

The Family at Home: Familiar Illustrations of Various Domestic Duties

By [Gorham D. Abbott](#)

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Section 7 – READING

"Reading is an invaluable art. It is a key which can unlock all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. It furnishes a pleasing employment, and solace for the hour of solitude, and fits us for appearing in society with advantage. It enables a man to avail himself of the knowledge and experience of others, with whom, but for reading, he would have had no medium of communication. It brings him into familiar acquaintance with whatever may concern his present or future well-being through time and eternity.

"But, like every other machine of vast power, there is a proportionate danger of its becoming the instrument of destruction. Books have been made subservient to the purposes of vice as well as of virtue—the vehicles of everything that is polluting and profane; and the young cannot be too cautious in making their selection.

"A taste for reading is, in itself, desirable and commendable. It has been the means of keeping many a young man from imbibing a taste for the public-house, the ballroom, or the gaming-table. Every young man will do well to connect himself with some society, by means of which he may be furnished with a judicious selection of profitable books. There are many subjects affording mines of pleasing and interesting information, which invite the research of the student, and which are now happily treated of in so simple and common-sense a manner as to render them intelligible to people of an ordinary education. Biography, history, travels, geography, natural and experimental philosophy, and general science, will afford a pleasing variety to every unperverted taste.

"But guard against the love of light, trifling reading. At best, it wastes the time and enfeebles the mind, disqualifies it for the relish of more solid subjects. By giving a false and delusive coloring to the scenes of human life, excites unreasonable expectations, unfits for common duties, and produces discontent with the sober realities of life.

"The youth, or the head of a family, who is alive to the great interests of eternity, will devote a considerable portion of his leisure to the perusal of such books as

have a direct tendency to promote his moral and spiritual improvement. Very far from considering pious books dull and insipid, he will esteem them most interesting and savory; and, without excluding or despising works of general information, he will consider those connected with his spiritual interests as the most indispensable. Above all, the holy scriptures will be the book of his daily perusal. Whatever other book is consulted or dispensed with, this cannot be done without. It will be the man of his counsel, the light of his faith, the consolation of his spirit."

The above remarks were made by a gentleman at the formation of a reading society, or lending library, among the young men of the village. He originated the plan, and was for many years the president of the society. There was a little opposition at first: what good thing ever was set afoot that did not meet with some opposition? One or two of the farmers were sadly afraid of making the people too learned, and that there would be none left who would be content to labor. The master of a circulating library opposed it, because he feared that the new books recommended would cut out his foolish novels and romances; and the inn-keepers objected to it, when they found that the meetings of the society were to be held in the school-room, and not in a public-house. However, the plan succeeded, and outlived all their opposition: together with Sunday-schools, in which this gentleman and his whole family were actively engaged, I think this reading society was highly beneficial in promoting the civilization and respectability of individuals, and the comfort of families. Indeed, I recollect several instances of young people in humble life so improving these means of instruction, that they have been instrumental in fitting them to fill very respectable stations in society; so they have found the truth of the old saying, that "learning is better than house and land."

The following remarks I have met with elsewhere.

"There are many books," said John Newton, "which I cannot sit down to read. They are indeed good and sound—but have a great quantity of pages, compared to their insignificant value. There are some *silver* books, and a very few *golden* books; but I have one book worth more than all, called the Bible—and that is a book of priceless gems!"

To a man who knows the value of the word of God, it is nearer than his friends, dearer than his life, sweeter than his liberty, and pleasanter than his daily comforts.

Every man who prays loves the scriptures; for we speak to God in prayer, and He speaks to us in his word. Such a person reads the threatenings of God, and considers them as a call to him to repent. He reads the promises, and they call upon him to believe. He reads the commands of God, and feels himself sweetly called upon to obey; and often he bursts into exclamations like those of the Psalmist, "How sweet are your words to my taste! yes, sweeter than honey to my

mouth; moreover, by them is your servant warned, and in keeping of them there is great reward." "Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage."

All arguments against the word of God are fallacies; all conceits against the word are delusions; all derision against the word is folly; all opposition against the word is madness.

The Bible is open to all; but each should receive it as if addressed to himself alone. Let it speak to each in the words of Nathan to David, "You are the man!"

This one book is worth more than all the other books in the world! He who reads this book with attention, humility, prayer, and self-application, can never be ignorant of that which it chiefly concerns him to know. "Therein are contained the words of eternal life. It has God for its Author, salvation for its object, and truth, without mixture of error, for its matter."

"Holy Bible! book divine!
Precious treasure! you are mine!
Mine, to tell me whence I came;
Mine, to teach me what I am;
Mine, to chide me when I rove;
Mine, to show a Savior's love!
Mine you are, to guide my feet;
Mine, to judge, condemn, acquit;
Mine, to comfort in distress,
If the Holy Spirit bless;
Mine, to show, by living faith,
Man can triumph over death;
Mine, to tell of joys to come,
And the rebel sinner's doom!
O, you holy book divine,
Precious treasure! you are mine!"

COMMON SENSE

Common sense is a most valuable quality. "The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way;" to see promptly what is the best thing to be done in the circumstances in which he is placed; and what is the best way of setting about it. Of some people it may be justly said, they have every sense but common sense; they can tell you about the stars, and write fine poetry, and make fine speeches, and draw fine pictures, and play fine music; but, as to handling a spade, or a hammer, or a stocking-needle, they are as helpless as a babe or an idiot. They have scarcely an idea of the food they eat, or the clothes they wear; to know how, where, and by what means, they are procured, and what they are made of; but they depend altogether upon the skill, care and industry of other people. And

if they (like Robinson Crusoe) should be cast on an uninhabited island, though surrounded with the means of subsistence, they would perish for lack of a notion how to bring them into use. They go through the world without opening their eyes to any of the common objects around them.

One of these learned simpletons having had a hole cut in his study-door to admit a favorite cat, when the said cat brought him a kitten, deemed it necessary to send for a carpenter to cut a smaller hole, through which the kitten might pass; never once imagining that a cat and a kitten could pass through the same hole.

Another, walking round a favorite meadow, about a mile in circumference, when he had gone three parts of the way, looked at his watch, and finding it was near dinnertime, thought he had not time to go quite round, but must hasten back as quickly as possible; thus making his walk a mile and a half instead of a mile! A poor day-laborer would have known better than to commit such a blunder. But "fine sense and exalted sense are not half so useful as common sense."

As every man knows that he cannot live long on earth, but will live in another and an unknown world forever, it would be the part of common sense to be more concerned and more active in securing the interests of that long futurity, than those of this short and fleeting time; but this is one sad proof of human depravity, that the generality of people are "careful and troubled about many things" that concern their *present* interest, ease, and gratification, and disregard "the one thing needful,"—the interests of their souls, and their preparation for eternity. "O that they were wise; that they understood this; that they would consider their latter end!" "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world—and lose his own soul, and be cast away?"

POLITENESS

Some people are very fond of affecting a crude coarseness of manners, and despise politeness among friends, as though it were inconsistent with freedom and sincerity. How important that politeness should be cultivated in every family; not the foolish, unmeaning ceremony of the world, but a gentle, obliging demeanor towards all around us. "Politeness is not affection, but it is one of the outworks of it; like a wall or a hedge round a garden, which preserves it from being entrenched upon or trampled down." True politeness is *benevolence in trifles*. Some people are naturally polite, and others naturally churlish, or rather selfish; for selfishness is the great enemy to politeness, as well as to generosity; and many people, even in polished life, who make loud professions of benevolence and attachment to their friends, are yet too selfish to deny themselves some trifling gratification, though at the expense and inconvenience of a whole party. On the other hand, some, even among the rustic classes of society, discover much native politeness.

One mark of true politeness is, that it never seeks to obtrude itself on the notice of those whom it accommodates; but rather conceals than displays the personal sacrifice at which it promotes their pleasure. It is noiseless in conferring a kindness, and is never known to recall the attention of others to it; but seems to forget, or rather actually forgets, acts of kindness, which are no strange things, but perfectly habitual to it.

Another branch of genuine politeness is, not to bring forward a subject of conversation which is not understood by the party in general, by which they cannot be really benefitted, or in which they cannot harmoniously unite.

Another feature is, that true politeness, without compromising anything that duty or fidelity requires to be brought forward, observes proper times and seasons for saying and doing things. Everything is beautiful in its season; nothing is beautiful out of it. "Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." So is he who rudely reminds the fallen of past greatness; that treats a superior with insolence; an inferior with contempt; an equal with unkindness; who ostentatiously overdoes gratitude; or who pains the generous and delicate mind by compelling it to decline giving that which it is unable to bestow.

Politeness may even be regarded as a Christian virtue; our Lord and his apostles both practiced and inculcated it; we are repeatedly admonished to be kind, patient, gentle to all men, pitiful and courteous. Among other instances that might be given, the Epistle of Paul to Philemon discovers, in every sentence, the very essence of politeness; and the whole character of the Savior presents a living and perfect model.

"My dear Redeemer and my Lord,
I read my duty in your word;
But in your life the law appears
Drawn out in living characters.
Be you my Pattern—make me bear
More of your gracious image here."

It is of no small importance that those especially whose office it is to recommend religion to others, should cultivate a kind, gentle and winning deportment. "We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." A very simple incident will serve to illustrate this sentiment. Many years ago, the son of a highly respectable family was placed in business with his grandfather, where it was his duty to answer the applications of people calling on business. On one occasion, a stiff, prim, powdered minister came up, and in a haughty tone addressed the youth: "Is your master at home?" Not long afterwards, a cheerful, benevolent-looking gentleman called, and, on being answered by the same youth, good-humoredly said to him, "Now, can you manage to ride my horse up and down a few minutes while I go in and speak to Mr. —?" With cheerful alacrity the youth

complied with the request; and, contrasting the kind and gentle manners of this visitor with the repulsive haughtiness of the minister, from that moment imbibed a strong prejudice (if such it might be called) in favor of the pious instructions imparted by the latter gentleman, and against those of the former. The attractive visitor was the Rev. Richard Cecil, who was remarkably successful in winning the attention of young people to the great truths that belong to their everlasting peace; and herein, probably, was part of the secret of his success. Gentleness and kindness of manners in the teacher, will not indeed carry the gospel in power to the heart; but they may do much in removing the covering of prejudice from the ears. It is something to gain the gospel a favorable hearing; for faith comes by hearing: and the manners and deportment of both ministers and private Christians should be such as to echo every invitation of the gospel, saying, "Come with us, and we will do you good."

On a journey, one frequently has an opportunity of observing and contrasting the different manners of coachmen, guards, waiters, and other people employed for the accommodation of travelers; and the truth of the sentiment often presents itself to the mind, "Nothing is cheaper than civility—nothing is more odious than scorn."

Certainly, if religion does a man any real good, it makes him more to be depended on, and teaches him to behave with propriety to all with whom he comes in contact.

HELP AND PITY

Some people seem to make it their employment to go about, from house to house, to find out the calamities of their neighbors, only to have the pleasure of carrying the news to the next house they go to. I once heard one of these gossips. She had nearly talked herself out of breath, with "Shocking news, I hear! poor Mr. Green is dead, and has left a large family without a shilling to help them; and Mrs. Perry has fallen down stairs, and broken her leg; I saw the doctor ride by, as I came along; and Farmer Smith's house has been burnt down; and Mrs. Wyman's eldest daughter has lost her place, at a minute's warning. Dear, dear, what troubles there are in the world; it really makes one's heart ache to hear of them."

Asked a good man, who stood near, and who was quite as ready himself to lend a helping hand as to give a word of advice, "what have you done to help all these people in their distress?"

"O, sir, it is not in my power to help them."

"Indeed, I think you might find out some way of being useful to them; if you only spent, in rendering help, the very time that you squander in idle gossip, about

their misfortunes, which, I can't help thinking, seems to afford you a sort of pleasure. I will tell you a story: A traveler passing over a miserable road, the wheel of his carriage stuck in a deep rut. He labored with all his might to extricate it, but in vain; presently some one passing by said to him, 'You are in an awkward situation, sir; how did the accident happen?' Another came up, 'Dear, dear, what is the matter? Well, what a good thing that your neck was not broken; but this road ought to be fixed: there are continually accidents of one kind or another.' A third addressed him, 'I'm really sorry to see you so much heated and fatigued, sir: I fear, too, your horse and carriage are injured. I am very sorry.' 'Come then,' replied the unfortunate traveler, 'if you really are sorry, be so good as to put a shoulder to the wheel; a *grain* of help is worth a *bushel* of pity.'"

The idle and impertinent curiosity of some people, in the time of a neighbor's distress, is ill concealed under professions of sympathy and pity, while, like the priest and the Levite in the parable, they only come to the place and look, and then pass by on the other side of the way. If sympathy and pity are really felt, let them lead to conduct like that of the good Samaritan; for our Lord says to each of us, "Go and do likewise."

MAXIMS AGAINST SIN

The maxims on sin, and on several other subjects that follow, I have gleaned as opportunity offered, partly from books, partly from the conversation of friends. I wish they may be remembered by my children, and prove profitable to them in the hour of temptation.

"It is the mischievous property of sin—that it not only puts the soul into hell, but puts hell into the soul."

"That should be our chief trouble, which is the cause of all the trouble in the world."

"Nothing worth having, is gotten by sin. Nothing worth keeping, is lost by holiness."

"Tis bad trading with sin and Satan, since we ourselves must pay for all at last."

"By suffering we may avoid sinning; but we cannot by sinning avoid suffering."

"Fools make a mock at sin," but "it will be bitterness in the end."

"He who makes light of small sins—is in the ready way to fall into great ones."

"If we would not fall into things unlawful things, we must not venture to the utmost bound of lawful things. To tread upon the edge of a precipice is dangerous, if not

destructive."

"Tis folly for a person to do that now, which he must shortly undo by repentance, or be himself undone forever."

"Carefully avoid those vices which most resemble virtue. They are a thousand times the most ensnaring." *Covetousness*, which looks very much like *Prudent Care*, is *Idolatry!*

"Never do evil that good may come thereby. That would be serving the devil, that God may serve you."

In order to avoid sin—

1. Do not run in the path of temptation.
2. Maintain a constant watch and fear of sin.
3. Beware of pride and presumption.
4. Avoid and abhor slothfulness.
5. Remember, all strength and grace are in Christ. By faith and prayer look to Him for them.
6. Continually seek the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit.

CONSCIENCE

"Hearken to the warnings of conscience, if you would not feel its wounds."

"Stand in awe of your own conscience."

Prayer.

"What conscience dictates to be done,
Or warns me not to do,
This, teach me more than hell to shun,
That, more than heaven pursue."

"When no observers are present, be afraid of *yourself!* That which we are afraid to *do* before men, we should be afraid to *think* before God."

"Remember there is a witness everywhere, and a book in which every action is recorded, and from which no record is ever blotted out, except by the precious

blood of Christ."

"Conscience is either a man's best friend—or his worst enemy."

The only way to have peaceful slumbers, or pleasant dreams—is by preserving a good conscience.

The state of the conscience has an amazing influence both on bodily health and mental vigor. When the conscience is pure and peaceful, the health and spirits are in a great measure preserved; and in sickness the physician finds a powerful ally within, to second all his endeavors. On the other hand, a disturbed conscience produces a burning brow, a restless, feverish state of spirits, and that which resists all the efforts of the healing art. "It is of no use," said a miserable wretch to the physician who offered him medicine; "doctors cannot reach a diseased conscience."

It is a great mercy to have an *enlightened* conscience—which can discern between good and evil; a *tender* conscience—which shrinks from the touch of evil; a *wakeful* conscience—which perceives the approach of evil; a *peaceful* conscience, healed and cleansed by the blood of sprinkling; a *clear* conscience, void of offence, both towards God and man; a *sanctified* conscience, with which the Holy Spirit bears witness that we have in sincerity received the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, and that we are children of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ.

The following story illustrates the power of conscience—A butcher who resided in the west of England, and had for several years been in the practice of keeping a stall for the sale of meat, in one of the neighboring markets, having given way to the sin of falsehood, his heart became hardened, and he was then an easy prey to a temptation, by yielding to which, as the following particulars will show, he embittered almost the whole of his future life. It happened, on one occasion, that a lady, having purchased some meat of him, accidentally left her purse; on discovering her loss, she returned to the butcher to inquire for it, but he firmly denied having seen it. The lady was too fully convinced that she had left it on his stall, to be easily satisfied with his denial; but it was in vain she endeavored to bring to his recollection the circumstances relative to the transaction: every remonstrance was useless; he still persisted that he had no knowledge of the purse or its contents. The lady, not inclining to press the subject further, submitted to the loss, (which was about four pounds,) but from that time declined having any further dealings with one who could act so dishonestly.

Some years after this, the butcher became reduced in his circumstances, and at length was under the necessity of declining his business, after which he engaged in the occupation of a pig driver. While thus employed, he fell from his horse, by which he was so much injured that he was able to use but little personal exertion during the remainder of his life; and having no other means of support, he was obliged to apply to the parish for relief. In this dependent and helpless situation

he survived many years, for a time noted for the sullenness of his disposition, and unaccommodating habits. But as he advanced in age, his mind became suddenly impressed with the awfulness of eternity, and a recollection of his ill-spent life became most burdensome to him, which was very evident from his general conduct, though the person with whom he lived was not aware that he was then suffering from the remorse of an awakened conscience. She had been particularly struck with the very scanty manner in which he supported himself; for, trifling as his income was, he could not be prevailed upon, by all her arguments, to spend the whole of it, nor to disclose his reasons for doing so.

At length he had little by little saved as much as he apprehended the lost purse contained. He then related the whole affair to his hostess, acknowledged that the lady had left the purse upon his stall, that his son had concealed it with his knowledge, and that, on her application, he had denied the fact; that under a feeling of severe remorse for the wicked transaction, he could find no peace until he had restored the amount which the purse contained to its proper owner. He then gave his accumulated savings to the woman, with directions to take it to the lady, who lived about five miles from him, which she accordingly did. This happened after an interval of about fifteen years from the time the purse was lost. From this period to his death he manifested a desire to be prepared for the final change; his general conduct was very satisfactory, and he was enabled, by faith in Christ, to look forward with a confident hope of pardon and everlasting life.

How grateful ought we to be, when awakened to a sense of our guilt! Surely it is a proof that we are not given up to the enemy of our souls: it shows that the Lord has not forsaken us. And when thus mercifully made sensible of our sins, may we be enabled by faith to behold the "Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world!"

It is by grace alone that we are kept from falling—may we then endeavor constantly to live in the spirit of prayer, that we may be enabled to resist temptation! How little are we able to repel the assaults of an enemy, without any preparation beforehand! May we be encouraged by the assurance that every time we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit to overcome temptation, we shall find that resistance to evil becomes more easy. But may we also remember, that every time we fall in with temptation, we are increasing the power of Satan over us, and thereby adding difficulties in our path which may eventually lead to our eternal misery! Let us therefore habitually remember our own weakness and our surrounding dangers, that we may continually say unto God, "Hold me up—and I shall be safe!"

MAXIMS ON SELF-EXAMINATION

"Examine yourselves. What! Don't you know your own selves?"

"Keep the heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life."

"In the morning, consider what you have to do; and in the evening, what you have done."

"Man, know yourself; all wisdom centers here."

The following lines, by Dr. Watts, are recommended to all young people to commit to memory.

Evening Reflections.

"Let not soft slumber close your eyes
Before you've recollected thrice
The train of actions through the day:
Where have my feet chose out their way?
What have I learned, wherever I've been,
From all I've heard, from all I've seen?
What know I more, that's worth the knowing?
What have I done, that's worth the doing?
What have I sought, that I should shun?
What duties have I left undone?
Or into what new follies run?
These self-inquiries are the road
That leads to virtue, peace, and God!"

Just as it is wise to keep clear accounts of our receipts and expenses, our debts and engagements, so it is wise constantly to examine and compare our *heart* and *conduct* with the Word of God; to see what duties have devolved upon us, and whether we have discharged them, or failed in them, and what means can be adopted to promote circumspection, diligence, and fidelity in future. These reviews, if faithfully entered into, will often be humbling and painful, but they will be no less profitable. The more we know of ourselves—the less we shall be inclined to rely on our own merits, or to trust our own strength. And the more earnestly we shall desire an interest in the perfect righteousness and all-sufficient atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the influences of his Holy Spirit to purify our souls, and to quicken and sustain us in the paths of holiness.

The practice of self-examination has been recommended and observed by good and wise men in all ages. It is a pleasure to add the testimony of the present sovereign of England, King William the Fourth. He lately said, that, when a midshipman in the British navy, he was obliged to keep a logbook fairly written; and thus, he said, he acquired a habit, which he had found of the greatest benefit through life, that of recording the occurrences of the day, and submitting his actions to the scrutiny of self-examination.

REPENTANCE

"While we live in a sinful world, and carry about with us a body of sin and death, repentance must be the work of every day."

"We sin enough every day to sorrow for it, and to be humbled for all our lives."

"If repentance on earth is bitter—what will remorse in hell be?"

"He who covers his sins shall not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy."

"Repentance is a plank thrown out after shipwreck—he who neglects it sinks inevitably."

"Worldly joy ends in sorrow. Spiritual sorrow ends in joy."

"Let none defer repentance until another day. He who has promised pardon on our repentance, has not promised life until we repent."

"If we put off repentance to another day, we have the sins of another day to repent of, and a day less to repent in."

"They shall look on Him whom they have pierced, and shall mourn." Zechariah 12:10. "Repentance is the tear of love, dropping from the eye of faith, when it fixes on Christ crucified. Repentance begins in the humiliation of the heart, and ends in the reformation of the heart and of the life."

Sincere repentance is never too late, but late repentance is seldom sincere. The thief on the cross repented, and was pardoned in the last hour of his life. We have one such instance in scripture—that none might despair; and only one—that none might presume.

Still, however, the probability that apparent repentance, which comes at a dying hour, will be genuine, is very small. The following fact will furnish an affecting illustration of this sentiment, and a solemn warning against the too common delusion of deferring the work of repentance to a dying bed—

The faithful and laborious clergyman of a very large and populous parish had been accustomed, for a long series of years, to preserve notes of his visits to the afflicted, with remarks on the outcome of their affliction, whether life or death, and of the subsequent conduct of those who recovered. He stated, that, during forty years, he had visited no less than two thousand people apparently drawing near to death, and who revealed such signs of penitence as would have led him to indulge a good hope of their eternal safety—if they had died at that moment.

When they were restored to life and health—he eagerly looked that they should bring forth fruits fit for repentance; but alas! of the two thousand, only two people manifested an abiding and saving change! The rest, when the terrors of eternity ceased to be in immediate prospect, forgot their pious impressions and their solemn vows—and returned with new avidity to their former worldly-mindedness and sinful pursuits, "as the dog returns to his vomit again, and as the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."

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