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Great Effects result from little Causes.

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S E R M O N,

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IN ANDOVER.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

It is with some reluctance that the writer of this sermon consents to its publication, because, in his opinion, it belongs to that class of sermons which are peculiarly liable to be overrated, as delivered from the pulpit. He commits it to the press, however, from respect to the opinion of his friends, and in the hope that it may contribute something to encourage the efforts of christians in doing good.

S E R M O N.



JAMES iii. 5.

"BEHOLD HOW GREAT A MATTER A LITTLE FIRE KINDLETH."

EVERY child knows that a spark of fire is a little thing. It is extinguished by a drop of water ; or, if let alone, dies of itself. Yet a spark of fire often becomes the instrument of extensive utility or mischief. A spark of fire from the flint or the match, spreads the field of battle with the dead. A spark of fire is communicated to a magazine of powder : in a moment, massy walls of wood and stone, the pride of war, and the labour of years, yield to the frightful explosion ; and, scattered in a thousand fragments, spread terror and destruction. A spark of fire lights in a closet, or on the roof of a building ; a family start from their slumbers to see their dwelling, with all its contents, in a blaze. The flames kindle upon the nearest buildings ;—the neighbourhood is involved in the spreading ruin ; and, behold, a city is laid in ashes !

The text suggests one leading thought, which I trust is now clearly before your minds :

GREAT EFFECTS RESULT FROM LITTLE CAUSES.

Let us attend to the illustration of this truth, and its application to practical purposes.

The extent of the kingdom of providence, and the connexion of minute with great events, is a subject with which our duty and happiness are deeply concerned. When I speak of causes and effects, let me not be understood to exclude or overlook the supreme agency of that almighty hand which created, and which controuls all things. What are called the laws of nature are nothing distinct from the divine will operating in a uniform manner. In support of the proposition suggested by the text,

we derive an argument, then, from the general doctrine of a divine providence. The argument is this.—God created the world. As an intelligent Agent he must have created it for some end. To secure the accomplishment of that end, he must *govern* it; and his government, to be effectual, must be *universal*. It must extend to *little* things; to *all* things. So the bible teaches. The sparrow, though only equal in value to half a farthing, is not beneath the care of the great Jehovah. He feeds the young ravens, and clothes the lilies in beauty, and numbers even the hairs of our heads. This he does with ultimate reference to the great objects of his kingdom. So *reason* teaches. A very limited acquaintance with the connexion of causes and effects, must satisfy us that, in the government of providence, great things often depend on small things. A moment seems scarcely worth our regard; yet centuries are made up of moments. The mountain that rears its stately head to the clouds, is composed of grains of dust. The river that rolls its majestic tide to the ocean, consists of drops. Here navies float on its waters; but followed backwards to its source, it becomes now a rivulet, and now a spring bubbling from the rocks of some distant region.

The greatest events which the world has witnessed, have resulted from a combination of concurrent causes, each of which might seem altogether unimportant in itself.

Take the subject to illustrate which the Apostle uttered the text. The tongue is a little member; yet it may prove “a world of iniquity, and set on fire the course of nature.” We need not draw examples from the monstrous folly of duellists, when so many examples are to be found among rational, sober men, and even in the Christian Church. That little member speaks a word. A partial alienation betwixt two friends, commences; by the whispering of other tongues, increases: becomes coldness, then jealousy, then enmity. Their own passions, the partialities of friends, the officiousness of tale-bearers, act with combined and mischievous effect, till a trivial

misunderstanding, which might have been amicably adjusted in one minute, becomes an incurable and ruinous controversy.—Suppose the parties to be pastors in the church : suppose them to be prime ministers of a nation, and see how the consequences rise into incalculable importance.

To change the figure, and adopt that of Solomon, “The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water.” The breach in a dam, which might have been covered with a man’s hand, was neglected, and occasioned a deluge.

The same connexion betwixt small things and great, runs through all the concerns of our world. The ignorance of a physician, or the carelessness of an apothecary, may spread death through a family or a town. How often has the sickness of one man become the sickness of thousands ? How often has the error of one man become the error of thousands ?

A fly or an atom may set in motion a train of intermediate causes which shall produce a revolution in a kingdom. Any one of a thousand incidents might have cut off Alexander of Greece in his cradle. But if Alexander had died in infancy, or had lived a single day longer than he did, it might have put another face on all the following history of the world.

Great effects may result from little causes.

Let us pursue the illustration of this truth, as furnished by experience and facts.

“The woman took of the fruit and did eat ; and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.” In itself how small was this action ; but it ruined a *world* ! *One* hand did the deed, in *one moment* ; but *hundreds of millions* have been involved in the consequences, through *sixty centuries*.

A spark of envy in the bosoms of Joseph’s brethren grew into a settled enmity, and led them to aim at the destruction of his life. Here commenced a series of events which occasioned the removal of Jacob’s family to Egypt, and which gave complexion to the affairs of two nations through all subsequent periods.

The seed of Jacob who came down to Egypt were only seventy persons. During their residence in that land, they multiplied to six hundred thousand fighting men. The king of the country, alarmed at this increase, issued a barbarous edict that every Hebrew male child should be destroyed at its birth. To avoid the execution of this decree, a Hebrew mother, having concealed her little son for three months, resolved to commit the babe to the mercy of Providence, with no protection from the elements and the monsters of the Nile but an ark of bulrushes. Soon a stranger passed by that way, just at the moment that the babe wept. That stranger was a woman, whose heart could feel for a poor forsaken infant: a princess too, the only person in Egypt who might safely indulge this tenderness. The child was saved, and adopted as the son of the king's daughter. Little did that princess know what she was doing. That weeping infant, thus rescued from death, was to be the minister of divine vengeance to her haughty father and his kingdom; was to be the amanuensis of the Holy Ghost; was to write five books of the sacred canon, containing the only authentic history of the creation and first ages of the world; was to become a distinguished legislator, deliverer, and guide to the Church of God.

Joshua's victorious march into Canaan was suddenly arrested. His army were compelled to fly before their enemies: all was consternation and distress. What was the matter? A single man out of the twelve tribes had embezzled two articles from the spoils of Jericho, contrary to divine command. Achan committed trespass in this thing, "and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel."

Restrained by the energy of Joshua's authority and example, Israel prospered; but his death was followed by a rapid decline of piety and morals. In this period of licentiousness Micah stole from his mother eleven hundred pieces of silver. By a process which exhibits one of the strangest traits in the human character, namely, the connexion betwixt depravity and superstition, Micah

came to the resolution to appease his conscience by making this stolen silver into a god. A vagrant Levite from Bethlehem Judah became his priest. From this small beginning idolatry spread like a leprosy through the nation. The fear of God was extinguished ; and such profligacy of manners ensued, even in the beloved tribe of Benjamin, that a peaceable stranger could not lodge among them one night in safety. One of the most dire calamities which flowed from these impieties, was civil war. Brother was armed against brother ; and in three desperate battles sixty five thousand men were slain. "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth."

The sons of Eli made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. This negligence in the judge and the priest of Israel proved a source of the deepest anguish to himself and his country. These lawless sons, having access to the sacred utensils of the tabernacle, carried away the Ark of the covenant into the camp, to ensure victory over the Philistines. God was angry ; Israel was smitten with a terrible slaughter ; and the Ark was taken. In the mean time Eli heard what his sons had done. His heart trembled. Blind with age, and bending under the decrepitude of ninety eight years, he tottered away to the gate of the city and sat down there, that he might catch the first rumour from the army. Oh should the Ark be taken, the glory of Israel would be gone ! With what profane triumph would it be told in Gath, and published in the streets of Ashkelon ! Presently a tumult is heard :—a messenger has come from the army :—where is Eli ?—"What meaneth the noise of the tumult," said the poor old man to the messenger panting for breath ? "what is there done, my son ?"—"*Israel is fled before the Philistines : there hath been a great slaughter among the people ; thy two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead ; and the ARK OF GOD IS TAKEN.*" Eli heard all with composure till the dreadful event was announced. "the Ark of God is taken :—" that was too much : his heart sunk, he fainted, fell backward, and died.—From that day the ruin of Shiloh was dated. From that fatal day their candlestick

was removed out of its place, and their city dwindled to nothing.

In the sequel of the Jewish history we read that Goliath of Gath came forth, day after day, and with an attitude of daring impiety challenged the Hebrews and their God. The men of war were struck with dismay, and the captains of Israel, with trembling hearts, and at a cautious distance, looked at the mighty man.

At length a stripling shepherd, the son of Jesse, unfit, as was supposed, for the fatigues of war, was sent to the camp, on a common errand, to carry provisions and inquire for the welfare of his brethren. By permission of the king he entered the lists to fight with Goliath. Clad in no armour but faith in the Lord of hosts, and using no weapons but a sling and a stone, the giant fell before him.

Thus a common stone, which had lain perhaps useless and unnoticed for ages in the bottom of a common brook, slew the champion and routed the army of the Philistines, and decided a battle on which the interests of a nation were suspended.

Great effects may result from little causes.

I have drawn out the illustration of this truth in so many particulars, because I wish to impress it on every person in this assembly with reference to the practical instruction which results from it.

This instruction may be included under two general remarks.

First. It is a solemn thing to *live* in this world.

We are a part of a complex system. Connected as we are with our fellow beings, and with eternity, every action, every circumstance pertaining to our character, however apparently indifferent, becomes absolutely important. If the history of our race in past ages proves this, no less does the course of events within our own observation. We have just witnessed the winding up of a drama in which all the world have been actors. Little did its first authors anticipate the awful lesson of instruction to mankind which its progress has exhibited. A few licentious men, having organized the principles of an

archy in the heart of Europe, blew the fire in secret for half a century, when it burst into a tremendous explosion. Like Etna's boiling furnaces, it poured out its rivers of flame, to mar all that was fair, and consume all that was flourishing around it. Every monarchy in Europe was shaken. Political and religious systems, reared by the labour of ages, felt the concussion, and fell among the mighty ruins of this sweeping desolation.

At length the chief actor in the dreadful scenes of the last twenty years,—he at whose colossal stature the world trembled,—has fallen to the size of a common man, pre-eminent now in nothing but guilt. But when we look back on the convulsions of the nations, the amount of sin and suffering, the slaughter of human beings, occasioned by this single man ; we have demonstration never before exhibited, (and Heaven grant it may never be repeated,) that “one sinner destroyeth much good.” Oh who would not choose to be the meanest beggar that ever walked, nay the meanest worm that ever crawled, rather than be *that man* !

I grant that efforts to do mischief are wont to be attended with fatal success, because they co-operate with the strong downward course of human depravity. The river forms a broader and deeper current as it runs. The rock that is started from the mountain's summit by a single hand, rushes downward by its own weight ; but a thousand hands could not roll it back. The mischief which Jeroboam did in Israel, lasted through twenty generations.

On the contrary, it is easy to name those who have been illustrious benefactors of the world. Who can estimate the amount of good accomplished by Moses, by Nehemiah, by Paul, by Luther ? Who can pretend to determine, till it is revealed in eternity, the extent of good produced by the preaching of Whitefield ; or the number of immortal souls that will be found at last to have been saved from eternal death by the instrumentality of Baxter's *Saint's Rest*, or of the *Assembly's Catechism* ? In

this view every preacher of the Gospel may well tremble at the consequences which *must* result from his labours ; nay, at the consequences which *may* result from a single word or action. With awful emphasis then may it be said of the preacher whose doctrine or life is habitually corrupt, " Good had it been for that man if he had not been born."

But admitting that it is a solemn thing to live as the ruler of a nation, or the pastor of a church, does the subject apply to persons in *common* life ? It does. What though you occupy a humble station : only remember that you are immortal, and that others around you are immortal ; and what importance does this single thought attach to every thing you say or do ? You take a walk ; you read a book ; you spend an hour in a social circle. The thing is done and forgotten. But, imperceptibly perhaps, you have received impressions on your own mind, or have given impressions to some other mind, that will last forever. Every man and every woman is connected with God's world by a thousand ties, and cannot live, no not for a single day, without doing good or evil.

You are a *professed Christian*. Perhaps you sometimes forget the vows of God which are upon you ; and give such license to your tongue, or to your actions, as to wound the cause of the Redeemer. Did you ever soberly look at *consequences* in this case ? Did you ever reflect that what you have done in one half hour, may have influence a thousand miles distant, or a thousand years to come ? A mortal pestilence spread over a city : that pestilence was introduced by a ship's crew, among whom it was generated by a small defect in their ship ; and that defect was occasioned by the gnawing of a worm in an oak that grew on another continent a century before.

The temple of Jerusalem was built by the labour and wealth of a nation ; yet a single firebrand, thrown by a common soldier of the Roman army, consumed this magnificent edifice which had been the wonder of the world.

You are a *father*. Do you say, how can I, an obscure man, who have no influence on the affairs of the great

world, do mischief by my example? What was that unguarded word which you spoke this morning in your family?—*You have forgotten*,—but your *child* will remember it perhaps to his dying day. Say not then, I, who am obscure, may act without restraint, especially when secluded from the world, in the retirement of my family. *Obscure!*—You are *immortal*. You must go to the *judgment*; and every whisper of your life will be exhibited before an assembled universe! *Secluded!*—What if the eye of the world does not follow you into the domestic circle? Is it not restraint enough that your *child* is there? That child has a *soul*, worth more than a million globes of gold. That child too may become a legislator, or a judge, or a pastor in the Church. Take care, parent! You act under a dreadful responsibility. You cannot *stir* without touching some string that will vibrate after your head is laid in the dust. One word of pious counsel, or one word of sinful levity or passion, uttered in the hearing of your child, may produce an effect on your children's children. Nay, its influence may be felt on the other side of the globe, and may extend into eternity.

You are a *mother*. Excluded from any share in the splendid achievements of the world, is your influence therefore to be deemed unimportant? By no means. The wife of a humble tradesman in London had a son, who at his birth was apparently destitute of life, and was laid aside as dead. By the assiduities of a faithful nurse the expiring flame of life in the infant was happily preserved. His christian mother dedicated him to God, “and before he could read, taught him the history of the Old and New Testament, by the assistance of some Dutch tiles in the chimney of the room where they usually sat.” That child was PHILIP DODDRIDGE; afterwards, as you know, one of the most useful ministers that has lived in any age.

By whose instrumentality was the prophet Samuel educated for an exalted station in the church? By that of his mother Hannah. Who taught young Timothy the

holy Scriptures? His grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice. Wherever the writings of the late venerable John Newton shall be read, it will be known that the instructions which his pious mother gave him before he was *four years old*, fastened an impression on his conscience which cleaved to him through all his subsequent licentiousness, till he became an eminent believer and preacher of that Gospel which he had despised. In connexion with this take another fact, which spreads out our subject before us in all its interest. Claudius Buchanan, a poor youth, wandering in the streets of London, incidentally heard a sermon from Mr. Newton, which excited his first religious impressions. How much good has been done by the indefatigable efforts and enterprise of Buchanan! How little did he know, when he took his pen to write on that text, "We have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him," that he was kindling a fire to burn with unabated fervour in millions of bosoms, when the hand of death should have extinguished it in his own! How many thousands are every day instructed and comforted by reading the Family Bible of Scott, another man to whom Newton was a spiritual father! Look now at this immense sum of good, and remember that, so far as human agency deserves to be mentioned in any case, all this is to be ascribed, under God, to the instructions which a little child received from his Christian mother.

My second general remark is, that we should never yield to *discouragement* in our efforts to do good.

Though the result of these efforts in any case should not be so immediate as we could wish, we are called to the exercise of faith, and patience, and courage, not of despondence. The *first* question is, in every such case, —*is this a good object?* The *second* is, —*by what means shall it be accomplished?* Settle these, and there is no *third* question. To deliberate whether such an object shall not be given over, is beneath the dignity and energy of Christian principles. I know that the cause of piety

and good morals has stubborn obstacles to encounter. The majority of the world is against it. Still the friend of this cause may say with fearless confidence, like the prophet's servant, "They that be with *us* are more than they that be with *them*." Here again let facts speak for our instruction.

The disciples of Christ were once a feeble, despised sect at Jerusalem. The Jewish senate deliberated whether to crush this sect at a stroke, or to let it die of itself. But behold, "the weakness of God is stronger than men." Twelve fishermen of Galilee, without learning, without power, without ^{of} friends, erected the standard of the cross. Hosts of opposition gave way before the triumphs of truth: and all the wealth and wisdom, the pride and prejudice, the power and policy of the world, could not resist its progress.

But we need not survey past centuries. The astonishing events which we have recently witnessed, rebuke despondence in doing good.

Look at the concert of prayer. A few British Christians, in a private chamber, resolved to set apart an hour on the first Monday evening of every month, to pray for the revival of religion. The flame spread from minister to minister, and from church to church, till it reached the extremities of the empire in which it began. From Britain the same spirit has been kindled in various parts of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America.

It is no enthusiasm to hope that all Christendom will soon unite in this concert; and that the spirits of Luther, and Baxter, and Edwards, will look down from their abodes of light, to witness the church resting from her long conflict and agony; and her prayers from every part of the globe ascending in one great cloud of incense to heaven.

Look at the little band of men who formed the first Missionary Society in modern times. With means utterly incompetent to the magnitude of their undertaking, they assumed a motto worthy of the apostolic age;—

"EXPECT GREAT THINGS ; ATTEMPT GREAT THINGS."
 The history of their labors and successes for twenty three years, demonstrates that no obstacles are too great to be surmounted, no enterprise of Christian benevolence is too arduous to be undertaken, in the strength of the Lord.

Look at the British and Foreign Bible Society. In ten years from its establishment it has distributed more than a million Bibles and Testaments ; has filled the world with kindred societies, and with the fruits of its beneficence. Within the last year alone its expenditures for this sacred object were three hundred and seventy six thousand dollars.

Look at the British Tract Society. At its fourteenth anniversary one of its founders said, "I have followed this Society from its birth : at first we could not number more friends than would surround this table. But this infant has become a Sampson in strength." With an annual income of more than twenty thousand dollars, it has distributed at least twenty millions of Tracts, in various languages, which have gone as winged messengers of salvation to the ends of the earth. They have preached the Gospel in the splendid mansion, and in the humble cottage. They have carried instruction "to the child in the school, to the traveller on the road, to the soldier in the camp, to the seaman on the mighty waters, to the victim of disease in the hospital, and to the debtor, the captive, and the criminal, within the walls of the prison."

Look at the wonderful efforts to do good which our own country exhibits. Time would fail to mention the societies for promoting domestic and foreign missions, Bible Societies, Tract, Moral, Education, and other charitable associations, which have recently sprung up without number, and some of which are among the noblest institutions of the age.

Eight years ago there was not a single Bible Society in the United States : now there are sixty two. Three years ago there was scarcely one Moral Society : now there are hundreds.

Shall I swell this list of encouragements to perseverance in doing good?—then look at the examples of your fathers.

When the venerable PHILLIPS conceived the plan of yonder academy, with all his comprehensive intelligence and benevolence, how little did he know what he was doing!—How little did he anticipate what we have witnessed within so short a period, a THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, rising with ample resources, on the same foundation, through the unexampled liberality of a few honored associates in this good work!—How little do *we* anticipate the consequences of this establishment, to be developed in a century to come!—Already the name of Andover is spoken with affection by thousands of tongues, and is associated with the dearest hopes of many hearts in distant parts of the globe.

Yes! PHILLIPS and ABBOT have set you and the world a splendid example. And in some future age, when the dwellings which they inhabited shall be mouldered to ruins, the passing stranger will pause and say, “*There dwelt those friends of God; there sleep those venerable men, whose lives and labors, whose cares and prayers, and property, were devoted to doing good.*”

Shall I come nearer still, and say, look at your *own* example. Two years ago the Sabbath was dreadfully profaned in your streets, by travelling and business. You sighed over this evil, and said there is no remedy. But alarmed at length by its growing magnitude, you consulted: you formed this Moral Society: you said, the evil *shall cease*,—and it *ceased*.

The literary and religious improvement of your schools, now to be exhibited in the report of your committee, will furnish a still more powerful appeal to your hearts to go on with what you have begun.

* The reader will perceive that the respected names of BARTLET, BROWN, and NORRIS, though alluded to, were not mentioned in this passage of the sermon; they not having been inhabitants of this town.

I ask you now, brethren, to review this subject. Survey the world in motion: the wonderful characteristics of this age of action. Then look at the dear immortal children in your families and schools: then look forward into future generations, and into eternity; and say,—have you not met to day on a *great* occasion?

Stand up then to your work, and go forward. Every man, woman, and child can do something,—can do *much*. Who cannot spare one cent to buy a small tract? That tract, dropped on the high road, or given to a stranger, may carry comfort to some desponding, or conviction to some careless heart; may reclaim some profligate, awaken some drunkard to sobriety, some sabbath-breaker or swearer to saving reformation.

The day is coming when men will be accustomed to reckon the establishment of a Tract or Moral Society, or a praying meeting, among the instruments of ushering in the glory of the Church and the salvation of the world. It is not improbable that eternity will disclose to us how the astonishing events of this age sprung at first from the closet of some obscure saint, like Simeon and Anna of old, “praying to God alway, and waiting for the consolation of Israel.”

Courage then, brethren! Stand up to your work, and go forward. God is with you. The struggle betwixt sin and righteousness is drawing to a close. The storm which has agitated the Church is ceasing to rage. “The long night of discord and calamity which has enveloped the world, is passing into a glorious day. With humble hope and joy we hail the approaching consummation of the prophetic word, when the seventh angel shall sound, and great voices be heard in heaven, saying,—The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. Alleluia! Amen!