

The Danger of Accomplishments
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"In the hearts of all that are wise hearted, I have put wisdom." Exodus xxxi. 6.

[Note] ST. LUKE differed from his fellow-evangelists and fellow-disciples in having received the advantages of (what is called) a liberal education. In this respect he resembled St. Paul, who, with equal accomplishments appears to have possessed even more learning. He is said to have been a native of Antioch, a city celebrated for the refined habits and cultivated intellect of its inhabitants; and his profession was that of a physician or surgeon, which of itself evidences him to have been in point of education something above the generality of men. This is confirmed by the character of his writings, which are superior in composition to any part of the New Testament, excepting some of St. Paul's Epistles.

There are persons who doubt whether what are called "accomplishments," whether in literature or in the fine arts, can be consistent with deep and practical seriousness of mind. They think that attention to these argues a lightness of mind, and, at least, takes up time which might be better employed; and, I confess, at first sight they seem to be able to say much in defence of their opinion. Yet, notwithstanding, St. Luke and St. Paul were accomplished men, and evidently took pleasure in their accomplishments. I am not speaking of human *learning*; this also many men think inconsistent with simple uncorrupted faith. They suppose that learning must make a man proud. This is of course a great mistake; but of it I am not speaking, but of an over-jealousy of *accomplishments*, the elegant arts and studies, such as poetry, literary composition, painting, music, and the like; which are considered (not indeed to make a man *proud*, but) to make him *trifling*. Of this opinion, how far it is true, and how far not true, I am going to speak: being led to the consideration of it by the known fact, that St. Luke was a polished writer, and yet an Evangelist.

Now, that the accomplishments I speak of have a *tendency* to make us trifling and unmanly, and therefore are to be viewed by each of us with suspicion as far as regards himself, I am ready to admit, and shall presently make clear. I allow, that in matter of fact, refinement and luxury, elegance and effeminacy, go together. Antioch, the most polished, was the most voluptuous city of Asia. But the *abuse* of good things is no argument against the things themselves; mental cultivation *may* be a divine gift, though it is abused. All God's gifts are perverted by man; health, strength, intellectual power, are all turned by sinners to bad purposes, yet they are not evil in themselves: therefore an acquaintance with the elegant arts may be a gift and a good, and intended to be an instrument of God's glory, though numbers who have it are rendered thereby indolent, luxurious, and feeble-minded.

But the account of the building of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, from which the text is taken, is decisive on this point. It is too long to read to you, but a few verses will

37 remind you of the nature of it. "Thou shalt speak unto all that are wise hearted, whom I
38 have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron's garments to
39 consecrate him, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office." "See I have called
40 by name Bezaleel ... and have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and in
41 understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning
42 works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones, to set them,
43 and in carving of timber, to work all manner of workmanship." "Take ye from among you
44 an offering unto the Lord; whosoever is of a willing heart let him bring it, an offering of
45 the Lord, gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet and fine linen,
46 and goats' hair, and rams' skins dyed red, and badgers' skins, and shittim wood, and oil
47 for the light, and spices for anointing oil, and for the sweet incense, and onyx stones,
48 and stones to be set for the ephod, and for the breast-plate. And every wise hearted
49 among you shall come and make all that the Lord hath commanded." [Exod. xxvii. 3;
50 xxxi. 2-5; xxxv. 5-10.]

51 How then is it, that what in itself is of so excellent, and (I may say) divine in nature, is
52 yet so commonly perverted? I proceed to state what is the danger, as it appears to me,
53 of being accomplished, with a view to answer this question.

54 Now the *danger* of an elegant and polite education is, that it separates feeling and
55 acting; it teaches us to think, speak, and be affected aright, without forcing us to
56 practise what is right. I will take an illustration of this, though somewhat a familiar one,
57 from the effect produced upon the mind by reading what is commonly called a romance
58 or novel, which comes under the description of polite literature, of which I am speaking.
59 Such works contain many good sentiments (I am taking the better sort of them):
60 characters too are introduced, virtuous, noble, patient under suffering, and triumphing at
61 length over misfortune. The great truths of religion are upheld, we will suppose, and
62 enforced; and our affections excited and interested in what is good and true. But it is all
63 fiction; it does not exist out of a book which contains the beginning and end of
64 it. *We have nothing to do*; we read, are affected, softened or roused, and that is all; we
65 cool again,—nothing comes of it. Now observe the effect of this. God has made us feel
66 in order that we may *go on to act* in consequence of feeling; if then we allow our
67 feelings to be excited without acting upon them, we do mischief to the moral system
68 within us, just as we might spoil a watch, or other piece of mechanism, by playing with
69 the wheels of it. We weaken its springs, and they cease to act truly. Accordingly, when
70 we have got into the habit of amusing ourselves with these works of fiction, we come at
71 length to feel the excitement without the slightest thought or tendency to act upon it;
72 and, since it is very difficult to begin any duty *without* some emotion or other (that is, to
73 begin on mere principles of dry reasoning), a grave question arises, how, after
74 destroying the connexion between feeling and acting, how shall we get ourselves to act
75 when circumstances make it our duty to do so? For instance, we will say we have read
76 again and again, of the heroism of facing danger, and we have glowed with the thought
77 of its nobleness. We have felt how great it is to bear pain, and submit to indignities,
78 rather than wound our conscience; and all this, again and again, when we had no
79 opportunity of carrying our good feelings into practice. Now, suppose at length we
80 actually come into trial, and let us say, our feelings become roused, as often before, at

81 the thought of boldly resisting temptations to cowardice, shall we therefore do our duty,
82 quitting ourselves like men? rather, we are likely to talk loudly, and then run from the
83 danger. Why?—rather let us ask, why *not*? what is to keep us from yielding? Because
84 we *feel* aright? nay, we have again and again felt aright, and thought aright, without
85 accustoming ourselves to act aright, and, though there was an original connexion in our
86 minds between feeling and acting, there is none now; the wires within us, as they may
87 be called, are loosened and powerless.

88 And what is here instanced of fortitude, is true in all cases of duty. The refinement which
89 literature gives, is that of thinking, feeling, knowing and speaking, right, not of acting
90 right; and thus, while it makes the manners amiable, and the conversation decorous and
91 agreeable, it has no tendency to make the conduct, the practice of the man *virtuous*.

92 Observe, I have supposed the works of fiction I speak of to inculcate right sentiments;
93 though such works (play-books for example) are often vicious and immoral. But even at
94 best, supposing them well principled, still after all, at best, they are, I say, dangerous, in
95 themselves;—that is, if we allow refinement to stand in the place of hardy, rough-
96 handed obedience. It follows, that I am much opposed to certain *religious* novels, which
97 some persons think so useful: that they sometimes do good, I am far from denying;—
98 but they do more harm than good. They do harm on the whole; they lead men to
99 cultivate the religious affections separate from religious practice. And here I might speak
100 of that entire religious system (miscalled religious) which makes Christian faith consist,
101 not in the honest and plain practice of what is right, but in the luxury of excited religious
102 feeling, in a mere meditating on our Blessed Lord, and dwelling as in a reverie on what
103 He has done for us;—for such indolent contemplation will no more sanctify a man *in*
104 *fact*, than reading a poem or listening to a chant or psalm-tune.

105 The case is the same with the arts last alluded to, poetry and music. These are
106 especially likely to make us unmanly, if we are not on our guard, as exciting emotions
107 without insuring correspondent practice, and so destroying the connexion between
108 feeling and acting; for I here mean by unmanliness the inability to do with ourselves
109 what we wish,—the saying fine things and yet lying slothfully on our couch, as if we
110 could not get up, though we ever so much wished it.

111 And here I must notice something besides in elegant accomplishments, which goes to
112 make us over-refined and fastidious, and falsely delicate. In books, everything is made
113 beautiful in its way. Pictures are drawn of *complete* virtue; little is said about failures,
114 and little or nothing of the drudgery of ordinary, everyday obedience, which is neither
115 poetical nor interesting. True faith teaches us to do numberless disagreeable things for
116 Christ's sake, to bear petty annoyances, which we find written down in no book. In most
117 books Christian conduct is made grand, elevated, and splendid; so that any one, who
118 only knows of true religion from books, and not from actual endeavours to be religious,
119 is sure to be offended at religion when he actually comes upon it, from the roughness
120 and humbleness of his duties, and his necessary deficiencies in doing them. It is
121 beautiful in a picture to wash the disciples' feet; but the sands of the real desert have no
122 lustre in them to compensate for the servile nature of the occupation.

And further still, it must be observed, that the art of composing, which is a chief accomplishment, has in itself a tendency to make us artificial and insincere. For to be ever attending to the fitness and propriety of our words, is (or at least there is the risk of its being) a kind of acting; and knowing what can be said on both sides of a subject, is a main step towards thinking the one side as good as the other. Hence men in ancient times, who cultivated polite literature, went by the name of "Sophists;" that is, men who wrote elegantly, and talked eloquently, on any subject whatever, right or wrong. St. Luke perchance might have been such a Sophist, had he not been a Christian.

Such are some of the dangers of elegant accomplishments; and they beset more or less all educated persons; and of these perhaps not the least such females as happen to have no very direct duties, and are above the drudgery of common life, and hence are apt to become fastidious and fine,—to love a luxurious ease, and to amuse themselves in mere elegant pursuits, the while they admire and profess what is religious and virtuous, and think that they really possess the character of mind which they esteem.

With these thoughts before us, it is necessary to look back to the Scripture instances which I began by adducing, to avoid the conclusion that accomplishments are positively dangerous, and unworthy a Christian. But St. Luke and St. Paul show us, that we may be sturdy workers in the Lord's service, and bear our cross manfully, though we be adorned with all the learning of the Egyptians; or rather, that the resources of literature, and the graces of a cultivated mind, may be made both a lawful source of enjoyment to the possessor, and a means of introducing and recommending the Truth to others; while the history of the Tabernacle shows that all the cunning arts and precious possessions of this world may be consecrated to a religious service, and be made to speak of the world to come.

I conclude then with the following cautions, to which the foregoing remarks lead. First, we must avoid giving too much time to lighter occupations; and next, we must never allow ourselves to read works of fiction or poetry, or to interest ourselves in the fine arts for the mere sake of the things themselves: but keep in mind all along that we are Christians and accountable beings, who have fixed principles of right and wrong, by which all things must be tried, and have religious habits to be matured within them, towards which all things are to be made subservient. Nothing is more common among accomplished people than the habit of reading books so entirely for reading's sake, as to praise and blame the actions and persons described in a random way, according to their fancy, not considering whether they are really good or bad according to the standard of moral truth. I would not be austere; but when this is done habitually, surely it is dangerous. Such too is the abuse of poetical talent, that sacred gift. Nothing is more common than to fall into the practice of uttering fine sentiments, particularly in letter writing, as a matter of course, or a kind of elegant display. Nothing more common in singing than to use words which have a light meaning, or a bad one. All these things are hurtful to seriousness of character. It is for this reason (to put aside others) that the profession of stage-players, and again of orators, is a dangerous one. They learn to say good things, and to excite in themselves vehement feelings, about nothing at all.

165 If we are in earnest, we shall let nothing lightly pass by which may do us good, nor shall
166 we dare to trifle with such sacred subjects as morality and religious duty. We shall apply
167 all we read to ourselves; and this almost without intending to do so, from the mere
168 sincerity and honesty of our desire to please God. We shall be suspicious of all such
169 good thoughts and wishes, and we shall shrink from all such exhibitions of our
170 principles, as fall short of action. We shall aim at doing right, and so glorifying our
171 Father, and shall exhort and constrain others to do so also; but as for talking on the
172 appropriate subjects of religious meditation, and *trying* to show piety, and to excite
173 corresponding feelings in another, even though our nearest friend, far from doing this,
174 we shall account it a snare and a mischief. Yet this is what many persons consider the
175 highest part of religion, and call it spiritual conversation, the test of a spiritual mind;
176 whereas, putting aside the incipient and occasional hypocrisy, and again the immodesty
177 of it, I call all formal and intentional expression of religious emotions, all studied
178 passionate discourse, *dissipation*,—dissipation the same in nature, though different in
179 subject, as what is commonly so called; for it is a drain and a waste of our religious and
180 moral strength, a general weakening of our spiritual powers (as I have already shown);
181 and all for what?—for the pleasure of the immediate excitement. Who can deny that this
182 religious disorder is a parallel case to that of the sensualist? Nay, precisely the same as
183 theirs, from whom the religionists in question think themselves very far removed, of the
184 fashionable world I mean, who read works of fiction, frequent the public shows, are ever
185 on the watch for novelties, and affect a pride of manners and a "mincing" [Isa. iii. 16.]
186 deportment, and are ready with all kinds of good thoughts and keen emotions on all
187 occasions.

188 Of all such as abuse the decencies and elegancies of moral truth into a means of
189 luxurious enjoyment, what would a prophet of God say? Hear the words of the holy
190 Ezekiel, that stern rough man of God, a true Saint in the midst of a self-indulgent, high-
191 professing people: "Thou son of man, the children of thy people still are talking against
192 thee by the walls and in the doors of the houses, and speak one to another, every one
193 to his brother, saying, Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth
194 from the Lord. And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee
195 as My people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth
196 they show much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art
197 unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on
198 an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not." [Ezek. xxxiii. 30-32.]

199 Or, consider St. Paul's words; which are still more impressive, because he was himself
200 a man of learning and accomplishments, and took pleasure, in due place, in the pursuits
201 to which these give rise:
202 "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all
203 long-suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound
204 doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching
205 ears. And they shall turn away their ears from the Truth, and shall be turned unto
206 fables." "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." [2 Tim. iv. 2-4. 1
207 Cor. xvi. 13.]

Note

The Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist.