

A vibrant field of yellow sunflowers in the foreground, with a blurred mountain range in the background under a clear blue sky. The sunflowers are in sharp focus, showing their bright yellow petals and dark brown centers. The mountains in the distance are a mix of brown and green, suggesting a natural, rural setting.

John  
Ploughman's  
*Pictures*

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

# JOHN PLOUGHMAN'S PICTURES

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# JOHN PLOUGHMAN'S PICTURES

## Preface

*John Ploughman's Talk* has not only obtained an immense circulation, but it has exercised an influence for good. Although its tone is rather moral than religious, it has led many to take the first steps by which men climb to better things, and this fact has moved me to attempt a second book of the same character. I have continued to use the simplest form of our mother tongue, so that if any readers must necessarily have refined language, they had better leave these pages before they are quite disgusted. To smite evil has been my earnest endeavor, and assuredly there is need. It may be that the vice of drunkenness is not more common than it used to be; but it is sufficiently rampant to cause sorrow in every Christian bosom, and to lead all lovers of their race to lift up their voices against it. I hope that the plain speech of John Ploughman<sup>1</sup> will help in that direction.

It is quite out of the question for the compiler of such proverbial talk as this to acknowledge the sources from which the quaint sayings have been derived, for they are too numerous. I have gathered expressions and verses here, there, and everywhere; and perhaps the most simple way is to deny all claim to originality, and confess myself a gatherer of other men's stuffs. It is not quite so, but that is near enough. I have, however, borrowed many rhymes from Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*,<sup>2</sup> a book which is out of date, forgotten, and never likely to be reprinted.

I have somewhat indulged the mirthful vein, but ever with so serious a purpose that I ask no forgiveness. Those who see a virtue in dullness have full permission to condemn, for a sufficient number will approve.

May the kindness shown to the former volume be extended to this also.

—C. H. Spurgeon

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<sup>1</sup> **ploughman** – man who plows fields for a living; farm worker; common laborer. Spurgeon writes under the pseudonym of John Ploughman, a farmer filled with common sense wisdom.

<sup>2</sup> **Thomas Tusser** (1524-1580) – English poet and farmer, best known for his instructional common sense poem *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, an expanded version of his original title, *A Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie*, first published in 1557.

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## Introduction

Friendly readers,

Last time I made a book I trod on some people's corns and bunions,<sup>3</sup> and they wrote me angry letters asking, "Did you mean me?" This time, to save them the expense of a halfpenny card, I will begin my book by saying,

*Whether I please or whether I tease, I'll give you my honest mind;  
If the cap should fit, pray wear it a bit. If not, you can leave it behind.*

No offense is meant; but if anything in these pages should come home to a man, let him not send it next door, but get a coop for his own chickens. What is the use of reading or hearing for other people? We do not eat or drink for them: why should we lend them our ears and not our mouths? Please then, good friend, if you find a hoe on these premises, weed your own garden with it...

Will Shepherd has sometimes come down rather heavy upon me in his remarks, but it has done me good. It is partly through his home thrusts that I have come to write this new book, for he thought I was idle—perhaps I am, and perhaps I am not. Will forgets that I have other fish to fry and tails to butter; and he does not recollect that a ploughman's mind needs to lie fallow<sup>4</sup> a little, and can't give a crop every year. It is hard to make rope when your hemp is all used up, or pancakes without batter, and so I found it hard to write more when I had said just about all I knew. Giving much to the poor increases a man's store, but it is not the same with writing; at least, I am such a poor scribe that I don't find it comes because I pull. If your thoughts only flow by drops, you can't pour them out in bucketfuls.

However, Will has ferreted me out,<sup>5</sup> and I am obliged to him so far. I told him the other day what the winkle<sup>6</sup> said to the pin: "Thank you for drawing me out, but you are rather sharp about it." Still, Master Will is not far from the mark: after three hundred thousand people had bought my other book, it certainly was time to write another. So, though I am not a hatter, I will again turn cap-maker; and those who have heads may try on my wares—those who have none won't touch them.

So, friends, I am yours,  
rough and ready,

—*John Ploughman*

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<sup>3</sup> **corns and bunions** – calluses and bumps on feet.

<sup>4</sup> **fallow** – uncultivated so as to "rest" and recover nutrients for the next growing season.

<sup>5</sup> **ferreted me out** – drew me out.

<sup>6</sup> **winkle** – small marine mollusk; the extracted meat is a traditional food in coastal Europe.

# 1. Burn a Candle at Both Ends and It Will Soon Be Gone *Wisdom with Money*

Well may he scratch his head who burns his candle at both ends; but, do what he may, his light will soon be gone, and he will be all in the dark. Young Jack Careless squandered his property, and now he is without a shoe to his foot. His was a case of “easy come, easy go: soon gotten, soon spent.” He that earns an estate will keep it better than he that inherits it. As the Scotchman says, “He that gets gear before he gets wit is but a short time master of it,” and so it was with Jack. His money burnt holes in his pocket. He could not get rid of it fast enough himself, and so he got a pretty set to help him, which they did by helping themselves. His fortune went like a pound of meat in a kennel of hounds. He was everybody’s friend, and now he is everybody’s fool.

He came in to old Alderman Greedy’s money, for he was his nephew; but, as the old saying is: the fork followed the rake; the spender was heir to the hoarder. God has been very merciful to some of us in never letting money come rolling in upon us, for most men are carried off their legs if they meet with a great wave of fortune. Many of us would have been bigger sinners if we had been trusted with larger purses. Poor Jack had plenty of pence, but little sense. Money is easier made than made use of. What is hard to gather is easy to scatter. The old gentleman had lined his nest well, but Jack made the feathers fly like flakes of snow in winter-time. He got rid of his money by shovelfuls and then by cartloads. After spending the interest, he began swallowing the capital, and so killed the goose that laid the golden eggs.

He squandered his silver and gold, in ways which must never be told. It would not go fast enough, and so he bought race-horses to run away with it. He got into the hands of blacklegs,<sup>7</sup> and fell into company of which we shall say but little; only when such madams smile, men’s purses weep. These are a well without a bottom, and the more a fool throws in, the more he may. The greatest beauty often causes the greatest ruin. Play, women, and wine are enough to make a prince a pauper.

Always taking out and never putting back soon empties the biggest sack, and so Jack found it. But he took no notice till his last shilling<sup>8</sup> bade him good-bye, and then he said he had been robbed—like silly Tom who put his finger in the fire and said it was his bad luck. “His money once flashed like dew in the sun; when bills became due, of cash he had none.”

“Drink and let drink” was his motto; every day was a holiday and every holiday was a feast. The best of wines and the dearest of dainties suited his tooth, for he meant to lead a pig’s life, which they say is short and sweet. Truly, he went the whole hog. The old saying is, “a glutton young, a beggar old,” and he seemed set upon proving it true. A fat kitchen makes a lean will; but he can make his will on his fingernail, and leave room for a dozen codicils.<sup>9</sup> In fact, he will never need a will at all, for he will leave nothing behind him but old scores.<sup>10</sup> Of all his estate there is not enough left to bury him with. What he threw away in his prosperity would have kept a coat on his back and a dumpling in his pot to his life’s end; but he never looked beyond his

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<sup>7</sup> **blacklegs** – women who made themselves more sensual by wearing black stockings.

<sup>8</sup> **shilling** – silver coin of Great Britain equal in value to 1/20 pound or 5 pence.

<sup>9</sup> **codicils** – supplements to a will containing additions or modifications.

<sup>10</sup> **scores** – debts.

nose, and could not see to the end of that. He laughed at prudence, and now prudence frowns at him. Punishment is lame, but it comes at last. He pays the cost of his folly in body and in soul, in purse and in person, and yet he is still a fool, and would dance to the same tune again if he had another chance. His light purse brings him a heavy heart, but he couldn't have his cake and eat it too. As he that is drunk at night is dry in the morning, so he that lavished money when he had it feels the lack of it all the more when it is gone. His old friends have quite dropped him; they have squeezed the orange, and now they throw away the peel. As well look for milk from a pigeon as help from a fellow who loved you for your beer. Pot friends will let you go to pot, and kick you when you are down.

Jack has worse needs than the need of money, for his character is gone, and he is like a rotten nut, not worth the cracking. The neighbors say he is a ne'er-do-well, not worth calling out of a cabbage garden. Nobody will employ him, for he would not earn his salt, and so he goes from pillar to post and has not a place to lay his head in. A good name is better than a girdle of gold, and when that is gone, what has a man left?

What has he left? Nothing upon earth! Yet the prodigal son has still a Father in heaven (Luk 15). Let him arise and go to Him, ragged as he is. He may smell of the swine-trough, and yet he may run straight home, and he shall not find the door locked. The great Father will joyfully meet him, and kiss him, and cleanse him, and clothe him, and give him to begin a new and better life. When a sinner is at his worst, he is not too bad for the Savior—if he will but turn from his wickedness and cry unto God for mercy. It's a long lane that has no turning, but the best of all turns is to turn unto the Lord with all your heart. This the great Father will help the penitent prodigal to do. If the candle has been burned all away, the Sun in the heavens is still alight (Mal 4:2).

Look, poor profligate;<sup>11</sup> look to Jesus and live (Heb 12:2). His salvation is without money and without price (Isa 55:1). Though you may not have a penny to bless yourself with, the Lord Jesus will bless you freely. The depths of your misery are not so deep as the depth of God's mercy. If you are faithful and just in confessing the sins you would have forgiven, God will be faithful and just in forgiving the sins that you confess (1Jo 1:9).

But, pray, do not go on another day as you are, for this very day may be your last. If you will not heed a plain word from John Ploughman, which he means for your good, yet recollect this old-fashioned rhyme, which was copied from a gravestone:

*The loss of gold is great, The loss of health is more,  
But the loss of Christ is such a loss As no man can restore.*

## **2. Hunchback Sees Only His Neighbor's Hump**

### *Judging*

He points at the hunchback in front of him, but he is a good deal more of one himself. He should not laugh at the crooked until he is straight himself, and not then. I hate to hear a raven croak at a crow for being black. A blind man should not blame his brother for squinting, and he who has lost his legs should not sneer at the lame. Yet so it is; the rottenest bough cracks first,

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<sup>11</sup> **profligate** – one recklessly given to extravagant pleasures.



and he who should be the last to speak is the first to rail. Bespattered<sup>12</sup> hogs bespatter others, and he who is full of fault finds fault. They are most apt to speak ill of others who do most ill themselves.

*We're very keen our neighbor's hump to see,  
We're blind to that upon our back alone.  
E'en though the lump far greater be,  
It still remains to us unknown.*

It does us much hurt to judge our neighbors because it flatters our conceit, and our pride grows quite fast enough without feeding. We accuse others to excuse ourselves. We are such fools as to dream that we are better because others are worse, and we talk as if we could get up by pulling others down. What is the good of spying holes in people's coats when we can't mend them? Talk of my debts if you mean to pay them; if not, keep your red rag behind your ivory ridge.<sup>13</sup> A friend's faults should not be advertised, and even a stranger's should not be published. He who brays at a donkey is a donkey himself, and he who makes a fool of another is a fool himself. Don't get into the habit of laughing at people, for the old saying is, "Hanging's stretching and mocking's catching."

*Some must have their joke whoever they poke;  
For the sake of fun mischief is done;  
And to air their wit full many they hit.*

Jesting is too apt to turn into jeering, and what was meant to tickle makes a wound. It is a pity when my mirth is another man's misery. Before a man cracks a joke, he should consider how he would like it himself, for many who give rough blows have very thin skins. Give only what you would be willing to take: some men throw salt on others, but they smart if a pinch of it falls on their own raw places. When they get a tit for their tat, they don't like it; yet nothing is more just. Biters deserve to be bitten.

We may chide a friend and so prove our friendship, but it must be done very daintily or we may lose our friend for our pains. Before we rebuke another, we must consider and take heed that we are not guilty of the same thing, for he who cleanses a blot with inky fingers makes it worse. To despise others is a worse fault than any we are likely to see in them, and to make mercy over their weaknesses shows our own weakness—and our own malice too. Wit should be a shield for defense and not a sword for offense. A mocking word cuts worse than a scythe, and the wound is harder to heal. A blow is much sooner forgotten than a jeer. Mocking is shocking. Our minister says "to laugh at infirmity or deformity is an enormity"—he is a man who ought to know a thing or two, and he puts a matter as pat as butter.

*Who ridicules his neighbor's frailty  
Scoffs at his own in more or less degree:  
Much wiser he who others' lets alone,  
And tries his hardest to correct his own.*

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<sup>12</sup> **bespattered** – spattered with dirt.

<sup>13</sup> **red rag...ivory ridge** – tongue behind your teeth; that is, don't talk!

### 3. All Are Not Hunters That Blow the Horn

#### *Boasting*

He does not look much like a hunter, but how he blows! Goodness, gracious, what a row! There's more goes to ploughing than knowing how to whistle, and hunting is not all tally-ho and horn-blowing. Appearances are deceitful. Outward show is not everything. All are not butchers that carry a knife, and all are not bishops that wear aprons. You must not buy goods by the label; for I have heard that the finer the trade-mark the worse the article. Never have we seen more horn or less hunter. Blow away, my hearty, till your toes look out of your boots; there's no fear of your killing either fox or stag!

Now, the more people blow, the more they may; but he is a fool who believes all they say. As a rule, the smallest boy carries the biggest fiddle, and he who makes most boast has least roast. He who has least wisdom has most vanity. John Lackland is wonderfully fond of being called Esquire, and there's none so pleased at being dubbed a doctor as the man who least deserves it. Many a D.D.<sup>14</sup> is fiddle-dee-dee! I have heard say, "Always talk big and somebody will think you great," but my old friend Will Shepherd says, "Save your wind for running up a hill, and don't give us big words off a weak stomach." "Look," said he once to me, "there's Solomon Braggs holding up his head like a hen drinking water, but there's nothing in it. With him, it's much din and little done."

*Of all speculations the market holds forth,  
The best that I know for a lover of pelf,<sup>15</sup>  
Were to buy up this Braggs at the price he is worth,  
And sell him—at that which he sets on himself.*

Before honor is humility, but a prating fool shall fall (Pro 15:33; 10:8), and when he falls very few will be in a hurry to pick him up.

A long tongue generally goes with a short hand. We are most of us better at saying than doing. We can all tattle away from the battle, but many fly when the fight is nigh. Some are all sound and fury, and when they have bragged their brag, all is over—and amen. The fat Dutchman was the wisest pilot in Flushing, only he never went to sea; and the Irishman was the finest rider in Connaught, only he would never trust himself on a horse, because, as he said, "he generally fell off before he got on." A bachelor's wife is always well managed, and old maids always bring up their children in prime style. We think we can do what we are not called to, and if by chance the thing falls to our lot, we do worse than those we blamed. Hence it is wise to be slow in foretelling what we will do, for "Thus saith the proverb of the wise: 'Who boasteth least, tells fewest lies.'"

There is another old rhyme that is as full of reason as a pod is full of peas:

*Little money is soonest spendid;  
Fewest words are soonest mended.*

Of course, every potter praises his own pot, and we can all toot a little on our own trumpet, but some blow as if nobody ever had a horn but themselves. "After me the flood," says the mighty big

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<sup>14</sup> **D.D.** – one with a Doctor of Divinity degree from a university.

<sup>15</sup> **pelf** – money; riches.

man, and whether it be so or no, we have floods enough while he lives. I mean floods of words, words, words—enough to drown all your senses. Oh, that the man had a mouth big enough to say all he has to say at one go, and have done with it; but then one had need get to the other end of the world till his talk had run itself dry. Oh, for a quiet hay-loft, or a saw-pit, or a dungeon, where the sound of the jawbone would no more be heard. They say a brain is worth little if you have not a tongue; but what is a tongue worth without a brain? Bellowing is all very well, but the cow for me is that which fills the pail. A braying donkey eats little hay, and that's a saving in fodder; but a barking dog catches no game, and that's a loss to the owner. Noise is no profit, and talk hinders work.

When a man's song is in his praise, let the hymn be short meter, and let the tune be in the minor key. He who talks forever about himself has a foolish subject, and is likely to worry and weary all around him. Good wine needs no bush, and a man who can do well seldom boasts about it. The emptiest tub makes the loudest noise. Those who give themselves out to be fine shots kill very few birds. And many a crack ploughman does a shorter day's work than plain John, though he is nothing off the common. And so on the whole, it is pretty clear that the best huntsmen are not those who are for everlastingly blowing the horn.

#### **4. A Handsaw Is a Good Thing, But Not to Shave With**     *Fitness*

Our friend will cut more than he will eat, and shave off something more than hair, and then he will blame the saw [that he used instead of a razor]. His brains don't lie in his beard, nor yet in the skull above it, or he would see that his saw will only make sores. There's sense in choosing your tools, for a pig's tail will never make a good arrow, nor will his ear make a silk purse. You can't catch rabbits with drums, nor pigeons with plums. A good thing is not good out of its place. It is much the same with lads and girls; you can't put all boys to one trade, nor send all girls to the same service. One chap will make a London clerk, and another will do better to plough, sow, reap, and mow, and be a farmer's boy. It's no use forcing them; a snail will never run a race, nor a mouse drive a wagon.

*Send a boy to the well against his will;  
The pitcher will break and the water spill.*

With unwilling hounds it is hard to hunt hares. To go against nature and inclination is to row against wind and tide. They say you may praise a fool till you make him useful. I don't know so much about that, but I do know that if I get a bad knife I generally cut my finger, and a blunt axe is more trouble than profit. No, let me shave with a razor if I shave at all, and do my work with the best tools I can get.

Never set a man to work he is not fit for, for he will never do it well. They say that if pigs fly, they always go with their tails forward—and awkward workmen are much the same. Nobody expects cows to catch crows, or hens to wear hats. There's reason in roasting eggs, and there should be reason in choosing servants. Don't put a round peg into a square hole, nor wind up your watch with a cork-screw, nor set a tenderhearted man to whip wife-beaters, nor a bear to be a relieving-officer, nor a publican to judge of the licensing laws. Get the right man in the right place, and then all goes as smooth as skates on ice; but the wrong man puts all awry, as the sow did when she folded the linen.

It is a temptation to many to trust them with money; don't put them to take care of it if you ever wish to see it again. Never set a cat to watch cream, nor a pig to gather peaches, for if the cream and the peaches go a-missing, you will have yourself to thank for it. It is a sin to put people where they are likely to sin. If you believe the old saying, that when you set a beggar on horseback he will ride to the devil, don't let him have a horse of yours.

If you want a thing well done, do it yourself, and pick your tools. It is true that a man must row with such oars as he has, but he should not use the boat-hook for a paddle. Take not the tongs to poke the fire, nor the poker to put on the coals. A newspaper on Sunday is as much out of place as a warming-pan on the first of August, or a fan on a snowy day. The Bible suits the Sabbath a great deal better.

He who tries to make money by betting uses a wrong tool and is sure to cut his fingers. As well hope to grow golden pippins on the bottom of the sea, as to make gain among gamblers if you are an honest man. Hard work and thrifty habits are the right razor; gambling is a handsaw.

Some things require doing gently, and telling a man of his faults is one of them. You would not fetch a hatchet to break open an egg, nor kill a fly on your boy's forehead with a sledge-hammer, and so you must not try to mend your neighbor's little fault by blowing him up sky-high. Never fire off a musket to kill a midge,<sup>16</sup> and don't raise a hue and cry about the half of nothing.

Do not throw away a saw because it is not a razor, for it will serve your turn another day and cut your ham-bone if it won't shave off your stubble. A whetstone, though it cannot cut, may sharpen a knife that will. A match gives little light itself, but it may light a candle to brighten up the room. Use each thing and each man according to common sense and you will be uncommonly sensible. You don't milk horses nor ride cows, and by the same rule you must make of every man what he is meant for, and the farm will be as right as a trivet.<sup>17</sup>

Everything has its use, but no one thing is good for all purposes. The baby said, "The cat crew and the cock rocked the cradle," but old folks knew better: the cat is the best at mousing and the cock at rousing. Don't choose your tools by their looks, for that's best which does best. A silver trowel lays very few bricks. You cannot curry a horse with a tortoise-shell comb, or fell oaks with a pen-knife, or open oysters with a gold tooth-pick. *Fine* is not so good as *fit* when work is to be done. A good workman will get on pretty well with a poor tool, and a brave soldier never lacks a weapon. Still, the best is good enough for me, and John Ploughman does not care to use a clumsy tool because it looks pretty. Better ride on a donkey that carries you than on a steed which throws you. It is far better to work with an old-fashioned spade that suits your hand, than with a new-fangled invention you don't understand.

In trying to do good to your fellow-men, the gospel is out of sight the best instrument to work with. The new doctrine that they call "modern thought" is nothing better than a handsaw, and it won't work a bit. This fine new nothing of a gospel would not save a mouse; but the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ is suited to man's need, and by God's grace does its work famously. Let every preacher and teacher keep to it, for they will never find a better. Try to win men with its loving words and precious promises, and there's no fear of labor in vain. Some praise the balm of Gilead or man's morality; many try the Roman salve or the oil of Babylon; and others

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<sup>16</sup> **midge** – small fly.

<sup>17</sup> **trivet** – three-legged stand put over a fire to hold cooking vessels; with only three legs, it is always stable.

use a cunning ointment mixed by learned philosophers. But for his own soul's wounds and for the hurts of others, John Ploughman knows but one cure, and that is given freely by the good Physician to all who ask for it. A humble faith in Christ Jesus will soon bring you this sovereign remedy. Use no other, for no other is of use.

## 5. Don't Cut Off Your Nose to Spite Your Face

### *Anger*

Anger is a short madness. The less we do when we go mad the better for everybody, and the less we go mad the better for ourselves. He is far gone who hurts himself to wreak his vengeance on others. The old saying is, "Don't cut off your head because it aches," and another says, "Set not your house on fire to spite the moon." If things go awry, it is a poor way of mending to make them worse, as the man did who took to drinking because he could not marry the girl he liked. He must be a fool who cuts off his nose to spite his face, and yet this is what Dick did when he had vexed his old master, and because he was chid<sup>18</sup> must necessarily give up his place, throw himself out of work, and starve his wife and family. Jane had been idle, and she knew it, but sooner than let her mistress speak to her, she gave in her notice, and lost as good a service as a maid could wish for. Old Griggs was wrong, and could not deny it, and yet because the parson's sermon fitted him rather close, he took the sulks and vowed he would never hear the good man again. It was his own loss, but he wouldn't listen to reason, but was as willful as a pig.

Do nothing when you are out of temper, and then you will have less to undo. Let a hasty man's passion be a warning to you; if he scalds you, take heed that you do not let your own pot boil over. Many a man has given himself a box on the ear in his blind rage, ay, and ended his own life out of spite. He who cannot curb his temper carries gunpowder in his bosom, and he is neither safe for himself nor his neighbors. When passion comes in at the door, what little sense there is indoors flies out at the window. By-and-by a hasty man cools and comes to himself, like MacGibbon's gruel when he put it out of the window; but if his nose is off in the meantime, who is to put it on again? He will only be sorry once and that will be all the rest of his life. Anger does a man more hurt than that which made him angry. It opens his mouth and shuts his eyes, fires his heart, drowns his sense, and makes his wisdom folly. Old Tompkins told me that he was sorry that he lost his temper, and I could not help thinking that the pity was that he ever found it again, for it was like an old shoe with the sole gone and the upper leathers worn out, only fit for a dunghill. A hot-tempered man would be all the better for a new heart and a right spirit (Psa 51:10).

Anger is a fire that cooks no victuals and comforts no household. It cuts and curses and kills, and no one knows what it may lead to. Therefore, good reader, don't let it lodge in your bosom; and if it ever comes there, pass the vagrant on to the next parish.

*Gently, gently, little pot, Why so hasty to be hot?  
Over you will surely boil, And I know not what you'll spoil.*

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<sup>18</sup> **was chid** – had received words of disapproval and rebuke.

## 6. Drunkards, Read This!

I now hand you a handbill to stick up in the “Rose and Crown”<sup>19</sup> window, if the landlord wants an advertisement. It was written many years ago, but it is quite as good as new. Any beer-seller may print it who thinks it likely to help his trade.

Drunkenness:

- expels reason, distempers the body,  
diminishes strength, inflames the blood.
- causes internal/external/eternal/incurable wounds.
- is a witch to the senses, a demon to the soul,  
a thief to the purse, a guide to beggary, lechery, and villainy.
- is the wife’s woe and the children’s sorrow.
- makes a man wallow worse than a beast, and act like a fool.

He is a self-murderer who drinks to another’s good health,  
and robs himself of his own.

## 7. Every Man Should Sweep Before His Own Door

### *Responsibility*

He is a wise man who has wit enough for his own affairs. It is a common thing for people to mind Number One, but not so common to see people mend it. When it comes to spending money on labor or improvements, they think that repairs should begin at Number Two, and Number Three, and go on till all the houses up to Number Fifty are touched up—before any hint should be given to Number One. Now, this is very stupid, for if charity should begin at home, certainly reformation should begin there too. It is a waste of time to go far away to make a clearance; there’s nothing like sweeping the snow from your own door. Let every dog carry his own tail. Mind your own business and mend your own manners, and if every man does the same all will be minded and mended. As the old song says:

*Should every man defend his house, Then all would be defended.  
If every man would mend a man, Then all mankind were mended.*

A man who does not look well to his own concerns is not fit to be trusted with other people’s. Lots of folks are so busy abroad that they have no time to look at home. They say the cobbler’s wife goes barefoot, and the baker’s child gets no buns, and the sweep’s house has sooty chimneys. This comes of a man’s thinking that he is everybody except himself. All the wit in the world is not in one head, and therefore the wisest man living is not bound to look after all his neighbors’ matters.

There are wonderful people about whose wisdom would beat Solomon into fits; and yet they have not sense enough to keep their own kettle from boiling over. They could manage the nation, and yet can’t keep their boys out of the farmer’s orchard; they could teach the parson, but they can’t learn themselves. They poke their noses into other people’s concerns, where they are as welcome as water in one’s shoes, but as for setting their own house to rights, they like the job about as much as a pig likes having a ring put in his nose. The meddling man will not begin

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<sup>19</sup> **Rose and Crown** – typical name for a tavern.

to darn his own stockings because he has left his needle sticking in his cousin's socks. He will be as grey as grandma's cat before he improves, and yet he struts like a crow in a gutter and thinks himself cock of the walk.

A man's own selfishness and conceit ought to make him see to his own ways if nothing else does.

*There's but one wise man in the world, And who d'ye think it be?  
'Tis this man, that man, t'other man, Every man thinks 'tis he.*

Now, if this be so, why does not this wise man do the wise thing and set his own wise self in the way of growing wiser? Every cat cleans its own fur and licks its own kittens—when will men and women mind their own minds and busy themselves with their own business? Boil your own potatoes, and let me roast mine if I like; I won't do it with your fire. "Every man to his tent" was the old cry in Israel (2Sa 20:22), and it's not a bad one for England—only Nelson<sup>20</sup> gave us a better: "England expects every man to do his duty."

## **8. Scant Feeding of Man or Horse Is Small Profit and Sure Loss** *Industry and Contentment*

As for the men, I wish they were all round a more deserving set, but I am obliged to own that many are better at grubbing than ploughing. I would say to them, "Do good work, and then ask for good wages." I am afraid that many are not worth more than they get. Our old master used to say to Crawley Jones, "You feed so fast, and walk so very slow. Eat with your legs, and with your grinders go."

But then, if Jones was a slow man, he certainly had slow pay. He did not see the fun of working to the tune of twenty shillings when he received only ten. If he had done more, master would have given him more, but Jones couldn't see that; and so he mooched about—doing next to nothing—and got next to nothing for it. He very seldom got a bit of meat, and there was no bone or muscle in the man. He seemed to be fed on turnip-tops, and was as dull as a dormouse in winter time—and unless you had emptied a skip of bees over him you couldn't have woke him up...

Well, if after all our being sober and thrifty, we cannot get along without pinching, let us still be patient and contented. We have more blessings than we can count even now. If masters happen to be close-fisted, God is open-handed; and if the outward food be scant, the bread of heaven is plentiful. Cheer up, brother ploughman, it's better on before. There is a city where "the very streets are paved with gold exceeding clear and fine" (see Rev 21:10-18). This should make us feel like singing all the time, and help us to follow the advice of old Thomas:

*At bed, and at board, whatsoever befall,  
Whatever God sendeth, be merry withal.*

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<sup>20</sup> **Horatio Nelson** (1758-1805) – Vice Admiral in the British Royal Navy, noted for his inspirational leadership and superb grasp of strategy, resulting in a number of decisive naval victories, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars.

## 9. Never Stop the Plough to Catch a Mouse

### *Priorities*

There's not much profit in this game. Think of a man and a boy and four horses all standing still for the sake of a mouse! What would old friend Tusser<sup>21</sup> say to that? I think he would rhyme in this fashion: "A ploughman deserveth a cut of the whip, If for idle pretense he let the hours slip." Heaps of people act like this. They have a great work in hand that requires all their wits, and they leave it to squabble over some pretty nothing, not worth a fig. Old master Tom would say to them, "No more tittle-tattle, Go on with your cattle." He could not bear for a farmer to let his horses out even for carting, because it took their work away from the farm. And so I am sure he would be in a great stew if he saw farmers wasting their time at matches, hunts, and the like. He says,

*Who slacketh his tillage a carter to be,  
For groat<sup>22</sup> got abroad, at home shall lose three;  
For sure by so doing he brings out of heart,  
Both land for the corn, and horse for the cart.*

The main chance must be minded, and the little things must be borne with. Nobody would burn his house down to kill the black-beetles, and it would never answer to kill the bullocks to feed the cats. If our baker left off making bread for a week while he cracked the cock-roaches, what should we all do for breakfast? If the butcher sold no more meat till he had killed all the blow-flies, we should be many a day without mutton. If the water companies never gave the Londoners a drink till they had fished every gudgeon<sup>23</sup> out of the Thames, how would the old ladies make their tea? There's no use in stopping your fishing because of the sea-weed, nor your riding because of the dust.

Now, our minister said to me the other day, "John, if you were on the committees of some of our societies, you would see this mouse-hunting done to perfection. Not only committees, but whole bodies of Christian people go mouse-hunting." "Well," said I, "Minister, just write me a bit, and I will stick it in my book. It will be beef to my horseradish." Here's his writing:

A society of good Christian people will split into pieces over a petty quarrel, or mere matter of opinion, while all around them the masses are perishing for lack of the gospel. A miserable little mouse, which no cat would ever hunt, takes them off from their Lord's work. Again, intelligent men will spend months of time and heaps of money in inventing and publishing mere speculations, while the great field of the world lies unploughed. They seem to care nothing how many may perish so long as they can ride their hobbies. In other matters a little common sense is allowed to rule, but in the weightiest matters foolishness is sadly conspicuous. As for you and me, John, let us kill a mouse when it nibbles our bread, but let us not spend our lives over it. What can be done by a mousetrap or a cat should not occupy all our thoughts.

The paltry trifles of this world are much of the same sort. Let us give our chief attention to the chief things: the glory of God, the winning of souls for Jesus, and our own salvation.

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, containing many common poems used by Spurgeon throughout this work (see Preface).

<sup>22</sup> **groat** – English silver coin worth four pence, used from the 14th to the 17th century.

<sup>23</sup> **gudgeon** – a small fish.



There are fools enough in the world, and there can be no need that Christian men should swell the number. Go on with your ploughing, John, and I will go on with my preaching, and “in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal 6:9).

## 10. A Looking Glass Is of No Use to a Blind Man

### *Knowing Yourself*

He who will not see is much the same as if he had no eyes. Indeed, in some things, the man without eyes has the advantage, for he is in the dark and knows it. A lantern is of no use to a bat, and good teaching is lost on the man who will not learn. Reason is folly with the unreasonable. One man can lead a horse to the water, but a hundred cannot make him drink. It is easy work to tell a man the truth; but if he will not be convinced, your labor is lost. We pity the poor blind man; we cannot do so much as that for those who shut their eyes against the light.

A man who is blind to *his own faults* is blind to his own interests. He who thinks that he never was a fool is a fool now. He who never owns that he is wrong will never get right. He’ll mend, as the saying is, when he grows better, like sour beer in summer. How can a man take the smuts off his face if he will not look in the glass, nor believe that they are there when he is told of them?

*Prejudice* shuts up many eyes in total darkness. The man knows already; he is positive and can swear to it, and it’s no use your arguing. He has made up his mind—and it did not take him long, for there’s very little of it. But when he has said a thing he sticks to it like cobbler’s wax. He is wiser than seven men that can render a reason. He is as positive as if he had been on the other side the curtain and looked into the back yard of the universe. He talks as if he carried all knowledge in his waistcoat pocket like a peppermint lozenge. Those who like may try to teach him, but I don’t care to hold up a mirror to a mole.

Some men are blinded by their *worldly business*, and could not see heaven itself if the windows were open over their heads. Look at farmer Grab, he is like Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4), for his conversation is all among beasts, and if he does not eat grass it is because he never could stomach salads. His dinner is his best devotion; he is a terrible fastener on a piece of beef, and sweats at it more than at his labor.

As old Master Earle says, “His religion is a part of his copyhold, which he takes from his landlord, and refers wholly to his lordship’s discretion. If he gives him leave, he goes to church in his best clothes, and sits there with his neighbors, but never prays more than two prayers—for rain or for fair weather, as the case may be. He is a miser all the week, except on market days, where, if his corn sell well, he thinks he may be drunk with a good conscience. He is sensible of no calamity but the burning of a stack of corn, or the overflowing of a meadow, and he thinks Noah’s flood the greatest plague that ever was, not because it drowned the world, but spoiled the grass. For death he is never troubled, and if he gets in his harvest before it happens, it may come when it will, he cares not.”

He is as stubborn as he is stupid, and to get a new thought into his head you would need to bore a hole in his skull with a center-bit. The game would not be worth the candle. We must leave him alone, for he is too old in the tooth, and too blind to be made to see...

Of all dust the worst for the eyes is gold dust. A bribe blinds the judgment, and riches darken the mind. As smoke to the eyes, so also is flattery to the soul, and prejudice turns the light of the sun into a darkness that may be felt. We are all blind by nature, and till the good Physician opens our eyes we grope, even in gospel light. All the preaching in the world cannot make a man see the truth so long as his eyes are blinded. There is a heavenly eyesalve which is a sovereign cure, but the worst of the matter is that the blind in heart think they see already, and so they are likely to die in darkness. Let us pray for those who never pray for themselves: God's power can do for them what is far beyond our power.

*A dark and blinded thing is man, Yet full of fancied light!  
But all his penetration can Obtain no gospel light.  
Though heavenly truth may blaze abroad, He cannot see at all;  
Though gospel leaders show the road, He still gropes for the wall.  
Perhaps he stands to hear the sound, But blind he still remains,  
No meaning in the Word is found To cause him joys or pains.  
O Lord, Thy holy power display, For Thou the help must find.  
Pour in the light of gospel day, Illuminate the blind.  
Behold, how unconcerned they dwell Though reft of sight they be.  
They fancy they can see right well, And need no help from Thee.  
Speak, and they'll mourn their blinded eyes, And cry to Thee for light.  
O Lord, do not our prayer despise, But give these blind men sight!*

## **11. He Has the Fiddle, But Not the Stick**

### *Hard Work and Faith*

It often comes to pass that a man steps into another's shoes, and yet cannot walk in them. A poor tool of a parson gets into a good man's pulpit and takes the same texts, but the sermons are chalk and not cheese. A half-baked young swell inherits his father's money, but not his generosity; his barns, but not his brains; his title, but not his sense. He has the fiddle without the stick, and the more's the pity. Some people imagine that they have only to get hold of the plough-handles, and they would soon beat John Ploughman. If they had his fiddle, they are sure they could play on it. J. P. presents his compliments, and wishes he may be there when it is done...

However, between you and me and the bedpost, there is one secret which John does not mind letting out. John's fiddle is poor enough, but the stick is a right good one—too good to be called a fiddle-stick. Do you want to see the stick with which John plays his fiddle? Here it is: Looking to God for help, John always tries to do his best, whatever he has to do; and he has found this to be the very best way to play all kinds of tunes. What little music there is in John's poor old fiddle comes out of it in that way. Listen to a scrape or two.

*If I were a cobbler, I'd make it my pride  
The best of all cobblers to be;  
If I were a tinker, no tinker beside  
Should mend an old kettle like me.*

*And being a ploughman, I plough with the best.  
No furrow runs straighter than mine;  
I waste not a moment, and stay not to rest,  
Though idlers to tempt me combine.  
Yet I wish not to boast, for trust I have none  
In aught I can do or can be;  
I rest in my Savior, and what He has done  
To ransom poor sinners like me.*

## 12. “Great Cry and Little Wool,” Said He Who Clipped the Sow

*Love Not the World*

Instead of shearing sheep, our friend Hodge is trying to shear his pig! He does not seem to be making much of an out at shearing. It will take him all his time to get wool enough for a blanket, and his neighbors are telling him so. But he does not heed them, for a man never listens to reason when he has made up his mind to act unreasonably. He gets “cry” enough to stock a Babylon of babies, but not wool enough to stop his ears with.

Now, is not this very like the world with its notions of pleasure? There is noise enough—laughter and shouting and boasting—but where is the comfort that can warm the heart and give peace to the spirit? Generally there’s plenty of smoke and very little fire in what is called “pleasure.” It promises a nag and gives an egg. Gaiety is a sort of flash in the pan, a fifth of November squib,<sup>24</sup> all fizz and bang and done for. The devil’s meal is all bran, and the world’s wine turns to vinegar. It is always making a great noise over nut-shells. Thousands have had to weep over their blunders in looking for their heaven on earth; but they follow each other like sheep through a gap, not a bit the wiser for the experience of generations. It seems that every man must have a clip at his own particular pig, and cannot be made to believe that like all the rest it will yield him nothing but bristles. Men are not all of one mind as to what is best for them. They no more agree than the clocks in our village, but they all hang together in following after vanity, for to the core of their hearts they are vain...

A man is covetous and hopes to escape misery by being a miser. His greedy mind can no more be filled than a lawyer’s purse. He never has enough, and so he never has a feast. He makes money with his teeth, by keeping them idle. That is a very lean hog to clip at; for poverty wants some things, luxury many things, but covetousness wants all things. If we could hoard up all the money in the world, what would it be to us at last? Today at good cheer, tomorrow on the bier: in the midst of life we are in death!

Some, like old Mrs. Too-good, go in for self-righteousness, and their own mouths dub them saints. They are the pink of perfection, the cream of creation, the gems of their generation—and yet a sensible man would not live in the same house with them for all the money you could count. They are saints abroad, but ask their maids what they are at home. Great cry and little wool is common enough in religion: you will find that those who crack themselves up are generally cracked, and those who despise their neighbors come to be despised themselves.

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<sup>24</sup> **Fifth of November** – Guy Fawkes Day in Great Britain, when a plot to blow up Parliament was foiled. It is celebrated with fireworks throughout the country.

Many try wickedness and run into bad company, and rake the kennels of vice. I warrant you they may shear the whole styful of filthy creatures and never find a morsel of wool on the whole lot of them. Loose characters, silly amusements, gambling, wantonness, and such like are swine that none but a fool will try his shears upon. I don't deny that there's plenty of swinish music—who ever expected that there would be silence in a piggery? But then noise cannot fill the heart nor laughter lighten the soul. John Ploughman has tried for himself, and he knows by experience that all the world is nothing but a hog that is not worth the shearing. “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Ecc 1:2).

But yet there is wool to be had; there are real joys to be got for the asking if we ask aright. Below, all things deceive us; but above us there is a true Friend. “Wherefore do ye spend your money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not?” (Isa 55:2).

This is John Ploughman's verdict, which he wishes all his readers to take note of: Faith in Jesus Christ will give sweetest pleasures while we live. Faith in Jesus must supply solid comfort when we die.

### **13. You May Bend the Sapling, but Not the Tree** *Parenting*

Ladder, pole, and cord will be of no use to straighten the bent tree; it should have been looked after much earlier. Train trees when they are saplings and young lads before the down comes on their chins. If you want a bullfinch to pipe, whistle to him while he is young; he will scarcely catch the tune after he has learnt the wild bird's note. Begin early to teach, for children begin early to sin. Catch them young, and you may hope to keep them.

*Ere your boy has reached to seven, Teach him well the way to heaven:  
Better still the work will thrive, If he learns before he's five.*

What is learned young is learned for life. What we hear at the first, we remember to the last. The bent twig grows up a crooked tree. Horse-breakers say, “The tricks a colt gets at his first backing, Will while he continues never be lacking.” When a boy is rebellious, conquer him, and do it well the first time, that there may be no need to do it again. A child's first lesson should be obedience, and after that you may teach it what you please. Yet the young mind must not be laced too tight, or you may hurt its growth and hinder its strength.

They say a daft nurse makes a wise child, but I do not believe it: nobody needs so much common sense as a mother or a governess. It does not do to be always thwarting; and yet remember, if you give a child his will and a whelp<sup>25</sup> his fill, both will surely turn out ill. A child's back must be made to bend, but it must not be broken. He must be ruled, but not with a rod of iron. His spirit must be conquered but not crushed.

Nature does sometimes overcome nurture; but, for the most part, the teacher wins the day.<sup>26</sup> Children are what they are made: the pity is that so many are spoiled in the bringing up. A child may be rocked too hard; you may spoil him either by too much cuffing or too much kissing. I knew two boys who had a Christian mother, but she always let them have their own way. The

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<sup>25</sup> **whelp** – young dog.

<sup>26</sup> These are general patterns. God may allow a sinful child to rebel after excellent training from parents. The training itself glorifies God. The results of training are up to Him.

consequence was that when they grew up they took to drinking and low company, and soon spent the fortune their father left them. No one controlled them and they had no control over themselves, and so they just rattled along the broad road (Mat 7:13) like butcher boys with runaway horses, and there was no stopping them. A birch or two worn out upon them when they were little would have been a good use of timber.

Still, a child can be treated too hardly, and especially he can be shut up too many hours in school, when a good run and a game of play would do him more good. Cows don't give any the more milk for being often milked, nor do children learn any more because of very long hours in a hot room. A boy can be driven to learn till he loses half his wits; forced fruits have little flavor. A man at five is a fool at fifteen. If you make veal of the calf, he will never turn to beef. Yet learning may be left so long that the little dunce is always behindhand.

There's a medium in everything. He is a good father who hits upon it so that he governs his family with love, and his family loves to be governed by him. Some are like Eli, who let his sons sin and only chided them a little (1Sa 2:12-17); these will turn out to be cruel parents in the long run. Others are too strict and make home miserable, and so drive the youngsters to the wrong road in another way. Tight clothes are very apt to tear, and hard laws are often broken. But loose garments tear too; and where there are no laws at all, things are sure to go amiss. So you see it is easy to err on either side, and hard to dance the tight-rope of wisdom. Depend on it: he who has a wife and bairns<sup>27</sup> will never be short of care to carry. See what we get when we come to marry!—yet many there are who will not tarry.

In these days children have a good deal too much of their own way and often make their mothers and fathers their slaves. It has come to a fine pass when the goslings teach the geese, and the kittens rule the cat—it is the upsetting of everything, and no parent ought to put up with it. It is as bad for the boys and girls as it is for the grown folk, and it brings out the worst side of their characters. I would sooner be a cat on hot bricks, or a toad under a harrow, than let my own children be my masters. No, the head must be the head, or it will hurt the whole body. “For children out of place Are a father's disgrace. If you rule not you'll rue,<sup>28</sup> For they'll quickly rule you.”

## **14. A Man May Love His House, though He Ride Not on the Ridge**

### *Balance*

You can love your house and not ride on the ridge;<sup>29</sup> there's a medium in everything. You can be fond of your wife without being her drudge; and you can love your children dearly, and yet not give them their own way in everything. Some men are of so strange a kidney that they set no bounds to their nonsense. If they are fond of roast beef, they feel they have to suck the spit. They cannot rest with eating the pudding, they must swallow the bag. If they dislike a thing, the very smell of it sets them grumbling. And if they like it, they must have it everywhere and always, for nothing else is half so sweet. When they do go in for eating rabbits, they have

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<sup>27</sup> **bairns** – *Scottish*: children.

<sup>28</sup> **rue** – feel sorry; regret.

<sup>29</sup> **ride on the ridge** – parade up and down on the peak of the roof.

“Rabbits young and rabbits old; Rabbits hot and rabbits cold; Rabbits tender, rabbits tough: Never can they have enough...”

You can make a good thing become a nuisance by harping on that one string from dawn to dusk. A hen with one chick makes no end of scratching and clucking, and so does a fellow of one idea. He has a bee in his bonnet, and he tries to put a wasp in yours. He duns you;<sup>30</sup> and if you do not agree with him, he counts you his enemy. When you meet with him, you are unfortunate; and when you leave him you will better yourself go where you may. “There’s small sorrow at our parting,” as the old mare said to the broken cart. You may try to humor him, but he will have all the more humors if you do; for the man knows no moderation, and if you let him ride on the roof, he will soon sit on the chimney-pot...

What a trial it is to be shut up for an hour with a man or a woman with a hobby; riding in a horsebox with a bear with a sore head is nothing [compared] to it. The man is so fond of bacon that he wants you to kiss his pig, and all the while you hope you will never again see either the man or his pork as long as you live. No matter what the whole hog may be, the man who goes it is terrible.

*Rocking horse for boy, hobby horse for man;  
Each one rides his toy whenever he can.  
The boy is right glad though he rideth alone;  
His father’s own fad by the world must be known.  
Of the two hobby rides, the boy’s is the best;  
For the man often chides, and gives you no rest.*

It is a good thing for a man to be fond of his own trade and his own place, but still there is reason in everything, even in roasting eggs. When a man thinks that his place is below him, he will pretty soon be below his place, and therefore a good opinion of your own calling is by no means an evil. Yet nobody is everybody, and no trade is to crow over the rest. The cobbler has his awl but he is not all, and the hatter wears a crown but he is not king. A man may come to market without buying my onions, and ploughing can be done with other horses than mine (though Dapper and Violet are something to brag of). The farming interest is no doubt first, and so is the saddler’s, and so is the tinker’s, and so is the grocer’s, and so is the draper’s, and so is the parson’s, and so is the parish beadle’s—and so is every other interest according to each man’s talk.

*Your trade, as a trade, is all very well.  
But other good folk have their cheeses to sell.  
You must not expect all the world to bow down  
And give to one peddler the sceptre and crown.*

It is astonishing how much men will cry up small matters. They are very busy, but it is with catching flies. They talk about a mushroom till you would think it was the only thing at the Lord Mayor’s dinner, and the beef and the turkeys went for nothing. They say nothing about the leg of mutton, for they are so much in love with the trimmings. They can’t keep things in their places, but make more of a horse’s tail than they do of his whole body. Like the cock on the dunghill, they consider a poor barley-corn to be worth more than a diamond. A thing happens to suit their taste and so there is nothing like it in the whole of England; no, nor in all America or Australia. A duck will not always dabble in the same gutter; but they will, for, bless your heart, they don’t

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<sup>30</sup> **duns you** – urges you importunately.

think it a gutter but a river, if not an ocean. They must ride the ridge of the roof, or else burn the house down. A good many people love their dogs, but these folks take them to bed with them. Other farmers fat the calf, but they fall down and worship it. And what is worse, they quarrel with everybody who does not think as much of their idol as they do.

It will be a long while before all men become wise, but it will help on the time if we begin to be wise ourselves. Don't let us make too much of this world and the things of it. We are to use it but not to abuse it; to live *in* it but not *for* it; to love our house but not to ride on the ridge. Our daily bread and daily work are to be minded, and yet we must not mind earthly things (Col 3:2). We must not let the body send the soul to grass, rather must we make the limbs servants to the soul. The world must not rule us; we must reign as kings though we are only ploughmen, and stand upright even if the world should be turned upside down.

## 15. Great Talkers Think Themselves Great Men

### *Practicality*

Wonderful men and white rats are not so scarce as most people think. Folks may talk as they like about Mr. Gladstone and that sharp gentleman Bismarck,<sup>31</sup> but Jack, Tom, Harry, and scores more that I know of, could manage their business for them a fine sight better—at least, *they* think so, and are quite ready to try...

I used to feel quite staggered when I heard of an amazing clever man, but I've got used to it, as the rook<sup>32</sup> did to the scarecrow when he found out that it was a stuffed nothing. Like the picture that looked best a very long distance off, so do most clever fellows. They are swans a mile off, but geese when you get near them. Some men are too knowing to be wise; their boiler bursts because they have more steam than they can use. They know too much, and having gone over the top of the ladder they have gone down on the other side. People who are really wise never think themselves so. One of them said to me the other day, "All things I thought I knew; but now confess: The more I know I know, I know the less."

Simple Simon is in a sad plight in such a world as this, but on the whole he gets on better than a fellow who is too clever by half. Every mouse had need have its eyes open nowadays, for the cats are very many and uncommonly sharp. And yet, you mark my word, most of the mice that are caught are the knowing ones. Somehow or other, in an ordinary sort of a world like this, it does not answer to be so over and above clever. Those who are up to so many dodges, find the dodges come down on them before long. My neighbor Hinks was much too wise a man to follow the plough, like poor shallow-pated John Ploughman, and so he took to scheming, and has schemed himself into one of the largest mansions in the country, where he will be provided with oakum<sup>33</sup> to pick and a crank to turn during the next six calendar months. He had better have been a fool, for his cleverness has cost him his character.

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<sup>31</sup> **William Ewart Gladstone** (1809-1898) – British politician who served as Prime Minister four separate times (1868-74, 1880-85, 1886, and 1892-94), more than any other person.

**Otto von Bismarck** (1815-1898) – conservative Prussian statesman who dominated German and European affairs from the 1860s until 1890, unifying the German states.

<sup>32</sup> **rook** – crow.

<sup>33</sup> **oakum** – the substance of old ropes untwisted and pulled into loose hemp; used for caulking the seams of ships.

When a man is too clever to tell the truth, he will bring himself into no end of trouble before long. When he is too clever to stick to his trade, he is like the dog that let the meat fall into the water through trying to catch at its shadow. Clever Jack can do everything and can do nothing. He intends to be rich all at once and despises small gains, and therefore is likely to die a beggar. When puffing is trusted and honest trading is scoffed at, time will not take long to wind up the concern. Work is as needful now as ever it was if a man would thrive. Catching birds by putting salt on their tails would be all very well, but the creatures will not hold their tails still, and so we had better catch them in the usual way. The greatest trick for getting on in business is to work hard and to live hard.<sup>34</sup> There's no making bread without flour, nor building houses without labor. I know the old saying is, "No more mortar, no more brick, A cunning knave has a cunning trick"; but for all that, things go on much the same as ever, and bricks and mortar are still needed.

I see in the papers every now and then, that some of the clever gentlemen who blow up bubble companies<sup>35</sup> are pulled up before the courts. Serve them right! May they go where my neighbor Hinks is, every one of them. How many a poor tradesman is over head and ears in difficulty through them! I hope in future all men will fight shy of these fine companies, and swell managers, and very clever men. Men are neither suddenly rich nor suddenly good. It is all a bag of moonshine when a man would persuade you that he knows a way of earning money by winking your eye. We have all heard of the scheme for making boards out of sawdust, and getting butter out of mud, but we mean to go on with the saw-mill and keep on milking the cows; for between you and me and the blind mare, we have a notion that the plans of idiots and very clever men are as like as two peas in a shell.

The worst sort of clever men are those who know better than the Bible, and are so learned that they believe that the world had no Maker, and that men are only monkeys with their tails rubbed off. Dear, dear me, this is the sort of talk we used to expect from Tom of Bedlam,<sup>36</sup> but now we get it from clever men. If things go on in this fashion, a poor ploughman will not be able to tell which is the lunatic and which is the philosopher. As for me, the old Book seems to be a good deal easier to believe than the new notions, and I mean to keep to it. Many a drop of good broth is made in an old pot, and many a sweet comfort comes out of the old doctrine. Many a dog has died since I first opened my eyes, and every one of these dogs has had his day; but in all the days put together they have never hunted out a real fault in the Bible, nor started anything better in its place. They may be very clever, but they will not find a surer truth than that which God teaches, nor a better salvation than that which Jesus brings. So, finding my very life in the gospel, I mean to live in it—and so ends this chapter.

## 16. Two Dogs Fight for a Bone, and a Third Runs Away with It

### *Lawsuits*

We have all heard of the two men who quarreled over an oyster, and called in a judge to settle the question: he ate the oyster himself, and gave them a shell each. This reminds me of the

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<sup>34</sup> **live hard** – live simply and frugally.

<sup>35</sup> **blow up bubble companies** – use financial deceit to make a sham company seem large and profitable.

<sup>36</sup> **Tom of Bedlam** – the mentally ill; patients at the Bedlam Royal (mental) Hospital.



story of the cow that two farmers could not agree about, and so the lawyers stepped in and milked the cow for them, and charged them for their trouble in drinking the milk. Little is got by law, but much is lost by it. A suit in law may last longer than any suit a tailor can make you, and you may yourself be worn out before it comes to an end. It is better far to make differences up and keep out of court, for if you are caught there, you are caught in the brambles—and won't get out without damage.

John Ploughman feels a cold sweat at the thought of getting into the hands of lawyers. He does not mind going to Jericho, but he dreads the gentlemen on the road, for they seldom leave a feather upon any goose that they pick up. However, if men will fight, they must not blame the lawyers; if law were cheaper, quarrelsome people would have more of it, and quite as much would be spent in the long run. Sometimes, however, we get dragged into court willy-nilly, and then one had need be wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove (Mat 10:16). Happy is he who finds an honest lawyer, and does not try to be his own client. A good lawyer always tries to keep people out of law; but some clients are like moths with the candle, they must and will burn themselves. He who is so wise that he cannot be taught will have to pay for his pride.

*Let dogs delight to bark and bite, And lose the marrow bone;  
Let bears and lions growl and fight, I'll let the law alone.  
To suffer wrong is surely sad, But lawsuits are in vain;  
To throw good money after bad Will but increase my pain.*

## **17. He Lives under the Sign of a Cat's Foot**

### *A Godly Wife*

The question was once asked: When should a man marry? And the merry answer was that for young men it is too soon, and for old men it is too late. This is all very fine, but it will not wash. Both the wisdom and the folly of men seem banded together to make a mock of this doctrine. Men are such fools that they must and will marry even if they marry fools. It is wise to marry when we can marry wisely, and then the sooner the better. How many show their sense in choosing a partner it is not for me to say, but I fear that in many cases love is blind, and makes a very blind choice. I don't suppose that some people would ever get married at all if love had its wits about it. It is a mystery how certain parties ever found partners; truly, there's no accounting for tastes. However, as they make their bed they must lie on it, and as they tie the knot they must be tied by it...If a three-legged stool come flying through the air, he must be thankful for such a plain token of love from the woman of his choice, and the best thing he can do is to sit down on it and wait for the next little article.

When it is said of a man, "He lives under the sign of a cat's foot," he must try and please his pussy that she may not scratch him more than such cats generally do. A good husband will generally have a good wife, or make a bad wife better. Bad Jack makes a great noise about bad Jill, but there's generally twenty of one where there's a score of the other. They say a burden of one's own choosing is never felt to be heavy. But I don't know: some men are loaded with mischief as soon as they have a wife to carry. "Yet a good woman is worth, if she were sold, The fairest crown that's made of gold." She is a pleasure, a treasure, and a joy without measure.

A good wife and health are a man's best wealth; and he who is in such a case should envy no man's place. Even when a woman is a little tart, it is better than if she had no spirit, and made her house into a dirt pie...A husband is in a pickle indeed if he gets tied up to a regular scold; he might as well be skinned and set up to his neck in a tub of brine...

When the husband is not a man, it is not to be wondered at if the wife wears the top-boots: the mare may well be the best horse when the other horse is a donkey. Well may a woman feel that she is lord and master when she has to earn the living for the family, as is sometimes the case. She ought not to be the head, but if she has all the brains, what is she to do? What poor dawdles many men would be without their wives! As poor softy Simpkins says, "If Bill's wife becomes a widow, who will cut the pudding up for him, and will there be a pudding at all?" It is grand when the wife knows her place and keeps it, and they both pull together in everything. Then she is a helpmeet indeed and makes the house a home. Old friend Tusser says,

*When husband is absent, let housewife be chief,  
And look to their labor who live from their sheaf.  
The housewife's so named for she keepeth the house.  
And must tend on her profit as cat on a mouse.*

He is very pat upon it that much of household affairs must rest on the wife, and he writes, "Both out, not allow, Keep home, housewife thou." Like the old man and woman in the toy which shows the weather, one must be sure to be in if the other goes out. When the king is abroad, the queen must reign at home, and when he returns to his throne, he is bound to look upon her as his crown and prize her above gold and jewels. He should feel "if there's only one good wife in the whole world, I've got her." John Ploughman has long thought just that of his own wife, and after five-and-twenty years he is more sure of it than ever. He never bets, but he would not mind wagering a small cake that there is not a better woman on the surface of the globe than his own, very own beloved. Happy is the man who is happy in his wife. Let him love her as he loves himself (Eph 5), and a little better, for she is his better half. Thank God that hath so blest thee; and sit down, John, and rest thee...

## **18. He Would Put His Finger in the Pie, and So Burned His Nail**

### *Minding One's Business*

Some men must have a finger in every pie, or as the proverb has it, "Their oar must be in every man's boat." They seem to have no business except to poke their noses into other people's business. They ought to have snub noses, for they are pretty sure to be snubbed. Prying and spying, peddling and meddling, these folks are in everybody's way, like the old toll-gate. They come without being sent for, stop without being asked, and cannot be got rid of unless you take them by the left leg and throw them down stairs—and if you do that they will limp up again and hope they don't intrude. No one pays them, and yet they give advice more often than any lawyer; and though no one ever thanks them, yet there they are, peeping through keyholes and listening under the eaves. They are as great at asking questions as if they wanted you to say the catechism, and as eager to give their opinion as if you had gone down on your knees to ask it.

These folks are like dogs that fetch and carry; they run all over the place like starlings when they are feeding their young. They make much ado but never do much, unless it is mischief—

and at this they are as apt as jackdaws. If any man has such people for his acquaintances, he may well say, "Save me from my friends."

*I know your assistance you'll lend, When I want it I'll speedily send;  
You need not be making such stir. But mind your own business, good sir.*

It is of no more use than if we spoke to the pigs, for here is Paul Pry again. Paul and his cousins are most offensive people, but you cannot offend them if you try. Well do I remember the words of a wise old Quaker. "John," said he, "be not concerned with that which concerns not thee." This taught me a lesson, and I made up my mind not to scrub other people's pigs for fear I should soon want scrubbing myself. There is a woman in our village who finds fault with all, and all find fault with her. They say her teeth are all loose through her tongue rubbing against them. If she could but hold her tongue she would be happy enough, but that's the difficulty.

*When hens fall a cackling, take heed to the nest;  
When drabs fall a whispering, farewell to thy rest.*

Will Shepherd was sitting very quiet while others were running down their neighbors. At last a loose fellow sung out, "Look at Old Will, he is as silent as a stock-fish; is it because he is wise or because he is a fool?" "Well," said Will, "you may settle that question how you like, but I have been told that a fool cannot be silent." Will is set down as very odd, but he is generally even with them before he has done. One thing is sure, he cares very little what they do say so long as they don't worry his sheep. He hummed in my ear an old fashioned verse or two the other evening, something like this—

*Since folks will judge me every day, Let every man his judgment say;  
I will take it all as children's play, For I am as I am, whoever say nay.  
Many there be that take delight To judge a man's ways in envy and spite;  
But whether they judge me wrong or right, I am as I am, and so do I write.  
How the truth is I leave to you; Judge as ye list, whether false or true.  
Ye know no more than before ye knew, For I am as I am, whatever ensue.*

If folks will meddle with our business, it is best to take no notice of them. There's no putting them out like letting them stop where they are; they are never so offended as when people neither offend them nor take offense at them. You might as soon stop all the frogs from croaking as quiet idle gossips when they once get on the chat. Stuff your ear with wool, and let them jabber till their tongue lies still because they have worn all the skin off of it. "Where no wood is, the fire goes out"; and if you don't answer them, they can't make a blaze for lack of fuel. Treat them kindly, but don't give them the treat of quarrelling with them. Follow peace with all men, even if you cannot overtake it (Heb 12:14).

## **19. Beware of the Dog    Caution**

John Ploughman did not in his first book weary his friends by preaching, but in this one he makes bold to try his hand at a sermon, and hopes he will be excused if it should prove to be only a ploughman's preachment. If this were a regular sermon preached from a pulpit, of course I should make it long and dismal like a winter's night, for fear people should call me eccentric. As it is only meant to be read at home, I will make it short—though it will not be sweet, for I have not a sweet subject. The text is one that has a great deal of meaning in it, and is to be read on

many a wall. “Beware of dogs” (Phi 3:2). You know what dogs are, and you know how you beware of them when a bulldog flies at you to the full length of his chain; so the words don’t need any clearing up.

It is very odd that the Bible never says a good word for dogs. I suppose the breed must have been bad in those eastern parts, or else, as our minister tells me, they were nearly wild, had no master in particular, and were left to prowl about half starved. No doubt a dog is very like a man, and becomes a sad dog when he has himself for a master. We are all the better for having somebody to look up to; and those who say they care for nobody and nobody cares for them are dogs of the worst breed and, for a certain reason, are never likely to be drowned.

Dear friends, I shall have heads and tails like other parsons, and I am sure I have a right to them, for they are found in the subjects before us.

*Firstly, let us beware of a dirty dog*—or as the grand old Book calls them, “evil workers” (Phi 3:2)—those who love filth and roll in it. Dirty dogs will spoil your clothes and make you as foul as themselves. A man is known by his company; if you go with loose fellows, your character will be tarred with the same brush as theirs. People can’t be very nice<sup>37</sup> in their distinctions; if they see a bird always flying with the crows, and feeding and nesting with them, they call it a crow—and ninety-nine times out of a hundred they are right. If you are fond of the kennel and like to run with the hounds, you will never make the world believe that you are a pet lamb. Besides, bad company does a man real harm, for, as the old proverb has it, “If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas.”

You cannot keep too far off a man with the fever and a man of wicked life. If a lady in a fine dress sees a big dog come out of a horse-pond, and run about shaking himself dry, she is very particular to keep out of his way, and from this we may learn a lesson: when we see a man half gone in liquor, sprinkling his dirty talk all around him, our best place is half-a-mile off at the least.

*Secondly, beware of all snarling dogs.* There are plenty of these about; they are generally very small creatures, but they more than make up for their size by their noise. They yap and snap without end. Dr. Watts said, “Let dogs delight to bark and bite, For God has made them so.”<sup>38</sup>

But I cannot make such an excuse for the two-legged dogs I am writing about, for their own vile tempers and the devil together have made them what they are. They find fault with anything and everything. When they dare they howl, and when they cannot do that they lie down and growl inwardly. Beware of these creatures. Make no friends with an angry man: as well make a bed of stinging nettles or wear a viper for a necklace. Perhaps the fellow is just now very fond of you, but beware of him, for he who barks at others today without a cause, will one day howl at you for nothing. Don’t offer him a kennel down your yard unless he will let you chain him up. When you see that a man has a bitter spirit, and gives nobody a good word, quietly walk away and keep out of his track if you can. Loaded guns and quick tempered people are dangerous pieces of furniture. They don’t mean any hurt, but they are apt to go off and do mischief before

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<sup>37</sup> nice – precise.

<sup>38</sup> Isaac Watts (1674-1748) – English hymn writer and theologian; recognized as the “Father of English Hymnody.” Quoted hymn written in 1715.

you dream of it. Better go a mile out of your way than get into a fight; better sit down on a dozen tintsacks with their points up than dispute with an angry neighbor.

*Thirdly, beware of fawning dogs.* They jump up upon you and leave the marks of their dirty paws. How they will lick your hand and fondle you as long as there are bones to be got—like the lover who said to the cook, “Leave you, dear girl? Never, while you have a shilling.” Too much sugar in the talk should lead us to suspect that there is very little in the heart. The moment a man praises you to your face, mark him, for he is the very gentleman to rail at you behind your back. If a fellow takes the trouble to flatter, he expects to be paid for it, and he calculates that he will get his wages out of the soft brains of those he tickles. When people stoop down, it generally is to pick something up, and men don’t stoop to flatter you unless they reckon upon getting something out of you. When you see too much politeness, you may generally smell a rat if you give a good sniff. Young people need to be on the watch against crafty flatterers. Young women with pretty faces and a little money should especially beware of puppies!

*Fourthly, beware of a greedy dog,* or a man who never has enough. Grumbling is catching; one discontented man sets others complaining, and this is a bad state of mind to fall into. Folks who are greedy are not always honest, and if they see a chance they will put their spoon into their neighbor’s porridge—why not into yours? See how cleverly they skin a flint; before long you will find them skinning you. As you are not quite so used to it as the eels are, you had better give Mr. Skinner a wide berth. When a man boasts that he never gives anything away, you may read it as a caution: “Beware of the dog.” A liberal, kindhearted friend helps you to keep down your selfishness, but a greedy grasper tempts you to put an extra button on your pocket. Hungry dogs will wolf down any quantity of meat and then look out for more, and so will greedy men swallow farms and houses, and then smell around for something else.

I am sick of the animals: I mean both the dogs and men. Talking of nothing but gold and how to make money, and how to save it. Why, one had better live with the hounds at once, and howl over your share of dead horse. The mischief a miserly wretch may do to a man’s heart, no tongue can tell. One might as well be bitten by a mad dog, for greediness is as bad a madness as a mortal can be tormented with. Keep out of the company of screw-drivers, tight-fists, hold-fasts, and blood-suckers: “Beware of dogs.”

*Fifthly, beware of a yelping dog.* Those who talk much tell a great many lies; and if you love truth, you had better not love *them*. Those who talk much are likely enough to speak ill of their neighbors, and of yourself among the rest; and therefore, if you do not want to be town-talk, you will be wise to find other friends. Mr. Prate-apace will weary you out one day, and you will be wise to break off his acquaintance before it is made. Do not lodge in Clack Street, nor next door to the Gossip’s Head. A lion’s jaw is nothing compared to a talebearer’s. If you have a dog that is always barking, and should chance to lose him, don’t spend a penny in advertising for him. Few are the blessings that are poured upon dogs which howl all night and wake up honest householders, but even these can be better put up with than those incessant chatterers who never let a man’s character rest either day or night.

*Sixthly, beware of a dog that worries the sheep.* Such get into our churches and cause a world of misery. Some have new doctrines as rotten as they are new; others have new plans, whims, and crotchets,<sup>39</sup> and nothing goes right till these are tried. And there is a third sort that

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<sup>39</sup> crotchets – fancies.

are out of love with everybody and everything, and only come into the churches to see if they can make a row. Mark these and keep clear of them. There are plenty of humble Christians who only want leave to be quiet and mind their own business, and these troubles are their plague. To hear the gospel and to be helped to do good is all that the most of our members want, but these worries come in with their “-ologies,” puzzlements, and hard speeches, and cause sorrow upon sorrow. A good shepherd will soon fetch these dogs a crack of the head; but they will be at their work again if they see half a chance. What pleasure can they find in it? Surely they must have a touch of the wolf in their nature. At any rate, “Beware of the dog.”

*Seventhly, beware of dogs who have returned to their vomit.* An apostate<sup>40</sup> is like a leper. As a rule, none are more bitter enemies of the cross than those who once professed to be followers of Jesus. He who can turn away from Christ is not a fit companion for any honest man. There are many abroad nowadays who have thrown off religion as easily as a ploughman puts off his jacket. It will be a terrible day for them when the heavens are on fire above them and the world is ablaze under their feet. If a man calls himself my friend, and leaves the ways of God, then his way and mine are different; he who is no friend to the good cause is no friend of mine.

*Lastly, finally, and to finish up, beware of a dog that has no master.* If a fellow makes free with the Bible, the laws of his country, and common decency, it is time to make free to tell him we had rather have his room than his company. A certain set of wonderfully wise men are talking very big things, and putting their smutty fingers upon everything that their fathers thought to be good and holy. Poor fools, they are not half as clever as they think they are. Like hogs in a flower-garden, they are for rooting up everything—and some people are so frightened that they stand as if they were stuck, and hold up their hands in horror at the creatures. When the hogs have been in my master’s garden, and I have had the big whip handy, I warrant you I have made a clearance. I only wish I was a scholar, for I would lay about me among these free-thinking gentry, and make them squeal to a long meter tune. As John Ploughman has other fish to fry, and other tails to butter, he must leave these mischievous creatures, and finish his rough ramshackle sermon.

“Beware of dogs.” Beware of all who will do you harm. Good company is to be had, why seek bad? It is said of heaven, “without are dogs” (Rev 22:15). Let us make friends of those who can go inside of heaven, for there we hope to go ourselves. We shall go to our own company when we die; let it be such that we shall be glad to go to it.

## **20. Like Cat, Like Kit**     *Motherhood*

Most men are what their mothers made them. The father is away from home all day, and has not half the influence over the children that the mother has. The cow has most to do with the calf. If a ragged colt grows into a good horse, we know who it is that combed him. A mother is therefore a very responsible woman, even though she may be the poorest in the land, for the bad or the good of her boys and girls very much depends upon her. As is the gardener such is the garden, as is the wife such is the family. Samuel’s mother made him a little coat every year (1Sa

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<sup>40</sup> **apostate** – one who has professed to believe in Christ in the past, but then has abandoned either the fundamental doctrines of the faith or a godly life. See Free Grace Broadcaster 205, *Apostasy*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

2:19), but she had done a good deal for him before that: Samuel would not have been Samuel if Hannah had not been Hannah. We shall never see a better set of men till the mothers are better. We must have Sarahs and Rebekahs before we shall see Isaacs and Jacobs. Grace does not run in the blood, but we generally find that the Timothies have mothers of a godly sort.

Little children give their mother the headache, but if she lets them have their own way, when they grow up to be great children they will give her the heartache. Foolish fondness spoils many, and letting faults alone spoils more. Gardens that are never weeded will grow very little worth gathering; all watering and no hoeing will make a bad crop. A child may have too much of its mother's love, and in the long run it may turn out that it had too little. Soft-hearted mothers rear soft-headed children; they hurt them for life because they are afraid of hurting them when they are young. Coddle your children, and they will turn out noodles. You may sugar a child till everybody is sick of it. Boys' jackets need a little dusting every now and then, and girls' dresses are all the better for occasional trimming. Children without chastisement are fields without ploughing. The very best colts need breaking in. Not that we like severity; cruel mothers are not mothers, and those who are always flogging and fault-finding ought to be flogged themselves! There is reason in all things, as the madman said when he cut off his nose.

Good mothers are very dear to their children. There's no mother in the world like our own mother. My friend Sanders, from Glasgow, says, "The mither's breath is aye sweet." Every woman is a handsome woman to her own son. That man is not worth hanging who does not love his mother. When good women lead their little ones to the Saviour, the Lord Jesus blesses not only the children, but their mothers as well. Happy are they among women who see their sons and their daughters walking in the truth (2Jo 1:4).

He who thinks it easy to bring up a family never had one of his own. A mother who trains her children aright had need be wiser than Solomon, for his son turned out a fool. Some children are perverse from their infancy; none are born perfect, but some have a double share of imperfections. Do what you will with some children, they don't improve. Wash a dog, comb a dog, still a dog is but a dog. Trouble seems thrown away on some children. Such cases are meant to drive us to God, for He can cleanse out the leopard's spots. It is clear that whatever faults our children have, we are their parents, and we cannot find fault with the stock they came of. Wild geese do not lay tame eggs. That which is born of a hen will be sure to scratch in the dust. The child of a cat will hunt after mice. Every creature follows its kind. If we are black, we cannot blame our offspring if they are dark too.

Let us do our best with them, and pray the Mighty Lord to put His hand to the work. Children of prayer will grow up to be children of praise; mothers who have wept before God for their sons will one day sing a new song over them. Some colts often break the halter, and yet become quiet in harness. God can make those new whom we cannot mend, therefore let mothers never despair of their children as long as they live. Are they away from you across the sea? Remember, the Lord is there as well as here. Prodigals may wander, but they are never out of sight of the great Father, even though they may be "a great way off" (Luk 15:20).

Let mothers labor to make home the happiest place in the world. If they are always nagging and grumbling, they will lose their hold of their children, and the boys will be tempted to spend their evenings away from home. Home is the best place for boys and men, and a good mother is the soul of home. The smile of a mother's face has enticed many into the right path, and the fear of bringing a tear into her eye has called off many a man from evil ways. The boy may have a

heart of iron, but his mother can hold him like a magnet. The devil never reckons a man to be lost so long as he has a good mother alive. O woman, great is your power! See to it that it be used for Him Who thought of His mother even in the agonies of death (Joh 19:26).

## 21. A Horse that Carries a Halter Is Soon Caught

### *Mortification*

With a few oats in a sieve the nag is tempted, and the groom soon catches him if he has his halter on; but the other horse, who has no rope dangling from his head, gives master Bob a sight of his heels, and away he scampers...In other concerns it is much the same: you can't get out of a bad way without leaving it altogether, bag and baggage. Half-way will never pay. One thing or the other: be an out-and-outer, or else keep in altogether. Shut up the shop and quit the trade if it is a bad one: to close the front shutters and serve customers at the back door is a silly attempt to cheat the devil, and it will never answer. Such hide-and-seek behavior shows that your conscience has just enough light for you to read your own condemnation by it. Mind what you are at; don't dodge like a rat.

I am always afraid of the tail end of a habit. A man who is always in debt will never be cured till he has paid the last sixpence. When a clock says "tick" once, it will say the same again unless it is quite stopped. Harry Higgins says he only owes for one week at the grocer's, and I am as sure as quarter-day that he will be over head and ears in debt before long. I tell him to clean off the old score and have done with it altogether. He says the tradespeople like to have him on their books, but I am quite sure no man in his senses dislikes ready money. I want him to give up the credit system, for if he does not he will need to outrun the constable.

Bad companions are to be left at once. There's no use in shilly-shallying;<sup>41</sup> they must be told that we would sooner have their room than their company, and if they call again we must start them off with a flea in each ear. Somehow I can't get young fellows to come right out from the black lot; they think they can play with fire and not be burned. Scripture says, "Ye fools, when will ye be wise?" (Psa 94:8).

*April the first stands mark'd by custom's rules,  
A day for being, and for making, fools.  
But, pray, what custom, or what rule, supplies  
A day for making, or for being, wise?*

Nobody wants to keep a little measles or a slight degree of fever. We all want to be quite quit of disease; and so let us try to be rid of every evil habit. What wrong would it be right for us to stick to? Don't let us tempt the devil to tempt us. If we give Satan an inch, he will take a mile. As long as we carry his halter he counts us among his nags. Off with the halter! May the grace of God set us wholly free. Does not Scripture say, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate...and touch not the unclean thing" (2Co 6:17)?

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<sup>41</sup> **shilly-shallying** – wavering delay.



## 22. An Old Fox Is Shy of a Trap    *Deceit*

The old fox knows the trap of old. You don't catch him so easily as you would a cub. He looks sharp at the sharp teeth, and seems to say, "Hello, my old chap; I spy out your trap. Today, will you fetch me? Or wait till you catch me?"

The cat asked the mice to supper, but only the young ones would come to the feast—and they never went home again. "Will you walk into my parlor?" said the spider to the fly, and the silly creature did walk in, and was soon as dead as a doornail.

What a many traps have been set for some of us. Man-traps and woman-traps; traps to catch us by the eye, by the ear, by the throat, and by the nose; traps for the head and traps for the heart; day traps, and night traps, and traps for any time you like. The baits are of all sorts, alive and dead, male and female, common and particular. We had need be wiser than foxes, or we shall soon hear the snap of the man-trap and feel its teeth.

Beware of beginnings: he who does not take the first wrong step will not take the second. Beware of drops, for the fellows who drink take nothing but a "drop of beer," or "a drop too much." Drop your drop of grog. Beware of him who says, "Is it not a little one?" (Gen 19:20). Little sins are the eggs of great sorrows.<sup>42</sup> Beware of lips smeared with honey: see how many flies are caught with sweets. Beware of evil questions that raise needless doubts and make it hard for a man to trust his Maker. Beware of a bad rich man who is very liberal to you; he will buy you first and sell you afterwards. Beware of a dressy young woman, without a mind or a heart; you may be in a net before you can say Jack Robinson. "Pretty fools are no ways rare: Wise men will of such beware."

Beware of the stone that you stumbled over the last time you went that way. Beware of the man who never bewares, and beware of the man whom God has marked. Beware of writing your name on the back of a bill, even though your friend tells you ten times over, "It is only a matter of form, you know." It is a form that you had better "formally decline," as our schoolmaster says. If you want to be chopped up, put your hand to a bill; but if you want to be secure, never stand as security for any living man, woman, child, youth, maiden, cousin, brother, uncle, or mother-in-law (Pro 6:1-5; 11:15).

Beware of trusting all your secrets with anybody but your wife. Beware of a man who will lie, a woman who tells tales out of school, a shop-keeper who sends in his bill twice, and a gentleman who will make your fortune if you will find him a few pounds.<sup>43</sup> Beware of a mule's hind foot, a dog's tooth, and a woman's tongue. Last of all, beware of no man more than of yourself, and take heed in this matter many ways, especially as to your talk. Five words cost Zacharias forty weeks' silence (Luk 1:18-20). Many are sorry they spoke, but few ever mourn that they held their tongue.

*Who looks may leap, and save his shins from knocks;  
Who tries may trust, or foulest treachery find.  
He saves his steed who keeps him under locks;  
Who speaks with heed may boldly speak his mind.*

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<sup>42</sup> See *Little Sins* by Spurgeon, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>43</sup> **pound** – basic unit of money in Great Britain; equal to 100 pence.

*But he whose tongue before his wit doth run,  
Oft speaks too soon and grieves when he has done.  
Full oft loose speech hath bound men fast in pain,  
Beware of taking from thy tongue the rein.*

## **23. A Black Hen Lays a White Egg**    *Providence*

The egg is white enough though the hen is black as a coal. This is a very simple thing, but it has pleased the simple mind of John Ploughman, and made him cheer up when things have gone hard with him. Out of evil comes good, through the great goodness of God.<sup>44</sup> From threatening clouds we get refreshing showers; in dark mines men find bright jewels. And so from our worst troubles come our best blessings. The bitter cold sweetens the ground, and the rough winds fasten the roots of the old oaks. God sends us letters of love in envelopes with black borders. Many a time have I plucked sweet fruit from bramble bushes, and taken lovely roses from among prickly thorns. Trouble, to believing men and women, is like the sweetbriar in our hedges: where it grows there is a delicious smell all around, if the dew do but fall upon it from above.

Cheer up, mates, all will come right in the end. The darkest night will turn to a fair morning in due time. Only let us trust in God and keep our heads above the waves of fear. When our hearts are right with God, everything is right. Let us look for the silver that lines every cloud, and when we do not see it, let us believe that it is there. We are all at school, and our great Teacher writes many a bright lesson on the blackboard of affliction. Scant fare teaches us to live on heavenly bread; sickness bids us send off for the good Physician; loss of friends makes Jesus more precious—and even the sinking of our spirits brings us to live more entirely upon God. All things are working together for the good of those who love God (Rom 8:28-29), and even death itself will bring them their highest gain. Thus the black hen lays a white egg.

*Since all that I meet shall work for my good,  
The bitter is sweet, the medicine is food;  
Though painful at present 'twill cease before long.  
And then, oh how pleasant the conqueror's song!*

## **24. He Looks One Way and Pulls the Other** *Hypocrisy*

He faces the shore, but he is pulling for the ship: this is the way of those who row in boats, and also of a great many who never trust themselves on the water. The boatman is all right, but the hypocrite is all wrong, whatever rites he may practice. I cannot endure Mr. Facing-both-ways, yet he has swarms of cousins.<sup>45</sup>

It is ill to be a saint without and a devil within, to be a servant of Christ before the world in order to serve the ends of self and the devil, while inwardly the heart hates all good things. There are good and bad of all classes, and hypocrites can be found among ploughmen as well as among

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<sup>44</sup> See *The Sovereignty of God in Providence* by John Reisinger, and *God's Providence* by Spurgeon; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>45</sup> See Free Grace Broadcaster 193, *Hypocrisy*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

parsons. It used to be so in the olden times, for I remember an old verse that draws out just such a character. The man says, "I'll have a religion all of my own. Whether Papist or Protestant shall not be known. And if it proves troublesome, I will have none."

In our Lord's day many followed Him, but it was only for the loaves and fishes. They do say that some in our parish don't go quite so straight as the Jews did, for they go to the church for the loaves, and then go over to the Baptist chapel for the fishes. I don't want to judge, but I certainly do know some who, if they do not care much for faith, are always following after charity.

Better die than sell your soul to the highest bidder. Better be shut up in the workhouse than fatten upon hypocrisy. Whatever else we barter, let us never try to turn a penny by religion, for hypocrisy is the meanest vice a man can come to.

It is a base thing to call yourself Christ's horse and yet carry the devil's saddle. The worst kind of wolf is that which wears a sheep's skin. Jezebel was never so ugly as when she had finished painting her face. Above all things, then, brother laborers, let us be straight as an arrow and true as a die, and never let us be time-servers or turncoats. Never let us carry two faces under one hat, nor blow hot and cold with the same breath.

## **25. Stick to It and Do It**    *Perseverance*

Set a stout heart to a stiff hill, and the wagon will get to the top of it. There's nothing so hard but a harder thing will get through it; a strong job can be managed by a strong resolution. Have at it and have it. Stick to it and succeed. Till a thing is done, men wonder that you think it can be done; and when you have done it, they wonder it was never done before.

A wagon is oft drawn by two horses; but I would have every man who wants his way in life pull as if all depended on himself. Very little is done right when it is left to other people. The more hands to do work, the less there is done. One man will carry two pails of water for himself; two men will only carry one pail between them, and three will come home with never a drop at all. A child with several mothers will die before it runs alone. Know your business and give your mind to it, and you will find a buttered loaf where a sluggard loses his last crust.

In these times, it's no use being a farmer if you don't mean to work. The days are gone by for gentlemen to make a fortune off of a farm by going out shooting half their time. If foreign wheats keep on coming in, farmers will soon learn that "He who by the plough would thrive, Himself must either hold or drive."

Going to Australia is of no use to a man if he carries a set of lazy bones with him. There's a living to be got in old England at almost any trade if a fellow will give his mind to it. A man who works hard, and has his health and strength, is a great deal happier than my lord Tom Noddy, who does nothing and is always ailing. Do you know the old song of "The Nobleman's Generous Kindness"? You should hear our Will sing it. I recollect some of the verses. The first one gives a picture of the hardworking laborer with a large family:

*Thus careful and constant, each morning he went  
Unto his day labor with joy and content.  
So jocular and jolly he'd whistle and sing,  
As blithe and as brisk as the birds in the spring.*

The other lines are the ploughman's own story of how he spent his life, and I wish that all countrymen could say the same.

*I reap and I mow, I harrow and I sow,  
Sometimes a hedging and ditching I go;  
No work comes amiss, for I thrash and I plough.  
Thus my bread I do earn by the sweat of my brow.  
My wife she is willing to pull in a yoke,  
"We live like two lambs, nor each other provoke.  
We both of us strive, like the laboring ant,  
And do our endeavors to keep us from want."  
And when I come home from my labor at night,  
To my wife and my children in whom I delight,  
I see them come round me with prattling noise:  
Now these are the riches a poor man enjoys.  
Though I am as weary as weary may be,  
The youngest I commonly dance on my knee.  
I find in content a continual feast,  
And never repine at my lot in the least.*

So, you see, the poor laborer may work hard and be happy all the same; and surely those who are in higher stations may do the like if they like. He is a sorry dog who wants game and will not hunt for it. Let us never lie down in idle despair, but follow on till we succeed.

Rome was not built in a day, nor much else, unless it be a dog-kennel. Things that cost no pains are slender gains. Where there has been little sweat, there will be little sweet. Jonah's gourd came up in a night, but then it perished in a night (Jon 4:6-7). Light come, light go: that which flies in at one window will be likely to fly out at another. It's a very lean hare that hounds catch without running for it, and a sheep that is no trouble to shear has very little wool. For this reason a man who cannot push on against wind and weather stands a poor chance in this world.

Perseverance is the main thing in life. To hold on, and hold out to the end, is the chief matter.<sup>46</sup> If the race could be won by a spurt, thousands would wear the blue ribbon; but they are short-winded and pull up after the first gallop. They begin with flying and end in crawling backwards. When it comes to collar work, many horses turn to jibbing. If the apples do not fall at the first shake of the tree, your hasty folks are too lazy to fetch a ladder, and in too much of a hurry to wait till the fruit is ripe enough to fall of itself. The hasty man is as hot as fire at the outset and as cold as ice at the end. He is like the Irishman's saucepan, which had many good points about it, but it had no bottom. He who cannot bear the burden and heat of the day is not worth his salt, much less his potatoes.

Before you begin a thing, make sure it is the right thing to do: ask Mr. Conscience about it. Do not try to do what is impossible: ask Common Sense. It is of no use to blow against a hurricane, or to fish for whales in a washing tub. Better give up a foolish plan than go on and burn your fingers with it: better bend your neck than knock your forehead. But when you have once made up your mind to go a certain road, don't let every molehill turn you out of the path. One stroke fells not an oak. Chop away, axe, you'll down with the tree at last! A bit of iron does not

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<sup>46</sup> See *Perseverance in Holiness* by Spurgeon, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

soften the moment you put it into the fire. Blow, smith! Put on more coals! Get it red-hot and hit hard with the hammer, and you will make a ploughshare yet. Steady does it. Hold on and you have it. Brag is a fine fellow at crying “Tally-ho!”—but Perseverance brings home the brush.

We ought not to be put out of heart by difficulties: they are sent on purpose to try the stuff we are made of. And depend upon it, they do us a world of good. There’s a sound reason why there are bones in our meat and stones in our land. A world where everything was easy would be a nursery for babies, but not at all a fit place for men. Celery is not sweet till it has felt a frost, and men don’t come to their perfection till disappointment has dropped a half-hundred weight or two on their toes. Who would know good horses if there were no heavy loads? If the clay was not stiff, my old Dapper and Violet would be thought no more of than Tomkins’ donkey. Besides, to work hard for success makes us fit to bear it: we enjoy the bacon all the more because we have got an appetite by earning it.

When prosperity pounces on a man like an eagle, it often throws him down. If we overtake the cart, it is a fine thing to get up and ride; but when it comes behind us at a tearing rate, it is very apt to knock us down and run over us—and when we are lifted into it, we find our leg is broken or our arm out of joint, and we cannot enjoy the ride. Work is always healthier for us than idleness; it is always better to wear out shoes than sheets. I sometimes think, when I put on my considering cap, that success in life is something like getting married: there’s a very great deal of pleasure in the courting, and it is not a bad thing when it is a moderate time on the road. Therefore, young man, learn to wait, and work on. Don’t throw away your rod, the fish will bite some time or other. The cat watches long at the hole, but catches the mouse at last. The spider mends her broken web, and the flies are taken before long. Stick to your calling, plod on, and be content; for, be sure, if you can undergo, you shall overcome.

*If bad be your prospects, don’t sit still and cry,  
But jump up, and say to yourself, “I WILL try...”*

While I talk to you, young people, about getting on, I don’t want you to think that hoarding up money is real success. Nor do I wish you to rise an inch above an honest ploughman’s lot, if it cannot be done without being mean or wicked. The workhouse, prison as it is, is a world better than a mansion built by roguery and greed. If you cannot get on honestly, be satisfied not to get on. The blessing of God is riches enough for a wise man, and all the world is not enough for a fool...

Remember the question of the old Book: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mar 8:36). There is another road to success besides a crooked, dirty, cut-throat lane. It is the King’s highway, of which the same Book says: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mat 6:33). John Ploughman prays that all his readers may choose this way and keep to it. Yet even in that way we must use diligence, for “the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force” (Mat 11:12).

## 26. Don't Put the Cart before the Horse

### *Cause and Effect*

Nobody will ever take this fellow to be a Solomon. He has no more sense than a sucking turkey. His wit will never kill him, but he may die for lack of it. One would think that he does not know which side of himself goes first, or which end should be uppermost, for he is putting the cart before the horse. However, he is not the only fool in the world, for nowadays you can't shake your coat out of a window without dusting an idiot. You have to ask yourself what will be the next new piece of foolery.

Amusing blunders will happen. Down at our chapel we have evening meetings only on moonlight nights, for some of our friends would never find their way home down our Surrey lanes on a dark night. It is a long lane that has no turning, but ours have plenty of turnings, and are quite as long as one likes them when it is pitch dark, for the trees meet over your head and won't let a star peep through. What did our old clerk do the other Sunday but give notice that there would be no moon next Wednesday night in consequence of there being no service. He put the cart before the horse that time! So it was with the young parson, of very fine ideas, who tried to make us poor clodhoppers see the wisdom of Providence in making the great rivers run near the large towns, while our village had a small brook to suit the size of it. We had a quiet laugh at the good man as we walked home through the corn, and we wondered why it never occurred to him that the Thames was in its bed long before London was up, and our tiny stream ran through its winding ways long before a cottager dipped his pail into it.

Dick Widgeon had a married daughter who brought her husband as pretty a baby as one might wish to see. When it was born, a neighbor asked the old man whether it was a boy or a girl. "Dear, dear," said Dick, "here's a kettle of fish! I'm either a grandfather or a grandmother, and I'm sure I don't know which." Dick says his mother was an Irishman, but I do not believe it.

All this is fun, but some of this blundering leads to mischief. Lazy fellows ruin their trade, and then say that bad trade ruined them. Some fellows talk at random, as if they lived in a world turned upside down, for they always put things the wrong side up...

*Robert complained the other day:  
His master took his character away.  
"I take your character?" said he,  
"No fear: Not for a thousand pounds a year."*

The man was his own downfall, and now he blames those who speak the truth about him. "He mistakes the effect for the cause," as our old schoolmaster says, and blames the bucket for the faults of the well.

The other day a fellow said to me, "Don't you think Jones is a lucky chap?" "No," said I, "I think he is a hard-working man, and gets on because he deserves it." "Ah," was the man's answer, "don't tell me; he has got a good trade, and a capital shop, and a fair capital, and I don't wonder that he makes money." Bless the man's heart; Jones began with nothing, in a little, poking shop, and all he has was scraped together by hard labor and careful saving. The shop would never have kept him if he had not kept the shop, and he would have had no trade if he had not been a good tradesman. But there, it's no use talking, some people will never allow that thrift

and temperance lead to thriving and comfort, for this would condemn themselves. So to quiet their consciences, they put the cart before the horse...

When a man thinks that he is to make himself good before he comes to Jesus to be saved, he is planting the fruit instead of the root; and putting the chimney pots where the foundation should be. We do not save ourselves and then trust the Saviour; but when the Saviour has worked salvation in us, then we work it out with fear and trembling (Phi 2:12). Be sure, good reader, that you put faith first, and works afterwards; for if not, you will put the cart before the horse.

## **27. A Leaking Tap Is a Great Waster**     *Thrift*

A leaking tap is a great waster. Drop by drop, by day and by night, the liquor runs away, and the housewife wonders how so much can have gone. This is the fashion in which many laboring men are kept poor: they don't take care of the pence, and so they have no pounds to put in the bank. You cannot fill the rain-water if you do not catch the drops. A sixpence here, and a shilling there, and his purse is empty before a man dares to look in it. What with waste in the kitchen, waste at table, and waste at the public-house,<sup>47</sup> fools and their money soon part to meet no more.

If the wife wastes too, there are two holes in the barrel. Sometimes the woman dresses in tawdry finery and gets in debt to the tally-man; and it is still worse if she takes to the bottle. When the goose drinks as deep as the gander, pots are soon empty and the cupboard is bare. Then they talk about saving, like the man who locked the stable door after his horse was stolen. They will not save at the brim, but promise themselves and the pigs that they will do wonders when they get near the bottom. It is well to follow the good old rule: "Spend so as you may Spend for many a day."

He who eats all the loaf at breakfast may whistle for his dinner and get a dish of empties. If we do not save while we have it, we certainly shall not save after all is gone. There is no grace in waste. Economy is a duty; extravagance is a sin. The old Book says, "He that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent" (Pro 28:20); and, depend upon it, he that hastes to be poor is in much the same box. Stretch your legs according to the length of your blanket, and never spend all that you have. "Put a little by; Things may go awry."

It will help to keep you from anxious care, which is sinful, if you take honest care, which is commendable. Lay up when young, and you shall find when old. But do not do this greedily or selfishly, or God may send a curse on your store. Money is not a comfort by itself, for they said in the olden time: "They who have money are troubled about it, And they who have none are troubled without it."

But though the dollar is not almighty, it ought to be used for the Almighty, and not wasted in wicked extravagance. Even a dog will hide up a bone that he does not need, and it is said of wolves that they gnaw not the bones till the morrow; but many of our working men are without thrift or forethought, and, like children, they will eat all the cake at once if they can. When a frost comes they are poor frozen-out gardeners, and ask for charity—when they ought to have laid up for a snowy day. I wonder they are not ashamed of themselves. Those are three capital lines: "Earn all you can, Save all you can, Give all you can..."

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<sup>47</sup> **public-house** – pub; tavern.

Money once spent is like shot fired from a gun, you can never call it back. No matter how sorry you may be, the goldfinches are out of the cage, and they will not fly back for all your crying. If a fellow gets into debt, it is worse still, for that is a ditch in which man finds mud, but none catch fish. When all his sugar is gone, a man's friends are not often very sweet upon him. People who have nothing are very apt to be thought worth nothing; mind, *I* don't say so, but a good many do. Wrinkled purses make wrinkled faces. It has been said that they laugh most who have least to lose, and it may be so; but I am afraid that some of them laugh on the wrong side of their faces. Foolish spending buys a pennyworth of merry-making, but it costs many a pound of sorrow...

"For age and lack, save while you may; No morning's sun lasts all the day." Money is not the chief thing, it is as far below the grace of God and faith in Christ as a ploughed field is below the stars. But still, godliness has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come. And, he who is wise enough to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, should also be wise enough to use aright the other things that God is pleased to add unto him.

*A vain man's motto is "Win gold and wear it."*

*A generous man's motto is "Win gold and share it."*

*A miserly man's motto is "Win gold and spare it."*

*A profligate man's motto is "Win gold and spend it."*

*A banker's motto is "Win gold and lend it."*

*A gambler's motto is "Win gold or lose it."*

*A wise man's motto is "Win gold and use it."*

## **28. A Man in a Passion Rides a Horse that Runs Away with Him** *Self-control*

When passion has run away with a man, who knows where it will carry him? Once let a rider lose power over his horse, he may go over hedge and ditch, and end with a tumble into the stone-quarry and a broken neck. No one can tell in cold blood what he may do when he gets angry; therefore it is best to run no risks. Those who feel their temper rising will be wise if they rise themselves and walk off to the pump. Let them fill their mouths with cold water, hold it there ten minutes at the least, and then go indoors and keep there till they feel cool as a cucumber. If you carry loose gunpowder in your pocket, you had better not go where sparks are flying; and if you are bothered with an irritable nature, you should move off when folks begin teasing you. Better keep out of a quarrel than fight your way through it.

Nothing is improved by anger unless it be the arch of a cat's back. A man with his back up is spoiling his figure. People look none the handsomer for being red in the face. It takes a great deal out of a man to get into a towering rage; it is almost as unhealthy as having a fit, and time has been when men have actually choked themselves with passion and died on the spot. Whatever wrong I suffer, it cannot do me half so much hurt as being angry about it; for passion shortens life and poisons peace.

When once we give way to temper, temper will claim a right of way, and come in easier every time. He that will be in a pet for any little thing will soon be out at elbows about nothing at all. A thunderstorm curdles the milk, and so does a passion sour the heart and spoil the character.



He who is in a tantrum shuts his eyes and opens his mouth, and very soon says what he will be sorry for. Better bite your lips now than smart for life. It is easier to keep a bull out of a china shop than it is to get him out again; and besides, there's no end of a bill to pay for damages.

A man burning with anger carries a murderer inside his waistcoat. The sooner he can cool down, the better for himself and all around him. He will have to give an account for his feelings as well as for his words and actions, and that account will cost him many tears. It is a cruel thing to tease quick-tempered people, for, though it may be sport to you, it is death to them—at least, it is death to their peace, and maybe something worse. We know who said, “Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh” (Mat 18:7).

Shun a furious man as you would a mad dog, but do it kindly, or you may make him worse than he would be. Don't put a man out when you know he is out with himself...

*A man in a rage Needs a great iron cage.  
He'll tear and he'll dash Till he comes to a smash.  
So let's out of his way As quick as we may.*

As we quietly move off, let us pray for the angry person; for a man in a thorough passion is as sad a sight as to see a neighbor's house on fire and no water handy to put out the flames. Let us wish the fellow on the runaway horse a soft ditch to tumble in, and sense enough never to get on the creature's back again.

## **29. Where the Plough Fails to Go, There the Weeds Surely Grow**

### *Responsibility*

In my young days, farmers used to leave broad headlands; and, as there were plenty of good-for-nothing hedges and ditches, they raised a prime crop of weeds. These used to sow the farm and give a heap of trouble...Weeding is needed now, for ill weeds grow apace, and the hoe must always go; but lands still are a fine sight cleaner than they used to be. For now farmers go a good deal closer to work, and grub up the hedges and make large fields to save every bit of land. Quite right, too. The less there is wasted, the more there is for us all.

*To clothe the fields with plenty and all our barns endow,  
We'll turn up every corner and drive the useful plough.  
No weed shall haunt the furrow, before us all shall bow,  
We'll daily yield our labor to guide the useful plough.*

It would be well to do the same thing in other concerns. Depend upon it, weeds will come wherever you give them half a chance. When children have no school to go to they will pretty soon be up to mischief. And if they are not taught the gospel, the old enemy will soon teach them to thieve, lie, and swear. You can tell with your eyes shut where there's a school and where there's none: only use your ears and hear the young ones talk.

So far goes the plough, and where that leaves off, the docks<sup>48</sup> and the thistles begin, as sure as dirt comes where there's no washing, and mice where there are no cats. They tell me that in London and other big towns, vice and crime are sure to spread where there are no ragged schools and Sunday schools; and I don't wonder. I hope the day will never come when good peo-

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<sup>48</sup> **docks** – a certain type of weeds.

ple will give up teaching the boys and girls. Keep that plough going, say I, till you have cut up all the charlock.<sup>49</sup> Don't leave a rod of ground for the devil to sow his tares in.

In my young time, few people in our parish could either read or write, and what were they to do but gossip, and drink and fight, and play old gooseberry? Now that teaching is to be had, people will all be scholars; and, as they can buy a Testament for a penny, I hope they will search the Scriptures, and may God bless the Word to the cleansing of their souls. When the schoolmaster gets to his work in downright earnest, I hope and trust there will be a wonderful clearance of the weeds.

The best plough in all the world is the preaching of the gospel. Leave a village without Christ crucified, and it soon becomes a great tangle of thorn, briar, brake, and bramble. But when sound and sensible preaching comes, it tears all up like a steam plough, and the change is something to sing about. "The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose" (Isa 35:1).

Inside a man's heart, there is need of a thorough ploughing by God's grace, for if any part of our nature is left to itself, the weeds of sin will smother the soul. Every day we have need to be looked after, for follies grow in no time and come to a great head before you can count twenty. God speed the plough.

### **30. All Is Lost That Is Poured into a Cracked Dish**

#### *Attentiveness*

Cook is wasting her precious milk in a cracked dish, for it runs out almost as fast as it runs in. The sooner she stops that game the better. This makes me think of a good deal of preaching; it is labor in vain because it does not stay in the minds of the hearers, but goes in at one ear and out at the other. When men go to market, they are all alive to do a trade; but in a place of worship, they are not more than half awake, and do not seem to care whether they profit or not by what they hear. I once heard a preacher say, "Half of you are asleep, half are inattentive, and the rest..." He never finished that sentence, for the people began to smile, and here and there one burst out laughing. Certainly, many only go to meeting to stare about.

*Attend your church, the parson cries; To church each fair one goes.  
The old ones go to close their eyes, The young to eye their clothes...*

Even when hearers are awake many of them are forgetful. It is like pouring a jug of ale between the bars of a gridiron to try and teach them good doctrine. Water on a duck's back does have some effect, but sermons by the hundred are as much lost upon many men's hearts as if they had been spoken to a kennel of hounds. Preaching to some fellows is like whipping the water or lashing the air. As well talk to a turnip or whistle to a dead donkey, as preach to these dull ears. A year's sermons will not produce an hour's repentance till the grace of God comes in.

We have a good many hangers-on who think that their duty to God consists in hearing sermons, and that the best fruit of their hearing is to talk of what they have heard. How they do lay the law down when they get arguing about doctrines! Their religion all runs to ear and tongue: neither their heart nor their hand is a scrap the better. This is poor work, and will never pay the

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<sup>49</sup> **charlock** – very pernicious weeds among grain.

piper. The sermon that only gets as far as the ear is like a dinner eaten in a dream. It is ill to lie soaking in the gospel like a bit of coal in a milk-pan, never the whiter for it all.

What can be the good of being hearers only (Jam 1:22)? It disappoints the poor preacher and it brings no blessing to the man himself. Looking at a plum won't sweeten your mouth, staring at a coat won't cover your back, and lying on the bank won't catch the fish in the river. The cracked dish is never the better for all that is poured into it. It is like our forgetful heart: it needs to be taken away and a new one put instead of it (Eze 36:26).

## 31. Grasp All and Lose All; Scatter and Increase

### *Stewardship*

While so many poor neighbors are around us, it is a sin to hoard. If we do, we shall be losers, for rats eat corn, rust cankers metal, and the curse of God spoils riches. A tight fist is apt to get the rheumatism, an open hand bears the palm...People will not believe it, and yet it is true as the gospel, that giving leads to thriving. John Bunyan<sup>50</sup> said, "There was a man, and some did count him mad, The more he gave away, the more he had." He had an old saying to back him, one which is as old as the hills and as good as gold: "Give and spend, And God will send."

If a man cannot pay his debts, he must not think of giving, for he has nothing of his own, and it is thieving to give away other people's property. Be just before you are generous. Don't give to Peter what is due to Paul...There are many free hearts yet about, and John Ploughman knows a goodish few of them—people who don't cry, "Go next door," but who say, "Here's a little help, and we wish we could make it ten times as much." God has often a great share in a small house, and many a little man has a large heart.

Now, you will find that liberal people are happy people, and get more enjoyment out of what they have than folks of a churlish mind. Misers never rest till they are put to bed with a shovel.<sup>51</sup> They often get so wretched that they would hang themselves, only they grudge the expense of a rope. Generous souls are made happy by the happiness of others: the money they give to the poor buys them more pleasure than any other that they lay out.

I have seen men of means give coppers,<sup>52</sup> and they have been coppery in everything. They carried on a tin-pot business, lived like beggars, and died like dogs. I have seen others give to the poor and to the cause of God by shovelfuls, and they have had it back by barrow-loads. They made good use of their stewardship, and the great Lord has trusted them with more. The bells in their hearts have rung out merry peals when they have thought of widows who blessed them, and orphan children who smiled into their faces...

Let us see what we can do to scatter joy all around us, just as the sun throws his light on hill and dale. He that gives God his heart will not deny Him his money. He will take a pleasure in giving, but he will not wish to be seen, nor will he expect to have a pound of honor for sixpence. He will look out for worthy objects; for giving to lazy, drunken spendthrifts is wasteful and wick-

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<sup>50</sup> **John Bunyan** (1628-1688) – English minister, preacher, and one of the most influential writers of the 17th century. Beloved author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (available from CHAPEL LIBRARY) and numerous others.

Born at Elstow near Bedford, England.

<sup>51</sup> **put...shovel** – die and are buried.

<sup>52</sup> **coppers** – penny coins made of copper; the smallest amount possible.

ed—you might as well sugar a brickbat and think to turn it into a pudding. A wise man will go to work in a sensible way, and will so give his money to the poor that he will be lending it to the Lord. No security can be better and no interest can be surer...

## 32. Every Bird Likes Its Own Nest *Home*

It pleases me to see how fond the birds are of their little homes. No doubt each one thinks his own nest is the very best, and so it is for him. Just as my home is the best palace for me, even for me, King John, the king of the Cottage of Content. I will ask no more if Providence only continues to give me “A little field well tilled, A little house well filled, And a little wife well willed...” “Seek home for rest, For home is best.”

What can it be that so deludes lots of people who ought to know better? They have sweet wives, nice families, and comfortable houses, and they are several cuts above us poor country bumpkins—and yet they must be out of an evening. What is it for? Surely it can't be the company; for the society of the woman you love, who is the mother of your children, is worth all the companies that ever met together. I fear they are away soaking their clay,<sup>53</sup> and washing all their wits away. If so, it is a great shame, and those who are guilty of it ought to be trounced. O that drink! That drink!

Dear, dear, what stuff people will pour into their insides! Even if I had to be poisoned, I should like to know what I was swallowing. A cup of tea at home does people a sight more good than all the mixtures you get abroad. There's nothing like the best home-brewed, and there's no better mash-tub for making it in than the old-fashioned earthenware teapot. Our little children sing, “Please, father, come home,” and John Ploughman joins with thousands of little children in that simple prayer which every man who is a man should be glad to answer. I like to see husband and wife longing to see each other.

*An ear that waits to catch, A hand upon the latch;  
A step that hastens Its sweet rest to win;  
A world of care without, A world of strife shut out—  
A world of love shut in.*

Fellow workmen, try to let it be so with you and your wives. Come home, and bring your wages with you, and make yourselves happy by making everyone happy around you.

My printer jogs my elbow, and says, “That will do: I can't get any more in.” Then, Mr. Passmore,<sup>54</sup> I must pass over many things, but I cannot leave off without praising God for His goodness to me and mine, and all my brother ploughmen, for it is of His great mercy that He lets us live in this dear old country and loads us with so many benefits.

This bit of poetry shall be my finish. I mean every word of it—let us sing it together.

*What pleasant groves, what goodly fields,  
What fruitful hills and vales have we!  
How sweet an air our climate yields!  
How blest with flocks and herds we be!*

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<sup>53</sup> **soaking their clay** – filling their bodies with alcoholic drink.

<sup>54</sup> **Mr. Passmore** – One of Spurgeon's church members, Joseph Passmore was senior partner of the firm that published Spurgeon's books, Passmore and Alabaster, London.

*How milk and honey doth o'erflow!  
How clear and wholesome are our springs!  
How safe from ravenous beasts we go!  
And, oh, how free from poisonous things!  
For these, and for our grass, our corn;  
For all that springs from blade or bough;  
For all those blessings that adorn;  
Both wood and field, this kingdom through—  
For all of these, Thy praise we sing;  
And humbly, Lord, entreat Thee too,  
That fruit to Thee we forth may bring,  
As unto us Thy creatures do.*

