every opportunity of gently engrafting, and carefully fostering any favorable sentiment, and of nipping in the bud, every indication of evil disposition. There is, alas, a strong principle of frowardness, and depravity in the root,

which will be continually manifesting itself in the rising plant : do not, instead of checking this, strengthen its influence, by a constant compliance with the tempers, and caprices which spring from it. A spoiled child is receiving that from the indulgence of its misjudging parents, which will make it so much the easier victim to the hosts of enemies, with which, in every subsequent period of life, the world, the flesh, and the devil, will surround it. The spoiled child, most probably, becomes the wayward, and disobedient boy ; waywardness and disobedience in the boy, become licentiousness, and an entire casting off of all restraint, in youth ; and such a youth is too likely to terminate in a manhood characterised by ungovernable passions, and a low standard of morality. This is the serious result, merely in a moral point of view ; what must be the consequence in a religious ? God, remembered not in childhood ; mocked and set at nought, in youth ; and if not altogether forgotten, still mocked in manhood, by the formality of an outward religion, which has no effect on the heart !

This is no exaggeration ; and all this may arise from neglecting to direct the first ideas of childhood to the love of God, and hatred of sin. Surely did parents more generally, and more seriously reflect, in the management of their little ones, that childhood is the commencement of eternity, we should witness more frequent answers to the prayer, offered at the

season of Baptism, "that this child may lead the rest of his life according to this beginning."*

As the child advances beyond the tender age, we have hitherto supposed, the danger of so "despising these little ones," as to neglect their religious instruction, becomes more immediate and palpable. The evil, which has been hitherto, comparatively inactive, now becomes confirmed, and its effects are manifested in the outbreakings of open acts of sin ; and these are committed without the sensations of remorse, and conscious dread, which cannot but accompany the first sinful acts of those, who have been, from earliest infancy, taught to consider how GOD will regard every thing that they do. Hence the fearful catalogue of youthful delinquencies ; dissimulation, evasion, lying, theft, envy, revenge, swearing, Sabbath-breaking !—And how can it be otherwise if no pains are taken to eradicate, or, at least, repress, these, which are the natural produce of the soil ; and to sow, in their stead, those seeds, which, by God's help, may bring forth better fruit ?

But not only is this early culture of the young mind, often grievously neglected ; frequently does it happen, that, when the fruits of such neglect appear, in the licentious conduct of children, as they proceed from youth to riper age ; instead of being, even then, re-proved, and discountenanced, they are excused, and

* Baptismal Service.

palliated, under the softening terms of thoughtless follies, and youthful indiscretions. Oh, who can say how many youths of better promise, have been led on to the ruin of their temporal, and eternal interests, by these sadly misapplied terms of extenuation ; who, if their conduct had been faithfully represented to them, in its true colours, would have turned with horror from the path of destruction down which they were hastening ?

To the parent who himself fears God, but whose culpable partiality, or lenity, prevents his decisive, and authoritative condemnation of his children's sins, and excesses, what impressive warnings do the cases of Eli, and David hold forth ! Eli's feeble remonstrance to his sons, "why do ye such things ? Nay my sons, it is no good report that I hear," was unheeded by them in their profligacy ; and this was the sentence of God upon the father's connivance, "I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity *which he knoweth*, because his sons made themselves vile, and he *restrained* them not."

Who, again, is not affected by the bitter, unavailing anguish of a father for the death of his rebellious son, exhibited in the passionate lamentation of David for Absalom ? "the King was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept, and as he wept thus he said, O Absalom, my son, my son Absalom ; would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son !"'

But I would pause here, and ask, does not this affecting picture also appeal to children as well as parents? Is it calculated to suggest no painful reflections, no self reproach, to the youth who recklessly abandons himself to riotous living? Will not common affection make such an one relent in his desperate course, when the idea presents itself, of the sorrow without hope, which must rend a father's and a mother's heart, should death surprise their son in the mid career of profligacy and ungodliness? Or, if the thought of bringing such anguish of soul upon surviving parents, be a small thing with you, in comparison of the present pleasures of sin; think, O think seriously, what will be the consequences to yourselves, of being thus cut off in open rebellion against God! Whilst your afflicted parents are in vain bewailing, on earth, the unprepared state in which you were called away, you will be in vain repenting in hell, that you listened not to their advice, nor heeded their remonstrances: but, whilst *their* lamentations, and sorrow, can, at the furthest endure but to the end of this life; the "weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth," in the regions of despair, shall last for ever, and ever!

To return. If the displeasure of God was so strongly manifested against the feeble, and ineffectual remonstrances of parents, who were themselves his servants, and therefore, we may conclude, certainly did not neglect to instruct their children betimes, in the precepts of religion, tho' they continued not to

exert that influence, which, as godly parents, they were bound to exert ;—if God was so highly displeased with their remissness, how lamentable is the contemplation of a family where the parents are strangers to godliness, except in name, and the children are left to imbibe their ideas, or rather, their indifference, about religion, from the little observance of its duties, perhaps from the contempt of them, which they are accustomed to witness at home ! No motive to personal holiness can certainly be more urgent with a man, than the salvation of his own soul ; but yet to a parent there are most awful motives, in addition to this. Not only his own, but perhaps the salvation of his children, and household, may, as to human instrumentality, depend, in a great measure, on the regard he manifests for God, and His honor, and service. Dives dreaded to meet his brethren in the place of torment ; and how will it aggravate the pangs of the ungodly parent in another world, to see his children partakers of his perdition ; and, over and above the upbraidings of a guilty conscience, to listen to *their* curses, for having been accessory, by his conversation, and example in life, to the conduct which has brought them into the same condemnation !

But it is time that I advert to another class of ‘little ones,’ who whilst they peculiarly need, and have a special claim upon our kindest christian consideration, are, in some respects, more particularly liable to be despised. These are the *children of the poor* ;

whom, however prompt may be our charity in the relief of their temporal wants, we are too often in danger of over looking and forgetting, as regards their spiritual poverty and nakedness. And yet they have immortal souls which are as precious in the sight of God, (for they were purchased with the same price,) and shall hereafter, if found worthy, worship as near to the throne of the Lamb, as the souls of the richest benefactors on whom they now depend for protection or support.

We cannot, however, but be aware of the many difficulties which concur to hinder the poor in the attainment of that knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ, which 'is life eternal.' If the want of religious instruction be so dangerous, (as it assuredly is) to the children of those who are in comfortable or affluent circumstances, the danger is manifold greater to the children of the poor. Numbers of them are exposed, from their earliest years, to witness scenes of vice, and profligacy, where the name of God is never heard but to be taken in vain, where truth is violated without shame, and honesty is openly disregarded. In such cases, unless the active efforts of those whose lot has been more favorably cast, be timely interposed, to rescue these children of spiritual and temporal destitution, from the surrounding contagion, only some extraordinary providence can prevent their falling the victims of profligate impiety.— And even where the character of the parents is res-

pectable, poverty, we know, affords but few opportunities for the instruction of their children. They have not, of course, the means of procuring it from others, and in very few instances, have they the ability to impart it themselves. What then is to become of so large a portion of our fellow creatures? Must they “perish for lack of knowledge?” Such “is not the will of our Father which is in heaven:” on the contrary, He has provided for the supply no less of their spiritual, than of their temporal wants, by pointing them out to their more favored brethren, as the proper objects of their benevolent sympathy. “The poor ye have always with you, and when ye will ye may do them good;” and should we confine this good merely to contributing a little of our substance to the support and comfort of their perishing bodies, and give ourselves no concern about the miserable condition of their never-dying souls? This would be to “despise” them, in the most cruel and unchristian sense of the word. Instead of acting thus, we shall, if we have any real experience of the value and blessedness of religion ourselves, feel constrained, as much as in us lies, to impart a knowledge of its truths to those, whose exposure to temptation and affliction, makes them so especially need its protection and its consolations: we shall feel bound, with respect to this, as well as to earthly treasure, “to disperse abroad, to give unto the poor.”

It was probably the conviction of this duty which suggested the most efficient means ever yet devised

for the religious education of the poor, in the institution of Sunday Schools, which were first introduced by a philanthropic individual in England 52 years ago; and the beneficial effects of which have been such, as to render that period a memorable era in the history of religion.

The peculiar advantages of Sunday Schools, are almost too obvious to require a formal recital. In the first place, we are to remember that, the children of the poor being, from a very early age, engaged in laborious occupation, have, during the week, little or no time to devote to learning of any kind; and if they *can* spare a small portion for this object, it is generally spent in acquiring the elements of useful worldly knowledge: hence the Sabbath is the only day, on which sufficient time and opportunity are offered for conveying to them any adequate religious instruction.

It is further an advantage of Sunday School instruction, that it occupies, in the acquisition of the most important of all knowledge, hours, which would, in all probability, be otherwise spent in public or private profanation of the Lord's day: and it is well known that scarcely any thing so demoralizes the character of youth, (and indeed of every age) as the habitual disregard of the Sabbath. Hence too, another incidental, but great advantage of Sunday Schools suggests itself, namely, the opportunity which is there afforded, of encouraging children to a regular atten-

dance on public worship. Add to these considerations, the favourable circumstances for the profitable communication of instruction, under which the children and their teachers meet in a Sunday School.—The pervading stillness, and the removal from sight of all worldly business, diffuse a calm and hallowed influence, to which few can be wholly insensible, and which subdues into comparative soberness and seriousness the most thoughtless child, and brings him to his lessons in a frame of mind far more accordant with the nature of their subject, than would probably be the case in the unrepressed buoyancy of the week. Nor must we forget the mutual sentiments entertained by those who give, and those who receive instruction; the scholars knowing that their teachers can have but one motive, that of kindness towards them, in the voluntary trouble they undertake; and the teachers conscious, as I trust, on their part that they are actuated only by love to God, and to the souls of their fellow creatures. All these form a combination of favorable circumstances, which cannot fail of greatly promoting the actual success of teaching, whilst they are continually calling into action the christian feelings of mutual kindness, and esteem. These feelings are especially brought out, when the teachers so interest themselves in their work, as to make it their practice always to visit, during the week, the houses of absent scholars, and occasionally of all the scholars in their respective classes. So much indeed of the

success, and extended usefulness of a Sunday School, depends upon this practice, that, I trust, I may be pardoned for dwelling a moment upon it.

It is not the least advantage arising from this practice, that it is an effectual check to the absence of the children, which otherwise is wont to be so frequent, and so seriously interrupts the good effects which a regular attendance might reasonably be expected to produce. So long as neither children, nor parents have reason to suppose that inquiries, or remonstrances will be made on the subject, the former, even when sent by their parents, may constantly absent themselves, without fear of detection; whilst the latter scruple not, on the slightest plea of convenience, to keep their children at home, which they would much seldomer do, if they knew that a visit from the teacher, and inquiry into the cause of absence, would certainly be the consequence—Again the interest thus manifested by teachers, begets a corresponding interest in scholars, which of itself is highly conducive to the progress of instruction; besides that it generally produces a feeling of personal regard, and attachment on the part of the children* which gives to the en-

* In illustration of this feeling, may be quoted the instance of a young child mentioned by Archdeacon Mountain (in the appendix to his sermon entitled a Retrospect of the Summer and Autumn of 1832) who died of the cholera in Quebec, and "had attended one of the Church of England Sunday Schools in that Parish. When she felt herself dying, she expressed a wish to see the young lady who had acted as her voluntary teacher. This desire being complied with, she said she wished to kiss her before she died: and in the best manner, of which she was capable, expressed her deep thankfulness for having learned from her those truths regarding her salvation, of which she had been very ignorant before."

deavours of the teacher to instil practical piety, peculiar influence and authority.

The favorable opportunity also afforded in the course of these visits of enquiry after the children, for dropping a word of salutary warning and advice to the parents, on the truths of eternity, is most valuable and important. However careless and indifferent the parents may be in general on the subject of religion, the interest shewn by the teacher in their children's welfare, will seldom fail of procuring him some degree of attention in his efforts to awaken themselves to a sense of their sinful and dangerous condition : and thus it may be, that the attendance of one poor child on the instruction of a zealous and pious teacher of a Sunday School, shall be blessed to the recovery of a whole family from vice and irreligion, to a saving knowledge of the gospel of Christ.

Looking therefore at the subject in these several points of view, there is no saying to what extent the benefits arising from the effective operation of such an institution may not reach.

Nor is the personal trouble requisite on the part of teachers, to realise these effects, so great as may at first sight appear. If, as is desirable, no teacher have the charge of instructing more than twelve children, by calling at the homes of only three during the week, each teacher would be enabled to visit the family of every scholar in his class once a month;

and this with the occasional visits, in addition to absentees, would keep up that intercourse with children and parents, the good effects of which we have already endeavoured to point out ;—and few are the opportunities in which so trifling a cost of exertion may possibly be repaid by so large an amount of inestimable good effected.

Having thus touched upon the general objects and effects of Sunday School instruction, suffer me, in conclusion, to appeal to your christian liberality, in favor of a Society established in this Diocese, under the auspices of its Right Reverend Bishop, for the purpose of assisting in the formation and support of Sunday Schools throughout the two Provinces. A Central Committee of the General Society is established at York, and a School has been now for some time organised in connexion with it ; and it is hoped, that thro' the divine blessing on the continued exertions of those who are engaged in the work, much may be done towards training up the rising generation of the poor “in the way they should go.” One thing at least deserves consideration, if *we* neglect the christian duty of instructing the poor, in their youth, according to those principles which, we are persuaded, are in truest accordance with the Gospel of Christ and the precepts of his Apostles, what will be the consequence? Either they will be hereafter induced to wander to other, and, as we believe, less wholesome pastures; or else, they will grow up in

total ignorance of religion, and 'live without hope, and without God in the world.'

The chief expense of the Sunday School Society, is incurred in providing and printing books for the use of scholars; and this, it will be perceived cannot be small, when it is remembered how extensive is the field through which it is desirable to establish these schools. For though in some places where the population is sufficiently advanced in numbers and wealth, the inhabitants will be able to support the necessary expenses of their own schools; yet, we are all aware that there are many, and populous settlements, consisting almost entirely of inhabitants, (for the present at least) in humble and straitened circumstances, and where consequently the local ability to support Sunday Schools is as small as the need of them is great.

These settlements, then, must depend for the present religious instruction of their children, upon, extraneous assistance; which it is hoped that the Diocesan Society will be enabled to render from the general fund. And when it is remembered, not only that the religion of Christ does not confine the name and offices of neighbourhood to those who live in the same village or town; but further, how every good member of society wherever he may himself dwell, is interested in the moral and religious condition of the entire community, and therefore of every part of it; we cannot doubt that this two-fold motive will induce

many, both as christians desirous of doing good to all men, and as well-wishers to society, so to contribute to this object, that after the necessary provision is made for their own town, something may remain to aid the general designs of the society,* in affording similar means of christian instruction to the numbers who must else grow up in ignorance and error, and be too probably lost to the fostering care of our church, if they be not altogether lost to the influences of religion.

Such aid as this we trust we may look for from every christian who would not willingly incur the charge of ‘despising Christ’s little ones.’ But this is not all. Most acceptable and effectual support may be rendered to the cause, not only by pecuniary contribution, but also by the bestowal of the *time* of those, who can command it, on this ‘labour of love ;’ whether it be in sharing the task of instruction, where schools are already in operation ; or in endeavouring to promote their establishment wherever the existence of a poor community renders such a source of religious instruction desirable. The objects indeed for whom they shall do this are humble ; but I need not remind a christian congregation that the work is not, on that account, beneath the co-operation of any who acknowledge Christ for their Lord and Master. If

* A subscription list is opened to receive the names of those friends to the religious education of the poor, who may be disposed to become permanent supporters of the Sunday School Society.

He washed his disciples' feet, it was to teach them, and us, that no service, in his cause, tho' rendered to the poorest of his brethren, should be esteemed too lowly by those who would follow in his footsteps. What He taught and promised when on earth, with respect to 'the meat that perisheth,' may doubtless be applied by us, in a much higher sense, to the duty of setting before the poor 'the bread of life:' "When thou makest a feast, call the poor,—and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee; for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just." Yes, infinitely recompensed, when thy Judge and Savior shall acknowledge thy care of these little ones, and declare, "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."