

## **“The Weight of Sand”. A Sermon by Alexander MacLaren.**

*"SAND is weighty."-PROVERBS xxxii. 3.*

THIS Book of Proverbs has a very whole-some horror of the character which it calls "a fool"; meaning thereby, not so much intellectual feebleness as moral and religious obliquity, which are the stupidest things that a man can be guilty of. My text comes from a very picturesque and vivid description, by way of comparison, of the fatal effects of such a man's passion. The proverb-maker compares two heavy things, stones and sand, and says that they are feathers in comparison with the immense lead-like weight of such a man's wrath.

Now I have nothing more to do with the immediate application of my text. I want to make a parable out of it. What is lighter than a grain of sand? What is heavier than a bagful of it? As the grains fall one by one, how easily they can be blown away! Let them gather, and they bury temples, and crush the solid masonry of pyramids. "Sand is weighty." The accumulation of light things is over-whelming ponderous. Are there any such things in our lives? If there are, what ought we to do? So you get the point of view from which I want to look at the words this evening.

The first suggestion that I make is that they remind us of the supreme importance of trifles.

If trivial acts are unimportant, what signifies the life of man? For ninety-nine and a half per cent of every man's life is made up of these light nothings; and unless there is potential greatness in them, and they are of importance, then life is all "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Small things make life; and if they are small, then it is.

But remember, too, that the supreme importance of so-called trivial actions is seen in this, that there maybe every bit as much of the noblest things that belong to humanity condensed in, and brought to bear upon, the veriest trifle that a man can do, as on the greatest things that he can perform.

We are very poor judges of what is great and what is little. We have a very vulgar estimate that noise and notoriety and the securing of, not great but "big," results of a material kind make the deeds, by which they are secured, great ones. And we think that it is the quiet things, those that do not tell outside at all, that are the small ones.

Well, here is a picture for you. Half a dozen shabby, travel-stained Jews, sitting by a river-side upon the grass, talking to a handful of women outside the gates of a great city. Years before that, there had been what the world calls a great event, almost on the same ground—a sanguinary fight, that had settled the emperorship of the then civilised world, for a time.

I want to know whether the first preaching of the Gospel in Europe by the Apostle Paul, or the battle of Philippi, was the great event, and which of the two was the little one. I vote for the Jews on the grass, and let all the noise of the fight, though it reverberated through the world for a bit, die away, as "a little dust that rises up, and is lightly laid again." Not the noisy events are the great ones; and as much true greatness may be manifested in a poor woman stitching in her garret as in some of the things that have rung through the world and excited all manner of vulgar applause. Trifles may be, and often are, the great things in life.

And then remember, too, how the most trivial actions have a strange knack of all at once leading onto large results, beyond what could have been expected. A man shifts his seat in a railway carriage, from some passing whim, and five minutes afterwards there comes a collision, and the bench where he had been sitting is splintered up, and the place where he is sitting is untouched, and the accidental move has saved his life. According to the old story a boy, failing in applying for a situation, stoops down in the courtyard and picks up a pin, and the millionaire sees him through the window, and it makes his fortune. We cannot tell what may come of anything; and since we do not know the far end of our deeds, let us be quite sure that we have got the near end of them right. Whatever may be the issue, let us look after the motive, and then all will be right. Small seeds grow to be great trees, and in this strange and inexplicable network of things which men call circumstances, and Christians call Providence, the only thing certain is that "great" and "small" all but cease to be a tenable, and certainly altogether cease to be an important, distinction.

Then another thing which I would have you remember is, that it is these trivial actions which, in their accumulated force, make character. Men are not made by crises. The crises reveal what we have made ourselves by the trifles. The way in which we do the little things forms the character according to which we shall act when the great things come. If the crew of a man-of-war were not exercised at boat and fire drill during many a calm day, when all was safe, what would become of them when tempests were raging, or flames breaking through the bulk-heads? It is no time to learn drill then. And we must make our characters by the way in which, day out and day in, we do little things, and find in them fields for the great

virtues which will enable us to front the crises of our fate unblenching, and to master whatsoever difficulties come in our path. Geologists nowadays distrust, for the most part, theories which have to invoke great forces in order to mould the face of a country. They tell us that the valley, with its deep sides and wide opening to the sky, may have been made by the slow operation of a tiny brooklet that trickles now down at its base, and by erosion of the atmosphere. So we shape ourselves--and that is a great thing--by the way we do small things. dear friends, think solemnly

Therefore, I say to you, and reverently of this awful life of ours. Clear your minds of the notion that anything is small which

offers to you the alternative of being done in a right way or in a wrong; and recognise this as a fact--"sand is weighty," trifles are of supreme importance.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to take this saying as suggesting the overwhelming weight of small sins.

That is only an application in one direction of the general principle that I have been trying to lay down; but it is one of such great importance that I wish to deal with it separately. And my point is this, that the accumulated pressure upon a man of a multitude of perfectly trivial faults and transgressions makes up a tremendous aggregate that weighs upon him with awful ponderousness.

Let me remind you, to begin with, that, properly speaking, the words "great" and "small" should not be applied in reference to things about which "right" or "wrong" are the proper words to employ. Or, to put it into plainer language, it is as absurd to talk about the "size" of a sin, as it is to take the superficial area of a picture as a test of its greatness. The magnitude of a transgression does not depend on the greatness of the act which transgresses--according to human standards--but on the intensity with which the sinful element is working in it. For acts make crimes, but motives make sins. If you take a bit of prussic acid, and bruise it down, every little microscopic fragment will have the poisonous principle in it; and it is very irrelevant to ask whether it is as big as a mountain or small as a grain of dust, it is poison all the same. So, to talk about magnitude, in regard to sins, is rather to introduce a foreign consideration.

But still, recognising that there is a reality in the distinction that people make between great sins and small ones, though it is a superficial distinction, and does not go down to the bottom of things, let us deal with it now.

I say, then, that small sins, by reason of their numerousness, have a terrible accumulative power. They are like the green flies on our rose bushes, or the microbes that our medical friends talk so much about nowadays. Like them, their power of mischief does not in the least degree depend on their magnitude, and, like them, they have a tremendous capacity of reproduction. It would be easier to find a man that had not done any one sin than to find out a man that had only done it once. And it would be easier to find a man that had done no evil than a man who had not been obliged to make the second edition of his sin an enlarged one.

For this is the present Nemesis of all evil, that it requires repetition, partly to still conscience, partly to satisfy excited tastes and desires ;so that animal indulgence in drink and the like is a type of what goes on in the inner life of every man, in so far as the second dose has to be stronger than the first in order to produce an equivalent effect; and so on ad infinitum.

And then remember that all our evil doings, how-ever insignificant they may be, have a strange affinity with one another, so that you will find that to go wrong in one direction almost inevitably leads to a whole series of consequential transgressions of one sort or another. You remember the old story about the soldier that was smuggled into a fortress concealed in a hay cart, and opened the gates of a virgin citadel to his allies outside. Every evil thing, great or small, that we admit into our lives, still more into our hearts, is charged with the same errand as he had: -"Set wide the door when you are inside, and let us all come in after you." "He taketh with him seven other spirits worse than himself, and they dwell there." "None of them," says one of the prophets, describing the doleful creatures that haunt the ruins of a deserted city, "shall by any means want its mate," and the satyrs of the islands and of the woods join together, and hold high carnival in the city. And so, brethren, our little transgressions open the door for great ones, and every sin makes us more accessible to the assaults of every other.

So let me remind you how here, in these little unnumbered acts of trivial transgression which scarcely produce any effect on conscience or on memory, but make up so large a portion of so many of our lives, lies one of the most powerful instruments for making us what we are. If we indulge in slight acts of transgression, be sure of this, that we shall pass from them to far greater ones. For one man that leaps or falls all at once into sin which the world calls gross,

there are a thousand that slide into it. The storm only blows down the trees whose hearts have been eaten out and their roots loosened. And when you see a man having a reputation for wisdom and honour all at once coming crash down and disclosing his baseness, be sure that he began with small deflections from the path of right. The evil works underground; and if we yield to little temptations, when great ones come we shall fall their victims.

Let me remind you, too, that there is another sense in which "sand is weighty." You may as well be crushed under a sandhill as under a mountain of marble. It matters not which. The accumulated weight of the one is as great as that of the other.

And I wish to lay upon the consciences of all that are listening to me now this thought, that an over-whelming weight of guilt results from the accumulation of little sins. Dear friends, I do not desire to preach a gospel of fear, but I cannot help feeling that, very largely, in this day, the ministration of the Christian Church is defective in that it does not give sufficient, though sad and sympathetic, prominence to the plain teaching of Christ and of the New Testament as to future retribution for present sin. We shall "every one of us give account of him-self to God"; and if the account is long enough it will foot up to an enormous sum, though each item may be only halfpence. The weight of a lifetime of little sins will be enough to crush a man down with guilt and responsibility when he stands before that Judge. That is all true, and you know it, and I beseech you, take it to your hearts, "Sand is weighty. "Little sins have to be accounted for, and may crush.

III.—And now, lastly, let me ask you to consider one or two of the plain, practical issues of such thoughts as these.

And, first, I would say that these considerations set in a very clear light the absolute necessity for all-round and ever-wakeful watchfulness over ourselves.

A man in the tropics does not say, "Mosquitoes are so small that it does not matter if two or three of them get inside my bed-curtains." He takes care that not one is there before he lays himself down to sleep. There seems to me nothing more sad than the complacent, easy-going way in which men allow them-selves to keep their higher moral principles and their more rigid self-examination for the "great" things, as they suppose, and let the little things often take care of themselves. What would you think of the captain of a steamer who in calm weather sailed by rule of thumb, only getting out his sextant when storms began to blow? And what about a man that lets the myriad trivialities that make up a day pass in and out of his heart as they will, and never arrests any of them at the gate with a "How camest thou in

hither?" "Look after the pence, and the pounds will look after themselves." Look after your trivial acts, and, take my word for it, the great ones will be as they ought to be.

Again, may not this thought somewhat take down our easy-going and self-complacent estimate of our-selves? I have no doubt that there are a number of people in my audience this evening who have been more or less consciously saying to themselves whilst I have been going on, "What have I to do with all this talk about sin, sin, sin? I am a decent kind of a man. I do all the duties of my daily life, and nobody can say that the white of my eyes is black. I have done no great transgressions. What is it all about? It has nothing to do with me."

Well, my friend, it has this to do with you—that in

your life there are a whole host of things which only a very superficial estimate hinders you from recognising to be what they are—small deeds, but great sins. Is it a small thing to go, as some of you do go, on from year to year, with your conduct and your thoughts and your loves and your desires utterly unaffected by the fact that there is a God in heaven, and that Jesus Christ died for you? Is that a small thing? It manifests itself in a great many insignificant actions. That I grant you; and you are a most respectable man, and you keep the Commandments as well as you can. But "the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." I say that that is not a small sin.

So, dear brethren, I beseech you judge yourselves by this standard. I charge none of you with gross iniquities. I know nothing about that. But I do appeal to you all, as I do to myself, whether we must not recognise the fact that an accumulated multitude of transgressions which are only superficially small, in their aggregate weigh upon us with "a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life."

Last of all, this being the case, should we not all turn ourselves with lowly hearts, with recognition of our transgressions, acknowledging that whether it be five hundred or fifty pence that we owe, we have nothing to pay, and betake ourselves to Him who alone can deliver us from the habit and power of these small accumulated faults, and who alone can lift the burden of guilt and responsibility from off our shoulders? If you irrigate the sand it becomes fruitful soil. Christ brings to us the river of the water of

life; the inspiring, the quickening, the fructifying power of the new life that He bestows, and the sand may become soil, and the wilderness blossom as the rose. A heavy burden lies on our shoulders. Ah! yes but "behold the Lamb of God that beareth away the sins of the world."

What was it that crushed Him down beneath the olives of Gethsemane? What was it that made Him cry, "My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?" I know no answer but one, for which the world's gratitude is all too small. "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

"Sand is weighty." Christ has borne the burden. Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and it will drop from your emancipated shoulders, and they will hence forth bear only the light burden of His love.