

Murray Chapter Rose Croix

Ottawa



Address

Delivered at Easter Service

1914

EASTER ADDRESS

BY

ILL. BRO. S. S. DAVIDSON, 32°.

1914.

1914

077

C3

H5779

CONTENTMENT.

When you paid me the compliment last Easter, of choosing me to address you to-day, my first difficulty lay in selecting a subject that would be of interest, and also one that had not been touched upon before.

After a careful perusal of the different degrees of the Scottish Rite, and the lessons which they taught, I was impressed with the teachings of the 8th degree. The outstanding precept of this degree is without doubt, "To be contented with one's lot." I have, therefore, taken as the theme of my remarks to-day—Contentment—and propose to consider it under two phases:—

Contentment—right, and
Contentment—wrong.

I wonder how many of you have ever read George MacDonald's Poem, entitled "The Waesome Carl." In that poem, MacDonald draws the portrait of a truly discontented man. He came to the village and

"Muckle he spied and muckle he spak
"But the overcome o' his sang
"Whatever the time was aye the same
"There's none o' ye a' buts wrang."

"Ye're a' wrang an' a' wrang
 "An' a' thegither a' wrang
 "There's no a man about the toon
 "But's a' thegither a' wrang."

Nobody knew how to cook the bread, to handle the plough, or to attend to the cattle; the Minister didn't know how to preach, nor had he the gift of grace, the poor precentor "Gruntit like a swine," the elders didn't know how to pass the plate—a rare fault with Scotchmen. The people of the village, listening to him, regarded him as an oracle until he was given a simple bit of work to do, and absolutely spoiled it all, and came near losing his reputation, but he managed to save it by fixing the blame on others, and wound up triumphantly with his pitiful chorus:

"Ye're a wrang an' a' wrang,
 "An' a' thegither a' wrang;
 "There's no a man in a' the warl
 "But's a' thegither a' wrang."

Well, there are a good many men, too many, I fancy, who are nearly related to this "Waesome Carl." If they are not his twin-brothers, they are at least first cousins to him. Shakespeare speaks of "The Winter of our discontent." There are some people who always live in the inclemency of that winter, never allowing themselves by any chance to get out into the Spring.

The matter would be bad enough if such discontented spirits merely dwelt within themselves, and made only themselves miserable. But it never ends there, as we all know. The situation is aggravated by the fact that discontent is one of the most contagious diseases. *It spreads.*

And yet we must always bear in mind that it is sometimes altogether wrong to be contented. There are forms of contentment that are simply forms of death. The patient who has been given an opiate may be contented for awhile. An idiot may be quite contented. Let us remind ourselves of certain forms of contentment which are to be condemned. For one thing it is wrong to be contented with ignorance where we might have knowledge, or with partial knowledge where we might have full knowledge. All human progress may be said to depend upon a divine discontent in the souls of men.

Francis Bacon, the great statesman and philosopher of Queen Elizabeth's reign, on the title page of his book, "The Advancement of Learning," printed as his motto, the Latin words: *Plus ultra*—more beyond.

That is the spirit of the discoverer, the spirit of the explorer, the spirit of the philosopher, the spirit of the modern scientist. There would have been no Columbus apart from this spirit of discontent with present imperfect knowledge.

There would have been no fight against tuberculosis apart from this same spirit. Content may sometimes be the denial of all faith, the denial of all progress.

Again, it is wrong to be contented with the presence of injustice in the social life. Where could we find a nobler story than the record of the struggle for liberty in Great Britain when King and Commoner clashed in conflict. It is a glorious story and an inspiring one, but it could never have been written had it not been that the souls of these champions of civil freedom were moved by the impulses of a divine discontent with tyranny and injustice. Perhaps we regard that struggle as if ended long ago. But it has not. The fight still goes on. Should we be satisfied,—can we be content while men are compelled to work for wages upon which it is next to impossible to support life, or while the sweat shop takes its toll of woman and child-life, or while our gaols and prisons continue to be factories for the turning out of finished criminals, rather than institutions where opportunity is offered for the reformation of the wrong-doer? If we can be satisfied with these things, then there is something out of gear somewhere.

Nor is any reasonable man likely to argue that we ought to be contented with the moral and spiritual achievements of the past. It may be that it has been given us to make some

progress in times gone by, to turn aside from those things which debase the soul of man, and walk some distance along the upward way. But we may be quite certain of this—we have only made a beginning.

There are heights before us of which we have never as yet dreamed, but only he will look upon them who has become divinely discontented with former triumphs. And what sight could possibly be more tragic than that of some man who, in the midst of shame, and sin, and failure, is content?—content with the husks of life? For the man who has lost his ideals is dead and buried already.

As Browning reminds us:—

“Progress is man’s distinctive mark alone,
Not God’s and not the Beast’s.
God is, they are;
Man is, and wholly hopes to be.”

We have seen then that there may be, that indeed, there too often is, a wrong sort of contentment. But over against that wrong contentment, there shines by contrast the true contentment which we all should covet. First of all let us learn to be contented with “such things as we have.” Of course that advice must be taken with due qualifications. It does not mean, for example, that the workman is never to seek for higher wages. It does not mean that a father should not seek to improve

his condition for the sake of his children, And yet, how much of the wrong discontent of life and how much of life's unhappiness arise from dissatisfaction with our lot.

We envy our neighbors who happen to possess somewhat more of this world's goods than we do, and our lives are put out of joint by the desire for cheap show and ostentation. It is told of the old Greek Philosopher, Diogenes, that once he went with a friend to visit a country fair. They passed before all the booths, with a hundred gimcracks exhibited for sale, and after he had seen them all, Diogenes turned to his friend and said: "How many things are there in this world of which Diogenes hath no need."

Let us make no mistake about it. Contentment does not consist in, nor happiness depend upon, the abundance of material things that man possesses in this life.

Isaac Walton, in that little book of his which is the favourite classic of all true fishermen, tells us of a man he knew who had abundant wealth and several beautiful houses, and he was always moving from one house to another. A friend asked him one day why he was ever on the move, and his reply was: "I am trying to find contentment." But his friend knowing the temper of the man said: "If you would find contentment in any of your houses you must

leave yourself behind, for content will never dwell but in a meek and quiet soul."

Not only ought we to be contented, however, with our present possessions, but we ought to be contented with whatever comes to us in the way of duty. More discontent than we sometimes realize, visits us because we are not doing our manifest duty in life.

An excellent prescription for all cases of discontent is this: First find out what your duty is, and then go and do it, although the doing of it may seemingly get us into difficulties. Honesty may be the best policy, but there is no good purpose to be served by blinding ourselves to the fact that it is not always the easiest policy and not always the most comfortable one. But, nevertheless, the path of honesty and the path of all honorable duty—doing—is the only path by the side of which the perfect flower of true contentment springs.

As the brave heroine writes in Scott's "Heart of Midlothian": 'To know that one's purpose is right, and to keep one's heart strong, is the way to get through the worst day's darg.' The man who does his simple duty, whether in the cottage or in the palace, in the eyes of his immediate neighbors, or in the eyes of the great world, lives always in the enjoyment of a clear and unmolested conscience.

Sir Henry Lawrence was one of Britain's noblest soldiers. When the awful Mutiny broke out, his wise precautions saved the European inhabitants of Lucknow, enabling them to stand a siege of four months in the Residency after the rest of the city was in the hands of the rebels. But the brave leader was mortally wounded during the defence, and he requested that this should be his epitaph: "Here lies Henry Lawrence, who tried to do his duty." And surely that was an epitaph grander far—for it was true—than many a longer and more eloquent one that might have been inscribed upon his tomb.

Another way of putting all this, of course, is to say that we are to be contented with the will of Providence; first of all, being sure that we do not lay the blame upon Providence for those events which are only too clearly the result of human mistakes.

But unforeseen sorrow enters into every human life, and we are called upon to submit to the will of Providence, yes, and to be contented with that will. For sorrow has a mission in this world; it is undoubtedly a part of the education of the soul.

As Henry Van Dyke says: "Sorrow is an astronomer who shows us the stars." You all know the story of Carlyle's great trial, when, after he had, with toil unspeakable, completed

the first volume of his famous book on the French Revolution, the manuscript was burned through the carelessness of a servant. Here is what Carlyle wrote in his Journal: "It is as if an invisible school-master had torn my copy book when I showed it, and said, 'No, boy, thou must write it better.' What can I, sorrowing, do but obey,—obey and think it best." Those are the words of a man who had discovered that sorrow is not here just on its own account, but as a divine challenge to the soul of man.

And now I should like to make two practical suggestions.

One is that we shall never be contented so long as we suffer from an exaggerated sense of our own importance, so long as we think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. We cling with tenacity to what we call our rights and privileges, we think that we are indispensable; if any one seems to slight us we grow furious about it, we fight for what we call recognition, and then if this recognition does not come, we grow bitter and cynical and hard.

We think that life has deceived us with fair but false promises, and happiness takes flight, dwelling with us no more. Every fancied oversight becomes a positive insult purposely hurled at us. Every scratch becomes an infected wound. How much happier we should be, how much better it would be for us and for the world

in general, if humbly and gladly we threw ourselves into the fight, not worrying so much whether we serve as privates or as officers, but chiefly concerned with the absorbing business of hitting hard every vile thing which presents itself. Then shall we discover for ourselves the truth of that paradox—"Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth."

The other practical suggestion which I desire to make before I close is a very obvious one, but also a very necessary one—We shall never be contented, so long as we look continually at the dark side of life. Life is not a prison cell where we pace to and fro unceasingly, nothing different within, nothing different without. Life is a pilgrimage of increasing interest, and increasing power to appreciate what a man is, and what a man does, among his fellowmen.

Form the habit of looking for the bright things; remember even when the clouds are thickest and darkest that you have seen the sun, and that you will see it yet again.

But there are people, possibly to our sorrow we know some of them, whose habit it is to look only on the dark side. They live in a coal cellar, and if, by some cheerful word you seek to knock through a window for them, they are immediately at it with a dark green blind for fear the light might get in, and, with the light, hope and encouragement.

There have been visitors to Venice who were chiefly impressed with the filth of that city, but more who ignored the filth and saw the loveliness.

After Robert Louis Stevenson had experienced one of the most violent and dangerous hemorrhages he ever had, during which he thought he was dying, his recovery was retarded by a complication of maladies, all very painful. At last the climax seemed to arrive, when he was attacked by an inflammation of the eyes. His wife felt that this was more than any one person should be asked to bear, and she said in bitterness of spirit: "Well, I suppose this is the best thing that could have happened." Stevenson was too weak to talk, but he wrote on a bit of paper: "Why, how odd! I was just going to say those very words." Is it any wonder that Stevenson's name is still the synonym for happiness and good cheer?

In conclusion, my Brethren, Contentment is not a Scottish Rite degree. It is not conferred in any Masonic Chapter or Lodge. It cannot be purchased. You cannot be elected to it. It is secured in that greatest of all educational institutions, the School of human experience. It is every man's birthright. We all have some innate element of a contented spirit which can surely be developed by the elimination of that spirit of unrest which is so characteristic of the world to-day, that spirit of envy toward those

who seem to be endowed with more of this world's good gifts than we are: not that I would deprive any man of lofty aspiration, of noble ambition, for Contentment is not synonymous with laziness, but while striving to better our conditions, both physically and intellectually, to be contented with our honest achievements, and to nourish and develop that greatest aid to contentment, and the highest Masonic virtue—brotherly love.





