

THE
SACREDNESS OF LEARNING:

ADDRESS

Delivered at the Opening of Session 1864-5, Queen's
College.

BY
THE VERY REV'D PRINCIPAL SNODGRASS.



KINGSTON:
1864.

THE
SACREDNESS OF LEARNING:

ADDRESS

Delivered at the Opening of Session 1864-65, Queen's
College,

BY
THE VERY REV'D PRINCIPAL SNODGRASS.



KINGSTON :
1864.

THE
SACREDNESS OF LEARNING.

GENTLEMEN,—The learning which you come hither to acquire, which it is the high function of a University to impart, is characterized by many qualities, each of them affording abundant scope and material for profitable discussion. To the studious mind it offers an inexhaustible luxury of interest with which to regale the noblest faculties and feed the purest cravings of our nature. To the youth whose soul has begun to burn with the desire to equip himself, as fully as he possibly can, for that which he recognizes to be the great end of his being, namely, the service of his Maker and his species, it justly appears to be invested with the greatest utility. And, without attempting to specify all the excellencies which belong to it, it is worthy of observation that when we are actually engaged in the pursuit of it, we perceive its varied characteristics to be constantly uniting in the formation of most attractive combinations, which in their turn contribute force to the impetus that urges us on. For example, the interesting character of the details of a subject for which we have acquired a special relish, is immensely augmented by the discovery of adaptations to practical purposes; and again, the usefulness of any department of knowledge, if not increased as to its sphere, is very greatly enhanced as to its

value, when our path to the application of results lies through a succession of exercises, in the conducting of which all difficulties are charmed away by the pleasure they afford. From these and other similar qualities of learning the earnest student derives many powerful incentives to persevere in his daily round of self-imposed and cheerful toil. There is, however, one feature of it the existence of which it is of special importance to recognize, the influence of which it is a paramount duty to feel. I mean its sacredness, that characteristic for which supremacy must be claimed in every proper estimate of the subject. If the present occasion is seasonable, as I presume it is, for offering to you any observations which are fitted to excite in you a just regard for your high vocation as learners, and to induce you to walk worthily of it, I consider the topic now indicated, *the sacredness of learning*, to be eminently adapted to these ends, and venture to hope that an attempt to illustrate this view will not be altogether fruitless of advantage.

Let us, first of all, agree as to what may be fairly understood by the sacredness of learning. The subject of this term is in common language chiefly used as synonymous with knowledge, in the sense of an acquaintance or familiarity with things that may be known. The signification may be accepted as far as it goes. Philosophically considered, its faultiness consists in its being too contracted as to its general application, in its being limited to the greater or less number of facts which one is enabled to gather into the treasury of the mind. The popular notion of a man of learning sets up, for our admiration, the individual who, upon a variety of subjects, has made

himself conversant, no matter how—it may be by a mere effort of memory—with the authenticated results of other men's inquiries, such as are attainable in a certain class of books to which the virtue of making learning easy is very erroneously ascribed ; and, agreeably to that notion, it is not uncommon to represent the idol of its creation, with more truth than attractiveness, as a walking encyclopedia or a dungeon of learning. Let us not unduly depreciate this species of knowledge, nor the labour spent in its acquisition. It gives its possessor a position in which he can be pleasantly serviceable to a very large portion of his fellow beings ; it answers the same purpose as the ready reckoner on the counter of the shopkeeper, who knows or practices so little of mental arithmetic that he cannot trust himself in making the simplest calculations. But, with every desire to value it justly, it is obvious to remark that the faculty almost exclusively employed, namely, the faculty of memory, is but a very small part, and, as regards the formation of character, a comparatively unimportant part of the whole man which is the subject of education ; and therefore, that however extensively exercised in the accumulation of facts, and however retentive and ready it may be, the most successful cultivation of it falls far short of what is demanded by an adequate claim to learning ; and, unfortunately it is that part of our intellectual nature excessive attention to which is most likely to impair those sentiments of self-reliance and independence, which are essential elements in the composition of every rightly constituted, thorough student.

The true idea and definition of learning

*

cover a much larger, at least a much more diversified, ground than the popular notion of it. They embrace both the method of exercising correctly the mental powers by which knowledge is acquired, and the effect of that exercise upon the whole nature of the inquirer. Learning is an art; properly speaking it is the alpha and omega of all the arts, having every variety of truth as its subject, and the incorporation of truth with man's spiritual organization, for the development of intellectual and moral life, as its grand result. To be even moderately proficient in it requires not only laborious application, but also, and much more, a careful, judicious, and conscientious direction of every effort. There must be earnestness as well as activity in the cultivation of it, and yet sympathy with the subject must not interfere with the calm and deliberate treatment of it. But then, this art of learning gives you a much higher style of being than the mere collector of information, who with all his treasures of knowledge may be a very uneducated person, whose knowledge may be more of a burden than a benefit to his spiritual system, more of a hindrance than an aid to self-culture. The purpose of learning is not to fill up so much vacancy, like that of the man, who, intent on furnishing the shelves of his library, purchases good looking volumes by measurement, say at so much per foot, without any regard to the quality of their contents; but to discipline our capacities in such a way as that they shall always be in readiness and under control, for any exercise that may be required of them in the life-long business of learning, and that by means of them we shall ever duly appreciate and feel, whether as a necessity or

an enjoyment, the power of truth under which it is our only noble aim to live. Hence, with a little learning properly acquired, a man may be greatly superior to the possessor of vast stores of knowledge. The better of two mathematicians is not he who can recite without mistake all the propositions of Euclid, but he who is so appreciative of the exactness of mathematical truth and so skilled in its application, that he finds little difficulty in the solution of the hardest problems. The better of two classical scholars is not he who has read the greater number of works, but he who is so familiarized with the structure of languages and the principles of their interpretation, that he can at any time arrange a passage for translation, and in choice terms convey the nicest shades of meaning. And hence, also, it can never be too frequently or deeply impressed upon those who seek the education which it is the special design of Universities to furnish, that it is not the function of that class of institutions to cram the mind with classic lore or scientific information, but rather to give the right direction to the love and habit of study, such a direction as is suited to a certain stage of mental development, such as will best qualify a man to be a learner, such as will teach him always with humility to remember, that the true stature of his manhood is not distinguished by the crown of knowledge, which may be anything but a crown of glory, but by large, and wise, and generous sympathies with truth, the substance of all knowledge worth acquiring—sympathies which bring the human into harmony with the divine, which restore in the finite understanding a filial resemblance to the infinite.

For this learning the quality of sacredness is claimable. Ordinarily those things are accounted sacred which are specially recognized as belonging to God, or which, under the impulse of religious conviction, are solemnly devoted to God. When it is felt to be necessary to distinguish them from other things, the latter are described as common, because not set apart in any way to the service and glory of the Divine Being; or secular, because not supposed to lie within the domain or under the control of religion. It is so convenient to have terms indicative of such distinctions; moreover, we are so accustomed to the use of them, that one feels reluctant to start an objection or raise a quarrel respecting them. It may be sufficient to remember the general principle, that the language of mankind is constructed to express *their* ideas of the qualities and relations of things, and that therefore such distinctions as those referred to have not necessarily any real existence. In truth they have not any real existence; and their persistent maintenance in current phraseology is only an unconscious but condemnatory witness to the sin of profanity—the sin of regarding as other than sacred anything soever which is of God, from Him, or to Him. This matter is decisively determined, determined beyond all dispute, when we appeal it to the authority of God's written revelation, wherein, if anywhere, we may hope to find a language expressive of the actual and the real as seen by the Eternal Source of intelligence and truth. In the sacred volume God is declared to be the originator of all things but sin, which is an abhorrence to his nature and a profanation of his works; the institutor of all relations;

the giver of all laws; the disposer of all events; the consummator of all systems. The Psalmist witnesseth to a perpetual homage ascending from all parts of the Almighty's dominions—"All Thy works praise Thee." Saint Paul asserts an omnipresent essence, energy and purpose—"By Him all things consist." The same Apostle describes, while he enforces, the principle and end to which restored humanity should willingly subject itself—"Do all to the glory of God." And, in the reproving and correcting words addressed to Peter in his vision, though primarily applied to a particular case, we have a ground for that "earnest expectation of the creature," according to which, by the power of redemption, it shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption—"What God hath cleansed that call not thou common."

Gentlemen, this authority is supreme. By the holiest and most constraining considerations you are bound to defer to it. Recognize it in every exercise of those intellectual powers and moral sentiments with which your Maker hath endowed you. Recognize it in all the sources and means of instruction, which, by a divinely beneficent arrangement, profusely and invitingly surround you—in your perusal of the records of history, every page of which bears convincing testimony to the invisible but omnipresent hand that holds the direction and shapes the issue of all events—in your study of the book of nature where each relation you observe, each law you discover, each symbol you interpret, is an exponent of the marvellous skill with which the Father of lights hath, everywhere, on land and skies, on air and seas, photographed the glory of his perfections—in your inquiries into the physical structure and

spiritual organization of the individual man, and into the universal conditions, diversifying distinctions, and ultimate destiny of humanity, all of which demand the belief, as they are pregnant with the evidence of, a moral government. Recognize, especially recognize it, in the bearings, upon personal development and social progress, upon the consciousness of responsibility and the aspiration after fulness of life, of that many-sided but single purpose for which it is given us to know anything of the past, present, and future, anything of the universe, of ourselves, of God. And what is the effect of this devout recognition? It is unquestionably to invest the art, the subject, and the fruits of learning with the character of sacredness; and, therefore, either to abolish the common and the secular, or to resolve them into the profaned,—the result of a sacrilegious contact, on the part of creatures spiritually disordered and morally unclean, with the holy furniture of the stupendous temple which the Architect of the universe hath erected and consecrated, for the showing forth of his praise.

To truth, which is at once the subject of learning and the aliment of the learner, belongs in point of importance, according to its nature, a multiplicity of varying degrees; but even when marked by the lowest, it has the essence of which the highest is only a modified form; and truth is always and in all circumstances a very sacred thing—as surely, in its own way and within its own sphere, an expression of divine character and will, as any word which ever proceeded from the mouth of God. There are truths so simple, so universally believed and implicitly acted upon, that we do not stop to

inquire, and if we did might not be able to discover, what is their exact relation to the system of truth as a whole and to the highest truths in particular; but not the less on that account are they to be regarded as emanations from the Infinite Source of truth—links in that mighty chain which girds and binds all things together, each of them more or less remotely situated from the point of fixture in the throne of the Unchangeable, but each of them essential to the integrity of God's government and necessary to the interests of his intelligent creatures.

The work which has to do with this sacred thing, namely, the pursuit of learning, comprehending all those exercises, whether of mind or body, of the understanding or the heart, or of the whole combined, by which truth is discovered, weighed, arranged; appropriated, and felt, is a sacred occupation. By it we are introduced, through our first and simplest lessons, to the mysteries of creation, providence, and grace; by it we handle the tokens of a presiding Deity; by it we hold deep and secret communings with the mind of the Invisible. We devote the powers which we have of God to the task of acquainting ourselves with the works and ways of God. To learn *how* to learn—to know with what humility and reverence we should comport ourselves as we approach any department of knowledge or tread the courts of the temple of truth, is, therefore, the first and most important part of education.

As to the fruits of learning, these too, if sound and if seasonably gathered, are to be estimated as sacred. If truth be the subject of learning, the genuine results of learning must

correspond in kind thereto... Learning to be worth anything must enter largely into the formation of the student's character. Therein lies its highest use—to enlighten, purify, elevate, and refine. The moral power which comes from this, and not the dead weight of knowledge, is the proper measure of a learned man. A truthful character is the most sacred, an untruthful the profanest of characters. He has yet to begin to learn, yet to know what study means, who, having exhausted all accessible treasures of knowledge, thinks of resting from his labours, with a soul out of harmony with the sacred and the true.

Gentlemen, you must see from what has been advanced how grave and serious a thing it is to assume the garb and take the distinctive rank of a student—not so grave and serious as to destroy all sense of pleasure and love of recreation, for he who has no cheerfulness in mental effort had better desist from it, and he who neglects the physical from an exclusive devotion to spiritual training, understands not, but perverts the rudimental laws of his being; but yet so grave and serious as to compel you to put yourselves in a watchful, manly attitude, against all false enjoyments and trifling dispositions. Your vocation is the highest, your profession the noblest, to which time and life can be devoted; for it becometh you to remember that your attendance here is but the beginning of a lifelong course, during the whole of which, (whatever post of active usefulness you may hereafter fill), you will still be learners, if within these walls the true student-spirit shall have been fostered; and learners all the more, because of the opportunities and facilities for self-instruction which

the discharge of public duty will, by and by, be constantly throwing in your way. A vocation so important, a profession which brings you in contact with those realities which are the greatest in heaven and the best on earth—is worthy of a solemn, prayerful self-consecration—is entitled to the willing servitude of a spirit which knows how to respect all means, and agencies, and institutions, appointed of God or dedicated by man, to the sacred cause of learning.

There is especially one sentiment which must not be wanting, which must abide and prevail with you throughout your career. That sentiment is a loving and confiding reverence for the God of truth, the Author of that volume which is usually, but not consistently, divided into the two great sections, natural and revealed, and concerning which both the best and the worst of books have been written. This sentiment is that which makes the child place his hand in his father's hand, when he desires and trusts to be led in the way in which he should go, and as he goes to gather the wayside lessons which it is best for him to learn. The opinion of the wisest man, in regard to the importance of this sentiment and its relation to learning, must be worth quoting and remembering. He states it again and again in his own inimitable, aphoristic way. One occasion you can probably recall. It is towards the commencement of the Book of Proverbs, wherein he discourses largely on the subject of knowledge, and on its excellence as affording materials for the enlightenment of the understanding—as fitted, when rightly acquired, to make men wise, trustworthy, useful—as designed to beautify and strengthen the social relations,

and generally to promote the highest interests of mankind; but, ere he advances one step in the course which he prescribes for himself, he takes his stand on the great first-principle, which in his estimation is the foundation of all knowledge, science, philosophy, or whatever else may designate the subject of learning—"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." No view or system can ever improve this arrangement; to proceed on any other is a grand educational blunder. Learning, then, of which knowledge is only an important means, begins with the cultivation of a moral sentiment—not with one kind of knowledge as compared with another, but with a disposition to reverence the Possessor and Giver of all knowledge, whom to know is the end of knowledge, whom in Christ to know is life eternal. He who begins here is the best qualified for the prosecution of inquiries, and the obtaining of results. The very circumstance that he is a God-fearing man fits him for the adoption of correct views. He is the most likely of all men to avoid fallacious reasonings and rash conclusions. His imagination is under the most salutary restraint. He is disinclined to indulge in wild, unwarrantable speculation. Where reason and faith are at variance, he will distrust his reason rather than make shipwreck of his faith. When science and revelation are brought into collision, he will unhesitatingly pronounce the deductions of science to be at fault, rather than incur the impiety of tampering with one jot or tittle of God's Holy Word. In the former case he will imperatively demand of reason to retrace her steps, humiliated at the discovery of her weakness; in the latter he will insist that

the apparent discrepancies between nature and revelation, which science sometimes evolves, be not allowed, but that patience be exercised until further light be obtained, strong in the belief that he who cannot lie hath not caused to be written one word which needs to be recalled, because of its actual disagreement with scientific conclusions. There is not a sadder spectacle than that of a man of lofty intellect, and commanding talents, and most plausible pretensions to learning, engaged in the baneful work of adducing the oppositions of science "falsely so called," to shake the faith of humbler, less daring minds, in the teachings of the Holy Scriptures.

Despise not, then, the wisdom and security of Solomon's arrangement, for if you miss the beginning of knowledge your whole course will be wrong and perilous. When the fear of the Lord is not established in the heart, intellectual vanity and self-sufficient pride take possession of that citadel, and in such a case the more one knows the more unsafe and dangerous he becomes.

