

G4830

THE INFLUENCE OF HOME.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM
PLACE, SEPTEMBER 13, 1874, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

The text was taken from 2 Corinthians xiii, 11, "Be perfect be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace, and the God of love and peace shall be with you."

He said—We are all familiar with the idea of the sacredness of sorrow ; from our youth up, preachers and moralists have instilled into us that chastisement is good for us, and that afflictions are but blessings in disguise ; as we grew older we learnt this holy lesson for ourselves, though, perhaps, by slow degrees and with much rebellion and unbelief. Far be it from me to throw this teaching into the shade, or to underrate the magnificence of this triumph of the human heart over its troubles. Yet I think we have, in our eagerness to give or to gain consolation, suffered another equally valuable lesson to drop out of our recognition. We have not made enough of the sacredness of joy. We have not recovered from the depressing influences of the Puritanism of our forefathers, and, in all matters pertaining to religion and morals, the severity of discipline by sorrow has not only had its due prominence, but has been allowed to monopolize our regard and to appear as the sole agency in the culture of our characters. Man, in his usual extravagance, has cherished a tacit belief that because sorrow is a necessary blessing therefore joy is either unnecessary or unwholesome. Or, perhaps, it is because the pursuit of happiness is never likely to flag, whereas we are ever by nature striving to avoid pain, that happiness has needed no recom-

mentation, is considered to be amply provided for, and, if only tolerated by preachers, the less said about it the better. I think the sacredness of joy has been overlooked, and by the term "sacredness," as applied to joy, I mean exactly the same as when it is applied to sorrow. Just as sorrow is found to be beneficial to the soul, in purifying, elevating and expanding its noblest powers, so joy has a like beneficial effect, and is capable of doing wonders in the improvement of character. True joy is therefore as solemn and sacred as Heaven-sent affliction. Both are needful, as the day for labour and the night for rest. Both are indispensable to the proper development of human nature, and both should be recognized by moralists and religious teachers as equally important, equally sacred.

I wish this morning, after my long absence from you, to say a little of what is in my heart about the joys of home. Nearly all of us have a home, and most of us, it is to be hoped, can call theirs a happy one; but I wonder how many of us have ever thought seriously about our home as the real school-house of our characters, and as the mould in which our lives are cast? How many of us are there who pay more heed to the fact of enjoying a happy home than to the fact of the daily rising sun? To very many, and especially to the young, the one is just as much a matter of course as the other. Years and years roll by, and they do not fully realize the priceless blessings of home until they have lost it. In the turn of events they are forced to go forth into the world and dwell among strangers, and to make a new home for themselves; and then all at once they wake up to know how much they had so long unconsciously enjoyed, and what they have now lost—perhaps for ever. And so it is with many of us elder ones; we live on in the same smooth tenour of our way enjoying daily without reflection a thousand tender offerings of affection, till we get so accustomed to the things which make up our life's happiness as to take them for granted, and forget altogether with how much toil and sacrifice they have been supplied. But all at once some stroke of misfortune descends, some sore bereavement

or calamity worse than death stirs us from our easy and blind satisfaction, and makes us realize what our home has really been to us, and what holy and faithful services had made it so happy. Misfortune without, or the attack of unfriendly criticism, will often have the same effect. The blow which hurts one member shakes with electric shock all the rest, and so reveals the sacred and delicate bond which binds the family in one. The sympathy and help which are thus simultaneously awakened bring home to every heart the reality of that domestic love which all along had been giving them so much unconscious joy.

And so too, but in a less degree perhaps, is domestic love revealed by temporary separation. Members of one family do not know how much they love one another until they have been divided. Then one by one the little endearments are missed, the old loving looks of affection and sympathy are thirsted for, and the severed ones become conscious how much of the pleasure of their lives was due to each others' daily intercourse. Change of scene however interesting, change of occupation however pleasant, hospitality and kindness of friends however generous—all these fail to supply the joys that we left behind, or to fill the void in our breasts which is akin to pain. No personal comforts, not the best and most devoted of friends can take the place of the dear ones who are absent. Their memory is sweet to us; our rising thought in early dawn is of them and their welfare; our last prayer before our eyes are closed is that they may be safe and happy. In the midst of our most refreshing recreations we wish they were with us to share them; and if the slightest shadow of ill tidings reach us, we long to be back again to comfort and protect them. We learn in separation the intensity of our love, and begin to see how much more we owe to each other than we had ever dreamed. And so the return home is a sensation of exceeding joy. We wait for it as shipwrecked men wait for the dawn; we count the days and hours which must intervene, as poor school-boys do when the holidays draw near. We picture the scene in our vivid imaginations, calling up the vision of each smiling face as it greets us

on the threshold, and wondering with a trembling heart what good or bad reports we may have to hear.

Coming home is a most solemn joy. It is a holy sacrament to all who have a home—and not a mere dwelling-place—to come to. In all our experience there is nothing so religious, so exquisite; nothing which brings God so near to us, nothing which so completely wipes out dark memories, fills the soul with holy resolutions, or gives such foretaste of the peace and rest of Heaven.

We know and feel at such moments, though we cannot put it into words, that God Himself could not give us greater joy on earth than this, that our cup of happiness is full and running over, and that our hearts are bursting with grateful delight. We feel that God Himself is with us rejoicing in our joy, and delighting in giving such bliss to his children. Such mercies knit our hearts to Him, and help us to love His blessed will, and be ready to give up all we love best at His bidding.

And if religious emotion in its highest degree involve the penitent recollection of past misdeeds, and the pious resolve to amend our lives, what more fitting and natural opportunity for such feelings than this can there be?

Across the mind there sweeps a sorrowful thought of shame, and almost wonder, that any unjust or unkind word should ever have been spoken amongst us, much more any unkind deed done; and this spasm of godly sorrow is instantly followed by a flood of holy impulse to rule our lives by love, never to wrong each other by word or deed, but to help, comfort, and defend one another while life shall last. And this high resolve, not made on bended knee, or with tearful eye, but springing out of a joy too great for words, is propped up on all sides by hope—by hope which tells that there is an inexhaustible fountain of mutual love from which to draw, the depth of which we had not fathomed. We can thus promise to be good to each other, for love will make it easy. And this is one of the most prominent and most natural results of true joy. It gives a sense of perfect peace with God and trust in His blessed will; it makes the heart shrink from its own iniquity, it fills it with holy desire to be utterly good, and turns the desire for

improvement into a promise of success by revealing love as the basis of hope.

Away then with the foolish and unnecessary creeds! As if God had not created the family ties, and consecrated domestic duties and troubles and joys on purpose to teach us all the religion and morality that we ever wanted! What do we want with altars for offerings and burnt sacrifices, for incense and wafers, when in every temple of home there is a fireside—a sacred hearth—where daily and hourly offerings of love and duty may be laid. What need have we for religious rites and ceremonies to please God or benefit our souls, when home-life abounds with opportunities for the holiest services, and the sacraments of love may be partaken of every day.

I do not wish to be hard upon the Christian Sacraments or any other ceremony that may help feeble souls. But I do wonder that men should have gone out of their way to seek for God, should have hunted in the burning sands of the parched wilderness for the living streams of His bounty, should have invented elaborate devices for “pleasing Him” when all He asks of us is to love one another; or should have wasted their wits and their toil to cultivate piety and holiness, when the Divine method of becoming pious and holy lies straight before them, and has been mercifully appointed as the common lot of mankind.

To return to the more special subject of my discourse, if such joy is holy and elevating, it follows that the happier we can make our own homes the better shall we be.

And by happiness, of course I do not mean the mere piling up of earthly comforts or luxuries, the acquisition of wealth or the realization of ambitious hopes; but such peace of mind and pleasure in life as grows out of being loved and loving in return. In this sense, I believe many faults would be cured and we ourselves made infinitely more useful to the world outside, if we were to make each other happier at home, if there were more love and more determination not to wound or vex anyone around us. The effect of dwelling in an atmosphere uncongenial, where sympathy

is absent or scanty; where criticism is plentiful and sharp; where fault-findings outnumber the encouragements; where one error will obliterate many right actions; where cold hard duty, precious as that is, is made a substitute for affectionate interest; and where correctness is worshipped at the expense of generosity—the effect of dwelling in such an atmosphere, I say, is to wither the heart and to harden the manners, to lose a friend if not to make a foe. No husband or wife, parent or child, brother or sister, master, mistress or servant can hold ground in nobleness of character unless fostered by the warm sunshine of a loving intercourse. To make the best of anyone, we must begin with extreme kindness, and if possible, by loving him. If we do not, we shall never see any but the worst side of his nature, unless it be too noble to be concealed or disguised. Begin by detraction and discouragement, and the sorrow of the heart so oppressed will probably make it unworthy and drive it to baseness. Well may we say to each other what the Psalmist said to God. “If thou wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord who can abide it?” Yet, if we only make clear our loving purpose to make each other as happy as we can, oh! how bearable then are each other’s failings and defects, how easily we can put up with weak tempers and hasty words, as well as broken promises and neglected duties! We all have to fall back now and then on the loyalty of affection which is at the bottom of each other’s hearts; and if that be wanting, the superstructure of smiles and pleasant faces and pretty speeches are only a frightful mockery, making the void within more hollow and the soul’s insight more ghastly. Let people differ and wrangle sometimes, it is comparatively a trifle, if only they love one another at heart. If they do not and they are compelled to live together, God have mercy on them! They need the pity of Heaven!

But have we no other words for those who have no home—or whose home is poisoned by the serpent of strife—no words but of pity and sorrow. Yes, I think Love has words of hope for all—even for the most hopeless.

What are called incompatibility of temper, sourness of disposition, provoking habits and all the terrible list of reasons why people separate and why homes are either ruined or broken up, are not all incapable of cure. They who say there is no cure are those who have not had the patience to try, nor have the fortitude to

take up a course of conduct for which instead of thanks they expect only fresh insult.

Where real love is not forthcoming, there still remains the moral power of self-control and the determination at least to behave well to each other. Let all persons who are in the unhappy position of living in a home without mutual love try the experiment of doing the best they can for each other, of striving to avoid giving offence, of schooling themselves into actions and words of kindness. If no other happy result should follow, at least this course is sure to preserve domestic peace; and in nine cases out of ten it will do ever so much more. By slow degrees unwearied kindness and patience and forgiveness beget gratitude and go far to create an affection that is absent, or to restore one that is lost. Love is the offspring of pure kindness, quite as often as kindness is the offspring of Love. And so I would urge upon the unhappy that it is never too late to mend, never too late to ameliorate their own condition, if only they will go the right way to work and seek the happiness of those around them first.

For in this also the principle holds good that joy is purifying and elevating. Make any man or woman less miserable, add ever so little to his or her happiness and the fruit of a better life will soon shew itself.

And lastly I would say a few words to those who by inevitable circumstance are banished from home and have to dwell alone or among strangers. God only knows what some very tender and warm hearts suffer in the freezing atmosphere of unfamiliar faces and ungenial associates. But even for them there is left one blessing—and that God's best blessing—the power of winning love and making a home for themselves out of the foreign elements around them.

As every home is only Home when love reigns in it, so the veriest desert may become a garden if we do our part in the culture of the affections. Let anyone, however in other respects deficient in winning others, if only rich in kindness and manifest self-devotion, do his or her best for the comfort and peace of those who come in daily contact, and the strange faces will grow familiar and pleasant, hearts that seemed shut up to themselves and to only a few favoured ones will expand first with gratitude, then with esteem, and lastly with real friendship and love.

Governesses and tutors and servants, even boarders and lodgers can furnish a whole literature of this divine conquest of the human heart over the seemingly stony natures with which it is forced to dwell. Commanders of vessels, leaders of regiments, superintending engineers, a hundred times over have told the tale of their making a happy home for themselves out of the wealth of love and human feeling which they carried in their own breasts. If the ties have not been so tender, so spontaneous, so deep, as those wherewith God has blessed us in our natural domestic relations, still they have been strong and warm and have shewn their heavenly virtue in mutual self-sacrifice and in splendid heroism.

And surely no public work, no reformation, no patriotism can be compared for a moment with the glory of that triumph over the hearts of men.

More and more do I feel the solemn importance of being first in our own homes what we desire to be before the world. Nothing to me is more certain than that the ultimate test by which we and our work will be judged is the manner in which we live at home. If that will bear the scrutiny of the best and wisest and kindest among men, we need fear no failure in our philanthropic efforts in the world around us. But if our homes are darkened by strife or poisoned by impurity, the best among men will turn their backs upon our principles however sound, will revolt from our teaching however reasonable, and will point scornfully at our huge inconsistency, crying, "By their fruits ye shall know them."

Let us prize as our most precious gift—even above all faith and hope—the joy of a happy home. Let that be our sheet-anchor; let that be the shrine to defend which we will pour out our life's blood to the last drop. Let us banish for ever the idea that it is other people's business to make us happy; and instead of that, let us each one say to himself "my one duty is, and it shall be my chief concern, to make everyone around me as happy as I can."

If we but live in this spirit, we shall have lived for the greatest human glory, and we may add too, for the honour and glory of God; and our reward will be—what no wealth or luxuries can furnish—the confidence and love of all around us. God Himself can give no more!