

“The Education of Children by Paternus”

William Law

Paternus lived about two hundred years ago; he had but one son, whom he educated himself in his own house. As they were sitting together in the garden, when the child was ten years old, Paternus thus began to teach him:

“The little time that you have been in the world, my child, you have spent wholly with me; and my love and tenderness to you has made you look upon me as your only friend and benefactor, and the cause of all the comfort and pleasure that you enjoy; your heart, I know, would be ready to break with grief, if you thought this was the last day that I should live with you.

But, my child, though you now think yourself mighty happy, because you have hold of my hand, you are now in the hands, and under the tender care of a much greater Father and Friend than I am, whose love to you is far greater than mine, and from whom you receive such blessings as no mortal can give.

That God whom you have seen me daily worship, whom I daily call upon to bless both you and me, and all mankind, whose wondrous acts are recorded in those Scriptures which you constantly read; that God who created the heavens and the earth, who brought a flood upon the whole world, who saved Noah in the ark, who was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom Job blessed and praised in the greatest afflictions, who delivered the Israelites out of the hands of the Egyptians, who was the Protector of righteous Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and holy Daniel, who sent so many Prophets into the world, who sent His Son Jesus Christ to redeem mankind; this God, who has done all these great things, who has created so many millions of men who lived and died before you were born, with whom the spirits of good men that are departed this life now live, whom infinite numbers of Angels now worship in Heaven; this great God, who is the Creator of worlds, of Angels, and men, is your loving Father and Friend, your good Creator and Nourisher, from whom, and not from me, you received your being ten years ago, at the time that I planted that little tender elm which you there see.

I myself am not half the age of this shady oak, under which we sit; many of our fathers have sat under its boughs, we have all of us called it ours in our turn, though it stands, and drops its masters, as it drops its leaves.

You see, my son, this wide and large firmament over our heads, where the sun and moon, and all the stars appear in their turns. If you were to be carried up to any of these bodies at this vast distance from us, you would still discover others as much above you, as the stars that you see here are above the earth. Were you to go up or down, east or west, north or south, you would find the same height without any top, and the same depth without any bottom.

And yet, my child, so great is God, that all these bodies added together are but as a grain of sand in His sight. And yet you are as much the care of this great God and Father of all worlds and all spirits, as if He had no son but you, or there was no creature for Him to love and protect but you alone. He numbers the hairs of your

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head, watches over you, sleeping and waking, and has preserved you from a thousand dangers, which neither you, nor I, know anything of.

How poor my power is, and how little I am able to do for you, you have often seen. Your late sickness has shown you how little I could do for you in that state; and the frequent pains of your head are plain proofs that I have no power to remove them.

I can bring you food and medicines, but have no power to turn them into your relief and nourishment. It is God alone that can do this for you.

Therefore, my child, fear, and worship, and love God. Your eyes, indeed, cannot yet see Him. But all things that you see are so many marks of His power and presence, and He is nearer to you than anything that you can see.

Take Him for your Lord, and Father, and Friend, look up unto Him as the fountain and cause of all the good that you have received through my hands; and reverence me only as the bearer and minister of God's good things unto you. And He that blessed my father before I was born, will bless you when I am dead.

Your youth and little mind is only yet acquainted with my family, and therefore you think there is no happiness out of it.

But, my child, you belong to a greater family than mine; you are a young member of the family of this Almighty Father of all nations, who has created infinite orders of Angels, and numberless generations of men, to be fellow-members of one and the same society in Heaven.

You do well to reverence and obey my authority because God has given me power over you, to bring you up in His fear, and to do for you as the holy fathers recorded in Scripture did for their children, who are now in rest and peace with God.

I shall in a short time die, and leave you to God and yourself; and, if God forgives my sins, I shall go to His Son Jesus Christ, and live amongst patriarchs and prophets, saints and martyrs, where I shall pray for you, and hope for your safe arrival at the same place.

Therefore, my child, meditate on these great things; and your soul will soon grow great and noble by so meditating upon them.

Let your thoughts often leave these gardens, these fields and farms, to contemplate God and Heaven, to consider upon the Angels, and the spirits of good men living in light and glory.

As you have been used to look to me in all your actions, and have been afraid to do anything, unless you first knew my will, so let it now be a rule of your life, to look

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up to God in all your actions, to do everything in His fear, and to abstain from everything that is not according to His will.

Bear Him always in your mind, teach your thoughts to reverence Him in every place, for there is no place where He is not.

God keeps a book of life, wherein all the actions of all men are written; your name is there, my child; and when you die, this book will be laid open before men and Angels, and, according as your actions are there found, you will either be received to the happiness of those holy men who have died before you, or be turned away amongst wicked spirits, that are never to see God any more.

Never forget this book, my son, for it is written, it must be opened, you must see it, and you must be tried by it. Strive, therefore, to fill it with your good deeds, that the handwriting of God may not appear against you.

God, my child, is all love, and wisdom, and goodness; and everything that He has made, and every action that He does, is the effect of them all. Therefore you cannot please God, but so far as you strive to walk in love, wisdom, and goodness. As all wisdom, love, and goodness, proceed from God, so nothing but love, wisdom, and goodness, can lead to God.

When you love that which God loves, you act with Him, you join yourself to Him; and when you love what He dislikes, then you oppose Him, and separate yourself from Him. This is the true and the right way: think what God loves, and do you love it with all your heart.

First of all, my child, worship and adore God, think of Him magnificently, speak of Him reverently, magnify His providence, adore His power, frequent His service, and pray unto Him frequently and constantly.

Next to this, love your neighbour, which is all mankind, with such tenderness and affection as you love yourself. Think how God loves all mankind, how merciful He is to them, how tender He is of them, how carefully He preserves them; and then strive to love the world, as God loves it.

God would have all men to be happy; therefore do you will and desire the same. All men are great instances of Divine Love; therefore let all men be instances of your love.

But above all, my son, mark this; never do anything through strife, or envy, or emulation, or vain-glory. Never do anything in order to excel other people, but in order to please God, and because it is His will that you should do everything in the best manner that you can.

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For if it is once a pleasure to you to excel other people, it will by degrees be a pleasure to you to see other people not so good as yourself.

Banish therefore every thought of self-pride, and self-distinction, and accustom yourself to rejoice in all the excellencies and perfections of your fellow-creatures, and be as glad to see any of their good actions as your own.

For as God is as well pleased with their well-doings, as with yours; so you ought to desire, that everything that is wise, and holy, and good, may be performed in as high a manner by other people, as by yourself.

Let this therefore be your only motive and spur to all good actions, honest industry, and business, to do everything in as perfect and excellent a manner as you can, for this only reason, because it is pleasing to God, who desires your perfection, and writes all your actions in a book. When I am dead, my son, you will be master of all my estate, which will be a great deal more than the necessities of one family require. Therefore, as you are to be charitable to the souls of men, and wish them the same happiness with you in Heaven, so be charitable to their bodies, and endeavour to make them as happy as you upon earth.

As God has created all things for the common good of all men, so let that part of them which has fallen to your share be employed, as God would have all employed, for the common good of all.

Do good, my son, first of all to those that most deserve it; but remember to do good to all. The greatest sinners receive daily instances of God's goodness towards them; He nourishes and preserves them, that they may repent, and return to Him: do you therefore imitate God, and think no one too bad to receive your relief and kindness, when you see that he wants it.

I am teaching you Latin and Greek, not that you should desire to be a great critic, a fine poet, or an eloquent orator; I would not have your heart feel any of these desires; for the desire of these accomplishments is a vanity of the mind, and the masters of them are generally vain men. For the desire of anything that is not a real good, lessens the application of the mind after that which is so.

But I teach you these languages, that at proper times you may look into the history of past ages, and learn the methods of God's providence over the world: that, reading the writings of the ancient Sages, you may see how wisdom and virtue have been the praise of great men of all ages, and fortify your mind by their wise sayings.

Let truth and plainness therefore be the only ornament of your language, and study nothing but how to think of all things as they deserve, to choose everything that is best, to live according to reason and order, and to act in every part of your life in conformity to the will of God.

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Study how to fill your heart full of the love of God, and the love of your neighbour, and then be content to be no deeper a scholar, no finer a gentleman, than these tempers will make you. As true religion is nothing else but simple nature governed by right reason, so it loves and requires great plainness and simplicity of life. Therefore avoid all superfluous shows of finery and equipage, and let your house be plainly furnished with moderate conveniences. Do not consider what your estate can afford, but what right reason requires.

Let your dress be sober, clean, and modest, not to set out the beauty of your person, but to declare the sobriety of your mind, that your outward garb may resemble the inward plainness and simplicity of your heart. For it is highly reasonable that you should be one man, all of a piece, and appear outwardly such as you are inwardly.

As to your meat and drink, in them observe the highest rules of Christian temperance and sobriety; consider your body only as the servant and minister of your soul; and only so nourish it, as it may best perform an humble and obedient service to it.

But, my son, observe this as a most principal thing, which I shall remember you of as long as I live with you.

Hate and despise all human glory, for it is nothing else but human folly. It is the greatest snare, and the greatest betrayer, that you can possibly admit into your heart.

Love humility in all its instances; practise it in all its parts, for it is the noblest state of the soul of man; it will set your heart and affections right towards God, and fill you with every temper that is tender and affectionate towards men.

Let every day, therefore, be a day of humility; condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of your fellow-creatures, cover their frailties, love their excellencies, encourage their virtues, relieve their wants, rejoice in their prosperities, compassionate their distress, receive their friendship, overlook their unkindness, forgive their malice, be a servant of servants, and condescend to do the lowest offices to the lowest of mankind.

Aspire after nothing but your own purity and perfection, and have no ambition, but to do everything in so reasonable and religious a manner, that you may be glad that God is everywhere present, and sees and observes all your actions. The greatest trial of humility is an humble behaviour towards your equals in age, estate, and condition of life. Therefore be careful of all the motions of your heart towards these people. Let all your behaviour towards them be governed by unfeigned love. Have no desire to put any of your equals below you, nor any anger at those that would put themselves above you. If they are proud, they are ill of a very bad distemper;

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let them, therefore, have your tender pity; and perhaps your meekness may prove an occasion of their cure. But if your humility should do them no good, it will, however, be the greatest good that you can do to yourself.

Remember that there is but one man in the world, with whom you are to have perpetual contention, and be always striving to exceed him, and that is yourself.

The time of practising these precepts, my child, will soon be over with you, the world will soon slip through your hands, or rather you will soon slip through it; it seems but the other day since I received these same instructions from my dear father, that I am now leaving with you. And the God that gave me ears to hear, and a heart to receive, what my father said unto me, will, I hope, give you grace to love and follow the same instructions."

Thus did Paternus educate his son.

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William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout & Holy Life* (p. 210-216)
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