

tempt to conceal a fault by a falsehood, they will bring upon themselves your severest displeasure. Do not allow them to get into a habit of lying in jest. Maintain, on your part, a constant attention to truth. Never make use of deceit, as a means of procuring their obedience, but set them in all things an example of Christian truth and Christian simplicity.

Let us all, finally, endeavour to acquire the habit of "speaking the truth in love;" of being guided in our intercourse with each other by a spirit of open frankness, of simplicity, and godly sincerity. And since some impediment to this will arise from the remains of our native corruption, from the old man not being perfectly and entirely put off, let us fervently seek the assistance of God—let us beg him to take from us the way of lying, and to cause us to make much of his law—let us implore the Spirit of truth to guide us into all truth—into a habit of truth in our intercourse with each other, as well as to the knowledge of religious truth—and keep us in the ways of truth and holiness.

THE PRAYER.

O Lord, the God of truth, who hatest a lie as being the work of the great enemy, instil into our souls such an unalterable love of truth, that no temptation may lead us into the ways of falsehood. Let our hearts and tongues always go together; and keep far from us all manner of deceit, either in words or actions. Grant this, O Lord, for the sake of him who came to bear witness to the truth, thy Son Jesus Christ.

SERMON XX.

HONESTY.

EPHES. iv. 28.

Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.

HONESTY is a virtue, which holds a high place in the estimation even of those who are little influenced by religion. If not always scrupulously attentive to this virtue themselves, they still wish to see it observed by all other men. To the character of a real Christian, it is absolutely necessary. Indeed, to speak of a *dishonest Christian*, would be a sort of contradiction in terms. St. Paul accordingly, when laying before the Ephesians some of the principal virtues which it became them to practise, now that they were become Christians, now that they had put on the new man, makes early mention of *honesty*. "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." Far from depriving another of what belongs to him, sincere Christians—even those who have least—even those who labour for what they get—will be glad to impart what they can to the necessities of others. I would here remark, by the way, that if St. Paul

exhorts even those who support themselves by labour, to be ready to give to him that needeth, how much more forcibly are *they* called upon to give who have this world's goods in abundance! If they who have but little should gladly give of that little, certainly they who have much ought to give plenteously;^a—should give largely, though still with such sound judgment and discretion, as may prevent what they give from encouraging a habit of dependance, or any sort of idleness or profligacy. Upon this part of the verse, however, I shall not now enlarge, but shall confine myself to the former part of it, "Let him that stole steal no more."

This caution of the Apostle against *stealing*, as well as the eighth commandment, must be considered as forbidding us, in whatever manner, to deprive another, against his will, of that which belongs to him. Where this deprivation of his property is attended with outrage and violence, or when it is accompanied with breach of trust, or the violation of positive engagements, these and the like circumstances are so many aggravations of guilt, which call for severer punishment. In every instance however, in which we knowingly take from another that which he is lawfully possessed of, or keep back from him without his consent that which is his due, we act contrary to the spirit of the precept in the text.

The full consideration of this precept, consequently, might lead us to take notice of every species of fraud and dishonesty, that has been invented by the mischievous ingenuity, and practised by the ill-directed dexterity, of fallen man. These, however, are unhappily so various in their forms, and so many in number, that it would be an endless labour to recount them all. I shall therefore only

^a Tobit iv.

mention such violations of this injunction, as, either from their frequency, or from their being thoughtlessly considered and spoken of as light and trifling offences, seem most to require it.

And first, I wish to direct your attention to what are called *little* or *petty thefts*. I say *little* or *petty* thefts, because I will not suppose that any of you who are present would be guilty of the higher and more daring kinds of stealing. Now with regard to *little thefts*, I most readily allow, that there are some things so insignificant in value, that they are, by common usage and consent, left for whoever will be at the trouble of collecting them. To take and apply to our own use such things as these, is not to be considered as a violation of the divine law; for the consent of the owner may be fairly presumed. In every case however, which does not clearly fall under the above description of being allowed by common consent and usage, no one ought to venture to take any thing, however trifling he may think it in value, without honestly asking his own conscience, whether he would equally take it if the owner were present and looking on. If he would not, or if he has any doubt upon the subject, he must refrain from it, till his doubts are removed by asking and receiving permission. Asking leave indeed, is, generally speaking, so ready a way of removing such doubt, that recourse to it ought to be had in every case where the doubt exists. If you neither have leave, nor feel satisfied that you *would* have it, you cannot take any thing, however small its value, without being guilty of stealing.

It is plain, that such leave of the owner, though, generally speaking, it may fairly be presumed in the case of *dead wood* broken off by the violence of the wind, cannot be in any degree supposed in the taking of wood—either when actually growing,—or when cut by the owner,—or when applied to

fencing or other purposes. To steal wood in any of these or the like circumstances, is an offence, against which peculiar punishments are enacted by the laws of this country, and is a direct violation of the laws of God. In most cases of *wood stealing*, the lawful owner is injured, not merely to the amount of what is stolen, but sometimes to an extent which can hardly be repaired. He that steals or destroys wood actually growing, for instance, is in fact responsible for what it would have increased to if suffered to remain; and, consequently, if it was of such description as would have become *timber*, he exposes himself to temporal punishment of a very heavy nature.^b Thus again, if the wood was applied to the purpose of fencing, for the protection of the produce of the soil from cattle or other injury, he who steals it is in conscience answerable, not merely for the value of the wood taken, but for all the harm or loss, which, in consequence of its being taken, is sustained. If you say that the wood is of no value, of no consequence, ask yourself fairly whether you would venture to take it if you knew that the owner of it saw you. If you would *not*, be assured, that you do wrong in taking it,—in plain words, are guilty of stealing. The want of fuel, no doubt, is oftentimes a serious evil, an evil which they who have it in their power ought to be anxious to remedy. But a Christian ought to submit to this or to any other evil, rather than violate the laws of his Maker.

^b It may be right to remark, that the *wood-stealer* is particularly exposed to punishment. His conviction is easier than that of any other thief. In other cases of theft, it is generally necessary that the owner should be able to swear to his property; but this is not the case with wood. Any person carrying a burden of wood, or having wood in his possession which is supposed to be stolen, may be required to give account where he got it, and if his account is not satisfactory, may be punished, even though the owner of the wood is unknown.

Religion calls upon us to part with a right hand, or a right eye, or even with life itself, rather than offend God. It allows you, and requires you, to love your families, and to provide for them; but it does not allow you to love them more than the Almighty. If you break God's laws in order to provide necessaries for them, you not only expose your own souls to ruin, but act as if you wished to turn away God's blessing from your families. At the same time, you show that you do not put your trust in God, who has promised to provide his servants with all that is really needful,

But it is not only by direct stealing, that the precept in the text is broken; it is broken by every kind of wilful fraud and dishonesty.

In *dealing in traffic* there is much occasion for caution on this head. "Sin," says the son of Sirach, "sticketh close between buying and selling." If, for instance, the seller takes advantage of the ignorance or necessities of the buyer to exact from him an exorbitant and unfair price; if he, knowingly, sells articles of a worse quality than he pretends them to be of, or purposely conceals any defects or imperfections in them; he offends against the injunction of the text. To give a quantity less either in weight or in measure than he is paid for, is clearly the same as robbing the buyer of so much money, and is an offence against which there are especial provisions in the Old Testament. "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in weight or in measure, just balances" and "just weights shall ye have;"^c "for all that do such things, and all that do unrighteously, are an abomination unto the Lord thy God."^d

And as a poor man—as indeed any man—has just cause to complain, if he receives in weight or

^c Lev. xix. 35, 36.

^d Deut. xxv. 16.

in measure less than he pays for; so in his turn does he give just cause of complaint against himself, if he gives less *work* than he is paid for performing. As he feels himself injured if a shop-keeper gives him a few ounces less than he ought to have, so is he himself guilty of dishonesty, if he gives to work an hour or two less than the time for which he is hired. If he is employed by the day, he has sold to his employer such a quantity of his time. If he wastes any part of that time, or takes for refreshment a larger portion of it than is reasonable, or than is allowed by the custom of the country where he works, he defrauds his employer of so much time; which, since his time is paid for in money, is the same as defrauding him of so much money. If again, a man is hired to perform a certain task of work for a certain price, and neglects to perform that task to the best of his ability;—if, for the sake of despatch, and of increasing the *measure* of his work, he does it slightly and imperfectly, he is guilty of similar dishonesty. There is one case, in which this careless manner of doing work is particularly injurious. The case I mean is, where men are employed to thresh out grain, do not take pains effectually to separate it from the ear. If wilfully guilty of this neglect, they not only wrong their employers, but they also deprive the country at large of a part of the food intended for its subsistence.

On the other hand, if the buyer takes advantage of the ignorance or of the necessities of the seller, to induce him to part with his property at a less price than it is really worth; or if a master exacts from servants or labourers more work than they are well able to perform, or more than by the custom of the place he has a right to expect from them; if, having engaged to feed them, he neglects to give them sufficient food; or if he refuses to

pay their wages when they are demanded and justly due; in all such and the like cases the law of *honesty* is violated, and an offence committed against the golden rule of *doing as we would be done by*.

Knowingly to pass bad money is so evidently the same thing as stealing to the pretended value of the money, that it is almost superfluous to mention it as a flagrant and direct offence against the divine law.

And here I must not omit saying a few words upon the payment of debts. In this country it is the custom to deal much upon trust or credit, and in many cases this custom has its advantages. It would, however, be for the benefit of all parties if it were much less prevalent than it is. There can however be no doubt that money which is due to any person for goods received from him, is to be looked upon as actually his property; and those who incur debts which they know that they are never likely to pay;—those, who do not use their best exertions to pay off the debts which they have incurred;—or who refuse, or *resent* the just demands of their creditors;—are to be looked upon as guilty of dishonesty, as offenders against the precept of the Apostle. To be angry with, or to reproach, a creditor, when he quietly asks for what is really his own, or to seek to injure him for it, is not only most unreasonable and *senseless*, but also highly sinful in the sight of the God of truth and justice.

But possibly there may be some persons who would upon no account defraud or rob their neighbour, but think it no sin to defraud government, by evading the payment of some part of those duties and taxes which have been lawfully imposed. I wish such persons to reflect, that from the moment any tax is thus imposed and is become due, it is

to be looked upon as the property of the public at large. To evade the payment of it consequently is to defraud the *public*. And not only so, but as it is evident, that, if the taxes already imposed do not amount to what was expected from them, and are insufficient for the exigencies of the state, fresh duties must be levied; those who evade the payment of those already in existence, contribute to render additional taxes necessary, and to bring an additional burden upon those who pay them conscientiously. Such conduct is contrary to common honesty and to the injunction in the text, and contrary also to the express precepts of holy writ. "Render unto Cesar," says our Saviour, speaking of the tribute-money, "the things which are Cesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."^e *Render unto Cesar the things that are Cesar's*—that is, pay to the civil government, under the protection of which you live, the taxes imposed by it. And thus again the Apostle, "Render therefore to all their dues: *tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom.*"^f

Such are *some*—for I by no means pretend to enumerate all—but such are some of the many sins, which offend against the precept in the text, which are violations of *honesty*. I know not whether it is necessary to add, that all who in any manner assist or encourage those who are guilty of such offences;—those especially, who, though they do not actually steal themselves, yet *knowingly* receive or conceal things stolen by others;—participate in the guilt, and, both in this world and the next, expose themselves to the punishment of theft. "When thou sawest a thief," says the Psalmist, "then thou consentedst with him." And then he adds, a few verses after, "Consider this, ye that

^e Matt. xxii. 21.^f Rom. xiii. 7.

"forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver."^g

The consequences of all these offences are most formidable. Even in this world they are such, in most instances, as might be supposed sufficient to deter men from being guilty of them. It is true that some of the acts of dishonesty which I have mentioned are so frequently practised, that they are not always attended among men with the treatment which they merit. Generally speaking, however, you must be fully sensible, that he who is guilty of stealing or fraud, exposes himself to deserved shame, and contempt, and reproach; that his society is shunned; that he sometimes cuts himself off from the means of procuring a livelihood; and deprives himself of that protection and assistance, which, sooner or later, are generally bestowed upon honest industry. Even if his dishonest practices are, for a time, attended with seeming success, yet from that he derives no real advantage, which can make amends to him for the loss of his character, of the respect of those among whom he lives, and of the inward peace of his own mind. At the best, he cannot long enjoy his dishonest gains, his wages of iniquity; and the time is rapidly approaching, when he will lament his dishonesty from the bottom of his heart. "He that getteth riches," says the prophet, "and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool."^h At his *end* he will deeply feel that he has been guilty of the greatest *folly*; that he "has spent his labour for that which profiteth not," and has acquired wealth to his own hurt. For in the world to come, which he will then be about to enter, the consequences of his dishonesty will be most awful. We are re-

^g Psa. l. 18, 22.^h Jer. xvii. 11.

peatedly told that the *thief*—and under that general name may be comprehended all *wilful* violations of honesty—shall not inherit the kingdom of God, but shall have his part with those unhappy beings, who are doomed to suffer the vengeance of eternal fire.

In every point of view therefore, and upon every account, it is of the last importance to us both as men and as Christians,—as we value our character or our comfort in this world, or the salvation of our souls in the world to come,—to maintain an inflexible *honesty* of conduct, to be invariably just and true in all our dealings. In every part of our intercourse with each other, we should bear in mind the golden rule laid down by our Saviour; “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them.” In every transaction which in any degree relates to gain or profit; in every instance of conduct, which can in any way be referred to the principle of *honesty*;—particularly if unhappily we should be tempted to deprive another of his property, whether by open violence, or by secret fraud or pilfering;—we should put ourselves in his place, and consider fairly and impartially in what manner we should then expect, and think we had a right, to be treated, and upon no account do that to another which we would not have done to ourselves. This, I must again repeat it, should be the invariable rule of our conduct towards men; and to those who walk by this rule, and in all other parts of their conduct are influenced by similar religious principles, peace be on them and mercy; and may they, through the merits and atonement of Christ, be numbered among the true Israel, the chosen of God.

THE PRAYER.

(From the Whole Duty of Man.)

O God of righteousness and justice, cleanse my heart and hands from all fraud and injustice, and give me perfect integrity and uprightness in all my dealings. Grant that I may most strictly observe that sacred rule, of doing as I would be done by. Make me careful to render to every one his due, and may I so behave myself towards all, that none may have any evil thing to say of me; or, however, that I may, by keeping innocency and taking heed to the thing that is right, have peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord.