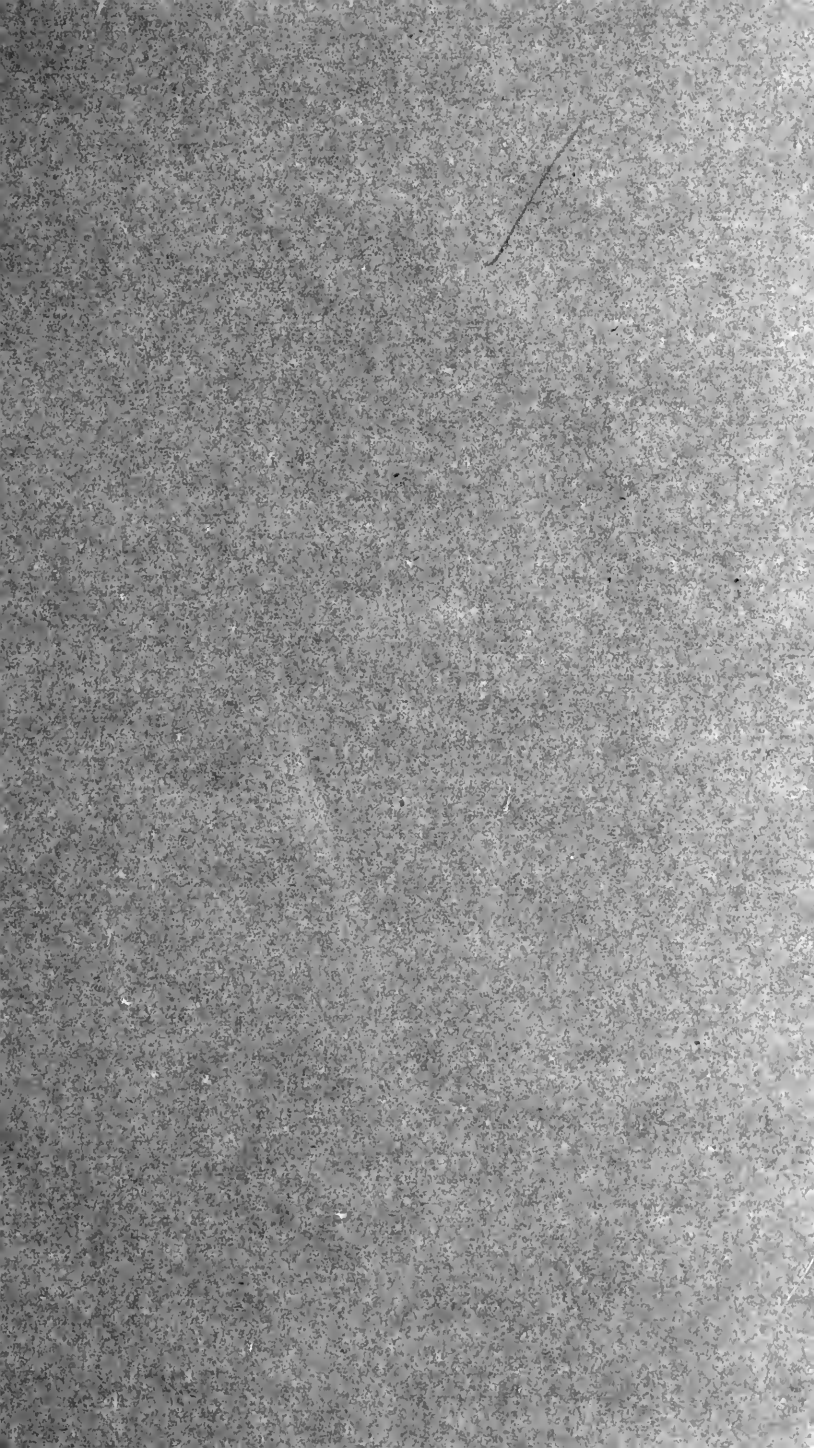




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POVERTY AND RICHES:

A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE TEMPLE CHURCH,

ON

SUNDAY, FEB. 15, 1857,

BY

HENRY ALFORD, B.D.

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A

SERMON,

§c.

PROVERBS xiii. 7.

“There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.”

THIS saying, my brethren, can only be explained by calling to mind that we live in a false world. On supplying “apparently” before the words rich and poor, the paradox vanishes. Who does not see this? And yet it is just the making this insertion, which is half life’s battle. We all know that the world is led by appearances: and we all know that those appearances are false. The schoolboy declaims it in his thesis, the divine insists on it in his pulpit, the sick man confesses it on his bed: but every one of these goes forth, and acts as if it were not so. Men live, and work, and weary body and spirit, and die, before for themselves, and in their inner hearts, they find out the difference between appearance and reality. It is a process in

which the wisest and best of us are as helpless as their inferiors, and make even more signal failures. The very man by whom the spirit of God spoke this proverb, filled as he was with wisdom, ran after the idle semblance of pleasure; "forsook," in his own solemn words, "the guide of his youth, and forgot the covenant of his God;" and ended a life of glory in idolatry, and apostasy, and shame. Good King Hezekiah, of whom it is said, that he walked in the way of God, not turning aside to the right nor the left, suffered himself to be puffed up by the splendour of his treasures, and vaunted of them, to the ruin of his country, before the messenger of the King of Babylon. Nor have there been wanting of the wisest and ablest in our own land, who have left names from which no future splendour can purge the spots of darkness, no future admiration of men avert the finger of scorn.

And of what a vast assemblage are these but the nobler examples! How many in all ages, how many in our own age, have been ruined for ever by pursuing what they knew to be a shadow, till it was all too late to grasp the substance! How many now present here, are leading their lives under the same practical self-deceit at this moment; spending their labour for that which is not bread,—accounting as wealth that which they cannot carry away with them when they die: studiously and pertinaciously and elaborately pauperizing themselves, in this life and for the next!

There are, my brethren, many frauds in the world: but there is one which, after all, is its greatest fraud, the root and spring of all those others, the deceit wherewith it imposes on itself and all its votaries; and that one is, its estimate of wealth.

THERE IS THAT MAKETH HIMSELF RICH, YET HATH NOTHING: THERE IS THAT MAKETH HIMSELF POOR, YET HATH GREAT RICHES. It will be my endeavour, by God's blessing, to accompany you to-day in the working out of this saying, and applying it to our daily lives. And with this view, let us take it as understood of THOUGHT, of WORD, and of DEED. The latter of these furnishes indeed the most abundant field for its illustration: but I do not anticipate that the two former will prove by any means barren in this respect.

“There is that maketh himself rich” in thought. What, my friend, dost thou think of thyself? And pray do not escape from the question with a mere theological phrase, or assert a doctrine of our faith in answer: I hope you and I have lived long enough in the world to have found out, that the use of these is no real guarantee in this matter; and have been long enough students of our Bible to know, that God is not in the habit of being thus contented, when He inquires for truth. What He wants, and what I am asking for, is matter of fact, not of convention: what thou really dost think, not what thou believest thou oughtest to think. Let me then repeat the question; and in connexion

with the words "maketh himself rich," let me call to your notice the habit of all of us in thinking of ourselves. Throughout our lives, there is one object of contemplation ever before us all. All do not view it alike, or our present inquiry would be needless: but all see it, reflect on it, pursue it with their eye, speculate on what others think of it. That object is, SELF. And one of the strangest and most mysterious parts of our complicated being, is this reflex action of our minds on our own personality. Some authors have written dialogues with their souls: some persons go about talking to themselves as if a companion were present: but these are only ebullitions of that which we all are doing every hour of our lives. We are ever, so to speak, projecting ourselves outside of ourselves, and contemplating as an object that which is itself the subject and spectator. And as this practice is universal, so the method in which it is carried on is exceedingly important to the welfare of every man. Whether a man thinks of himself honestly or dishonestly, manfully or cowardly, humbly or proudly, is a matter of the very first consequence to his usefulness, his truthfulness, his thoroughness, in every thing in which he can be employed.

Now the aim of very many men is, to be ever gathering around this object, self, fresh treasures of possession, new causes of admiration; to strive that it shall occupy continually more and more of their field of vision—engross more and more of their

respect and deference. And thus, in their thoughts of themselves, they are continually "making themselves rich." And of all the senses which my text will bear, there is none in which it is so directly and emphatically true as this, that he who thus maketh himself rich, HATH NOTHING. It is even common matter of observation in the world, that the wise in his own conceit is a fool. Even the world ridicules self-conceit. But when we come to think of those realities of which the world reckes not, we shall see that he who is thus rich, is poor indeed.

Thou thinkest much of thyself; of thine abilities, thy temper, thy conduct, thy place in the world; or it may be even of thy personal appearance, or of the very garments that clothe thee: for there is no food too light for vanity to feed on. What are all these thoughts, but so many hindrances in thy way to real wealth and importance? What is their tendency? To satisfy thee with thyself. And what the tendency of that self-satisfaction? Simply to stop every exertion for real good: to make thee profitless to thyself, and profitless to society, and profitless for God's work. Every high thought of self is an absolute deduction from a man's real worth. When we have to deal with a self-conceited man, we have just so much outwork to get through, before we can begin any real business: just so much lumber to remove, before actual work can begin. And in the face of such a fact as this, look on to

the time of trial; to the hour of strong questioning of the grounds of faith; to the day of sorrow, and the bed of death. Or, for we need not look so far as these—regard such a man, encumbered with his own good opinion, striving to enter the strait and narrow gate that leadeth to life. As we were born into this world, so must we be born anew unto life; without any encumbrance, without any disguise; reduced to our true dimensions, and seen as we really are. But how shall such an one enter there, loaded as he is with all these trappings of pride, which he has borne on him so long that they have grown to him and become part of himself? See we not how hard it is for one rich in his own esteem, ever to enter into the Kingdom of God? And when the final trial of us all comes, how miserably poor will such an one be proved to be! Then it will avail him nothing that he thought well of himself,—or that others thought well of him. Such questions will not there be raised; nor will such riches be the commodities of that land where he must spend eternity. Then indeed, he that exalted himself shall be abased; emptied of all, and driven out to shame and everlasting contempt.

But, on the other hand, let us follow the poor in spirit; him who does not in his thoughts make himself rich, but on the contrary is ever making himself poor: is learning, by genuine experience, not his own worth, but his own worthlessness; not his own power, but his own weakness.

And let us at once say, that by poverty of spirit, we do not intend meanness of spirit: nor by distrust of self, do we imply ignorance of self. If God has given ability, advantage, strength, let God's servant be aware of, and know well, these His gifts, and these entrusted powers. We need never blind our eyes to any of God's facts: and every fact is God's. Unconscious strength, advantage unawares, ability unsuspected by its holder, these are one thing: but strength known and measured, advantage tried and proved, ability exerted by one who is skilled where and how to bestow it, these are another matter, and a far nobler. And the really humble, the poor in spirit in the best and Christian sense, is not the man who is ignorant of himself; not he who depreciates or neglects his powers; but he who, knowing them and using them, "maketh himself poor:" becomes the more modest and self-distrusting, the more he knows, and the more he does: shrinks from the triumph which his own abilities have been permitted to win, not because he stupidly passes them by, or affectedly depreciates them, but because all such their achievements seem to him as nothing, in comparison with that which God made him to do, and which he might do: because too he looks on himself as an instrument in the hand of another; and, while filled with thankfulness for the use which God has deigned to make of him, is eager to be still more and more entirely the means of advancing His work in the world, and

promoting His glory by active spending of himself for good.

And this is the man who hath great riches, if we truly consider the matter: before whom lie all the opportunities of life, even those whose work is the most solemn, and whose prizes are the most glorious and enduring: to whom the strait gate presents comparatively little difficulty, the narrow way but few impediments. Discarding, not in idle phrase, but in thoroughness of inner conviction, every righteousness of his own, he aims at being enriched in fuller measure with that which is his by faith in and likeness to Christ his Saviour: being unencumbered by the hindrance of self-esteem, he is ever ready for any work, however lowly and unpromising, which God has in hand. Such persons have the most leisure of all men; for they have all that time which others spend in thinking of themselves: they are in conference, and in action, before others have done poisoning their dignity at home: and while others hesitate to soil their feet in the tillage, they stand laden with the golden sheaves of the harvest. It is by these men that all real wealth is sought out and amassed: that the mines of truth are dug, the rich veins of charity explored, the piles of treasure laid up which mankind shall one day inherit, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.

If we now pass on from the region of thought to

that of utterance, we are in the main but dealing with the outward expression of a man's inward measure of himself. For amidst all the treacheries, and defects, and exuberances of the tongue, it is yet true in the main, and ever will be, that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. Still, in the method of putting forth this inward character, there is immense difference between man and man: and though the speech, on the whole, is an index of the thought, no one can fail to observe, that within certain limits, men's speech often misrepresents them: one man, if judged by his talk, would be overrated; another, if tried by the same test, would be depreciated. So that it may be well to say a few words on this head also.

In discourse then as well,—discourse as a personal habit, and not as a mere index of thought,—“there is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing.” The man of much and random talk about himself is universally set down as a man of nought: this extreme all of us who have any good feeling consent to avoid. But we do not perhaps reflect that there are many steps short of this, which nevertheless tend the same way. I would especially mention, by way of example, the habit of speaking about religious matters in a tone far above men's own real religious attainment. This is the natural temptation of a controversial age; and I fear it is one very commonly yielded to among ourselves. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the

Lord Jesus, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." But then these two must go together: and as the temptation of a day of danger and persecution might be, to believe without open confession, so is it undoubtedly that of a day of security and of religious stir, to confess, without earnest and heartfelt belief. And where such is the case, the man makes himself, and appears, rich outwardly to the world and the church. He has his reward: the esteem and perhaps admiration of those who can do him good, or make his earthly way cheerful: the easily-won applause of a dominant party: the power of saying with effect bitter and scornful things of men infinitely beyond him in religious attainment, but who think and feel for themselves, and say no more than they think and feel. This is his privilege of wealth: and meanwhile he cheats himself into the semblance of also possessing justifying faith, and the witness of God's Spirit, and the promise of the heavenly inheritance: whereas in reality, he hath nothing: all is empty within: words are all, and though words form an important portion of the fruits as also of the responsibilities of the Christian life, bare words will never save a man: and in the day of trial, many such a high talker will be found utterly and hopelessly destitute.

On the other hand is it not true here too, that "there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great

riches?" None perhaps will hereafter be found so rich in the treasure which waxeth not old, as the humbly-speaking modest quiet Christian, who sat by while others took the lead, and listened when he might have taught, and submitted to contempt when he might have won admiration: and this, just because he knew that we are not put here to shine, nor to be admired, but to do His work who sent us: that the servant of the Lord must not strive, nor cry, nor make his voice to be heard in the streets; but be gentle, patient, forbearing, and persuading. How far within the mark He always spoke, who is our perfect and constant pattern! And if we have, or seem to have, an example of the other kind now and then in the Epistles of his fervid Apostle, yet let us remember, that we have from himself this limiting sentence also, to be in this, as in other things, only so far his imitators, as he imitated Christ: let us remember too, that St. Paul's is just an instance, how the Holy Spirit can and does tame down the earnest and bounding tongue, and use it not as enriching and setting off its possessor, but as glorifying Him by its warm and copious utterance.

But unquestionably by much the larger part of the instruction derivable from our text, is to be found in its application to practical life. Here it is, far more even than in thought or in tongue, that men are making themselves rich: and here far more again, that these solemn declarations are

exemplified, "There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches."

How many, in the universal struggle for wealth, does this former sentence characterize! How many men have toiled on with head and hand for years; have gathered round them this world's wealth, have secured that safe and certain place in the world's respect, which ever belongs to the wealthy and successful; yet of whom it must be said with regard to any enduring and permanent possessions, that they have nothing. There is at the same time a pathos, and a solemn irony, in these words. What, nothing after all? Those hands so long busy: that head so long wearied with scheming: so much running to and fro: so much careful investing and safe bestowal: and shall all turn out nothing, and thou a pauper? Alas, it is even so. Thou art living and toiling as one in a dream, who grasps with convulsive energy the treasure he seems to have found, for fear he should awake and it escape him: and yet the morning finds his hands empty, and his dream past by and forgotten. And so it shall be with thee. Thou too shalt awake, and shalt find nothing. One day, God himself shall break up this dream, and waken thee with some unwelcome touch of His truth: and thou too shalt find thine hands as empty. Thou shalt hear, like those guilty ones of old, His voice amidst thy gilded chambers, calling "Where art thou?" And the

conscience, long unfaithful, long whispering, dallying, compromising at her surface, shall yield up an answer from her depths, "Ruined." Thy dream too will have passed away; but, unlike that with which we compared it, it will not, no never will it be forgotten. All those years of toil, all those increases of comfort and luxury, all those investments so carefully considered and watched over, will eat into thy memory like a canker through the ages of eternity. We all, I suppose, are acquainted with the bitter pang of reflecting on lost opportunities. Nothing is keener in life; nothing more indelibly remembered, and pertinaciously renewed. I know that often even now, on looking back, the thought of what might have been, and should have been, but was not, years ago, returns, and returns, and seems to have lost none of its original sharpness of regret, and intensity of vain self-accusation. Think then what will be that abiding torment, of remembering a LIFE spent for nought; wealth thrown away; means of doing good despised; charity suffered to languish; a thousand claims of God's own asserting, the least of which if acknowledged might by His grace have made thee rich for ever, put by and scorned; thine own evil example of selfishness and greed followed, and bettered, as the world goes on. Who can bear, and yet how many will have to bear, these accumulated burdens for ever and for ever, and for ever? Judging here with our imperfect powers, we may say that it would

be torment enough for the ungodly man hereafter, to be allowed to see working the evil of which he has been the cause—working, and spreading, and gaining force for mischief; to know and feel intensely that it is the evil which it is—to know and feel as intensely, that it was he who caused it, his example that taught it: and this, without a hand to help, or a chance of undoing the mischief. O what agony of mind spoke in those words, “Send Lazarus unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” There was the rich man pauperized: after all his profits, all his securities, all his investments, all his bequeathments, there is his final schedule presented, and on the face of it, for heaven and earth to read, is “Ruin irreparable.” He has made himself rich, but he has nothing.

But in the midst of these saddening reflections, hymns of joy seem to break suddenly upon us, and bright rays of light to pierce through the gloom where our thoughts have been dwelling; and a sound as the voice of a great multitude comes up about us, and glory as of the risen day is shed around,—and as we listen, we hear, “Thou hast made us to be kings”—and it may well be; for as the vision reveals itself, they have crowns of gold—“and priests”—for they wear the pure white robes of the jubilant sacrifice of praise, and minister ever round the eternal throne. And if we ask, Who are these? we shall be answered, “These are they that made themselves poor, yet have great riches.”

And at the head of them, and in the midst of them, there is a Lamb as it had been slain. Was He too one of them? Yea verily, for He was rich, and He made himself poor: He inhabited the praises of eternity, and the wealth of a myriad worlds was not worthy to deck the hem of his garment: but He chose to hang naked and bleeding on the trunk of an accursed tree, that his brethren might be saved,—that his Father's will might be done. Was there ever a poorer than He was? No place to lay his head—poorer than the birds and the foxes: forsaken by all his retainers—poorer than an exiled king: his raiment parted among his murderers, and his vesture cast lots on—poorer than the beggar in his rags: his side pierced, and the rich stream of the heart shed forth,—stripped even of life itself in his great deed of atoning love.

He was at their head, and they have followed Him. They have made themselves poor: not by abjuring society, and shrinking from temptation, and leaving duty undone; but by using this world as not grasping it; by laying out, not on self, but on Him and His; by passing through life, not in the ostentatious and compulsory poverty of monastic vows, but in the daily abnegation of luxuries and comforts and advantages,—in the voluntary and unseen surrender of the working hand, and the toiling brain, and the spreading influence, which might have been used for self, to the labour and service of love. These are they who wrestled for

grace to chide down the proud thought, and check the ambitious desire: who chastened and pined, not only the bodily appetite without, but the insidious self-flatterer within: who set a watch before their lips, and robbed the tongue of its great swelling words, and taught it other praises than their own: these are they who looked on their worldly substance as God's and not theirs, foregoing things they might have enjoyed, when His cause needed their help. And they are there, in that blessed place, not because they did this, and earned glory by it, but because all this was the rich fruit borne in their service of and union to Him, who did earn all this glory for them; because in faith, and self-denial, and love, they were His disciples who said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

And now, my brethren, we set before you the choice, and may God give you grace to make it aright. We must not conceal from ourselves, that there will still be those among you who, in spite of all that God may say, or God's ways may prove, will yet be making themselves rich; craving for, earning, laying up, ever more and more: filling year after year a larger space in their own sight, and in the world's sight: adding on continually to their wants and to their enjoyments, till God's hand writes vanity on all, and they depart into eternity destitute. But on the other hand let us ever hope

and pray, that there may never be wanting to any age of this Christian land and church a supply of those who are ready to make themselves poor for the good of man and the glory of God; above all, that such may not be wanting to this age, when there are so many calls to earnest self-sacrifice. And in that day which shall right the world's balance, certain as the former and sadder half of our text is to be abundantly exemplified,—multitudes as there will then be who having made themselves rich, have nothing,—may there be found many also from this our land, from this our metropolis, and from these your ancient walls and enclosures, who having in thought and in word and deed made themselves poor for the work of love and of Christ, shall be filled full with the riches of His glory.

THE END.

