

# THE ELEMENTS • of • PERMANENT INFLUENCE

Discourse Delivered in the Fifteenth Street

Presbyterian Church, Washington, D. C.,

Sunday, February 16, 1890,

by

**EDWARD W. BLYDEN, LL.D.,**

Author of "*Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*", "*The African Problem*."

---

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST

---

Washington: R. I. Pendleton Printer. 438 7th Street, N.W.

1890

---

## THE ELEMENTS OF PERMANENT INFLUENCE

"But now they desire a better country." -Heb. xi-16

Among all nations civilized or uncivilized, and in all languages, life is represented as a journey- a pilgrimage; and because there are successive stages and changes, there is implanted in us a Restlessness, a constant desire to improve the present. Man never is but always to be blest.

We ourselves undergo changes, both voluntary and involuntary. Changes take place in our physical conditions. We grow or decay constantly. There is no cessation to the movements childhood, youth, manhood, old age. There are changes which take place by our voluntary efforts. As in early years we begin to observe, the impressions we receive from contact with objects around, change our mental attitudes. But more directly we change through the influence of the school upon us, when we come in contact with those whose business it is to modify our conceptions of things to give us larger knowledge of ourselves and of the external world. But there is always in us, whether we are undergoing the unconscious changes which external conditions produce upon us, or the revolution through which we constantly pass under the influence of teachers - an undercurrent of desire for the better. As we take our places in life -- if there is anything in us -- this all pervading desire is the unfailing stimulus of progress. The merchant, the scholar, the artist, the statesman, having visions of amelioration both for themselves,

for their professions and for humanity, are lifted out of the region of sloth and indifference and carried onward and upward.

One of the blessings of life - a blessing, perhaps, in disguise - are it's illusions. We are allured in the desert of our earthly pilgrimage by mirage after mirage, and, though illusion after illusion is dispelled, we still think that the full and fresh and overflowing fountain is but a few steps beyond- and in our imagination we see it sparkling in the sunlight. We press on. In this way, in spite of ourselves, advancements made. Or, to change the figure, we chase the butterflies, which cover the landscape of our imagination, regardless of the ruggedness and fatigue of the way, until, whether- we have seized the gorgeous insect or not, we have traversed a long distance.

All changes, however, are not real changes. We can transfer ourselves in dreams to other scenes. We can, in imagination, take the wings of a dove and fly to some distant mountain - to some isle in the sea. We can stand on the summit of our towers in Spain - our airy castles - and catch the breezes and view the landscape of a richer country; but, alas, from those heights we must descend to reality. We find that the imaginary - the ideal - is cold and lonely, and we come back again to the warmth of the actual and practical.

But there is always a desire for something not in our possession and which we long for as desirable, if not indispensable. This leads me to consider **SOME OF THE ELEMENTS OF A GENUINE AND PERMANENT PROGRESS.**

**FIRST.** There must be the desire for better. This desire implies a recognition of imperfection-- a knowledge of deficiency. It is unnecessary to point out that all the backwardness everywhere, in all departments of life, and among all peoples, is owing, as a rule, to lack of desire for improvement.

**SECOND.** The desire will avail nothing, if there be no movement. When the prodigal son came to himself, realized that is, his condition, and the intense desire for a better state of things was awakened in his soul, he said, " I will arise and go to my father," and he arose and went. There is little use in the most ardent prayers, and even in the exceeding bitter cry, if there is no movement.

"Wherefore criest thou to me?" said God to Moses, "Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward." The Apostle Paul seemed to place all his hope for perfection on this constant movement - this going. "This one thing I do, forgetting the things that are behind, I press toward the mark," &c.

Of course, then, a third and essential element of permanent progress is righteousness.

Movement on the wrong course is worse than standing still. There is a general righteousness and specific righteousness. There is a righteousness for a business man- not merely a spiritual righteousness, but what might be called a temporal or a secular righteousness or rightness.

The successful man of business is he who is endowed with certain peculiar gifts - a sense of order, of the value of time, a presence of mind in difficulty, a power of seeing the thing to be done at the proper time, insight into the relations of different kinds of wealth. These are the qualities which have filled this land and Europe with the magnates of riches.

This is a bettering of the outward conditions. But the elements of usefulness and permanence are lacking where the man of money has no proper idea of his possessions, when he uses them only for himself - only to get on - only to push forward his family or his friends: with no larger aim for the interests of the

community and when he has advanced in years he will have wearied old age, magnificence and splendor in his outward surroundings, but no largeness of heart-- forgotten, and justly forgotten, the day after his death.

Take the artist. He has the means of leading men to the better country intellectually and morally- of lifting them by his work to a higher plane. He has the gift of revealing the inner beauty of the universe - the gift of giving noble pleasure - the gift of teaching men how to see and to love what they see. But if he uses these gifts for himself - for making money and fame for himself, they will lose their power, or, rather, the living ideas which give them their power. All true inspiration and true use of it comes of throwing one's self into the interests, feelings, and movements of humanity. The musician can make noble music when the beats of inspiration are harmonious with the beats of general heart; when love, not self, is at the root. The writer or speaker who wishes to leave to the world of men a legacy of true thoughts, true work, should take into himself the whole world of men. When he ceases to recognize the fact that every good and perfect gift is from above - from the common father - when he is tempted to pride himself upon the divine things in him as if they were his own and for his own use, and to think himself specially favored of God, and separated by his gifts from the rest of mankind, then his work is either destroyed or rendered imperfect.

Take the statesman. Here is the man whose professions and aims are to improve by legalization or diplomacy the conditions around him. He desires literally a better country. If we study at all the course of contemporary history, we find, throughout the world, from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean, that the desire of rulers and lawmakers - the aspirations of classes and professions - are for a better country. But now here, or, at least, only in exceptional cases, do we find commended or adopted, the only principles through which a better country can be secured, the principles laid down by Him of whom it is said that His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. Men construct other kingdoms, organise powerful political parties, lay other foundations for power and greatness, but they have in them the elements neither of beneficence nor perpetuity. There is no way of winning an enduring kingdom over men's heart, but the way which is built within us by the righteousness of God and without us by His love and loving righteousness.

The races now holding power in the world have not always held it; but, because by the use, at various times, of unchristian methods they have secured power, which must, owing to its origin and use, be brief, even if it lasts a thousand years, they indulge in boast of the very qualities in spite of which not because of which, they have extended their ways to the end of the earth.

We heard a few weeks ago, a distinguished statesman from his place in the Senate, introduce an oration for which the whole country had waited with anxious expectation in the following terms:

"Mr. PRESIDENT, the race to which we belong is the most arrogant and rapacious, the most exclusive and indomitable in history. It is the conquering and the unconquerable race, through which alone man has taken possession of the physical and moral world. To our race humanity is indebted for religion, for literature, for civilization. It has a genius for conquest, for politics, for jurisprudence and for administration. The home and the family are its contributions to society. Individualism, fraternity, liberty and equality have been its contributions to the state. All other races have been its enemies or its victims."

Now, in this remarkable utterance, the sentences that are true are not commendable, and the sentences that are commendable are not true. The last sentence exposes the hollowness of the boast. All other races have been its enemies or victims. The "individualism, the fraternity and the equality" have been for itself,

not for humanity.

But this was a strange boast, even if it were well founded, for the representative of a Christian nation to indulge in on so important an occasion - a nation professing to hold in reverence, above all other peoples, that book which teaches the duty of humanity and the beauty of sacrifice, which professes to follow Him who taught that SERVICE not POWER is the measure of true nobility, and evidence of Christian discipleship; who took upon Himself the form of a servant, who, according to the touching narrative of the loving disciple. -

"Knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that He was come from God, riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments, and took a towel and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel, wherewith he was girded. "

Here was the evidence of enduring power - service. It was His constant teaching to His disciples - He that would be chief among you let him become your servant;" and this among His last acts, was intended to give an impressive object lessons to be transmitted through them to all his followers. "I have given you an example," He said at the close of the ceremony, "that you should do as I have done onto you. "

And this is the ground of all honor and greatness in the sight of God and man. No kingdom, not founded on this, whatever its glare and glitter, and however protracted its influence, can be permanent. If we will take a glance at history, past and contemporary, we shall find that, after all, the instincts of humanity are to honor service, not power. To whom are the monuments erected in the great centers of civilization? Are they to men who only exercised power? You will find that the names around which the heart's reverence and devotion pour their choicest perfumes are not those of the merely powerful. It is not the illustrations of the rapacity of men that will ring down the ages. It is not these that, like a refreshing stream, will rush through the desert of the future, giving life by their overflow and producing abundant harvests. No; the greatest men have not been the rapacious conquerors or the kings or political leaders, but the martyrs for truth and righteousness - those who set free the bodies and souls of men - the prophets, the inventors, the poets, the philosophers, the artists. Not the author of the Fugitive Slave Bill be immortal in the annals of the nation, but the writer of the Emancipation Proclamation. Not the boast of Senator Toombs that he would call the roll of his slaves under the shadow of Bunker Hill Monument, but the sayings of Philips and Garrison and Sumner - the songs of Whittier, of Longfellow, of Lowell. Not the memory of Jeff Davis will send a thrill throughout humanity, but the recollection of the so-called insanity of John Brown. The men who wrought and spoke for righteousness, for justice, for freedom - these are the men who have eternal power; their voices right now in our ears; their words move us now into new passions, which exalt our life; their actions kindle in us aspirations and efforts which lift us to higher levels. The power of warriors, and kings, and wealth, and rank sinks into insignificance before this power, and men are beginning at last to learn this truth.

*" Right forever on the scaffold;  
Wrong forever on the Throne;  
Yet the scaffold sways the future;  
And behind the dim unknown  
Standeth God within the shadow  
Keeping watch above His own. " 2*

That poet whom the Christian world is at this moment lamenting sang with his latest breath -

*"Of one who never turned his back, but march'd breast forward;  
Never doubted clouds would break;  
Never dream'd though Right were worsted.  
Wrong would triumph;  
Held we fall to rise, are battled to fight better;  
Sleep to wake. "*

When the orator says that to the Caucasian race "humanity is indebted for religion, for literature, for civilization," he is speaking with the inexactness not of the historian, but of the politician. Everybody knows that the basis of the civilization and literature of present day was on the Nile and not among the Caucasian race - not on the Ilissus, the Tiber, the Rhine or the Thames, but on the rivers of Ethiopia. There were only two steps between Egypt and modern Europe - Greece and Rome. Greece took not only civilization and literature but even religion from Ethiopia. Such were the wonderful developments of civilization and literature and religion in that country, that the early poets and historians of Greece, unable to understand such marvelous indigenous growth attributed it to the direct interference of the gods, who they affirm went every year to feast with the Ethiopians.

But even if - passing by the great religions of China and India, professed by more than one-half of the human race and with the founding of which Caucasians had nothing whatever to do - we take the three highest religions - Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedanism, the Caucasian can not claim to be their exclusive originators. Moses the founder of Judaism, was born in Africa and trained in Egyptian philosophy, learned, we are told, "in all the wisdom of the Egyptians." Though the founder of Christianity was Semitic or Caucasian, his life was threatened in his infancy by the jealous and ambitious Caucasian ruler; and it was in the land of Hamites and by Hamitic solicitude and hospitality that he was preserved; and when, during the last hours of his life one set of Caucasians condemned him to death by false accusations and another set imposed upon him the burden of his own cross, it was an African who came to the support of that greatest of prophets. Again, when the religion of Islam would have perished in the place of its origin, by Caucasian intolerance and persecution, it was to the land of Ham that its few adherents fled for shelter and protection: so that if these religions did not originate in Africa, Africa was there nursing mother.

The Caucasian characteristic impatience of guidance and control, which nailed the Redeemer of mankind to the cross, makes it difficult now for them to carry the Gospel to races alien to themselves. They have gone to foreign lands and the natives of those lands do not consider them as following the principles of the religion they profess to have founded. The backward races "become their victims or their enemies. "

The African boasts not of the service which his country and his people have rendered to civilization and religion; but he knows that through all the ages and all the continents he has rendered service in the highest and in the lowest walks. He has for three hundred years been the colossal servant of the Western Hemisphere. But he takes the word of the great Master for it, that he who serves will reign. He that will be chief first becomes a servant. Therefore, he has defied the rapacity of the all-conquering Caucasian; and his abounding vitality on this side of the Atlantic is filling with dismay the dominant and invincible race. The spectre of reaction from service to rule is haunting the visions of many of the thoughtful Caucasians in the southern part of this country. But the rapacious instincts of the conquering races are being neutralized by the pervading principles of Christianity, which in spite of individual views, are taking possession of nations.

In spite of brag, and boast, and bluster, the kingdoms of the world are becoming the kingdoms of the Lord and of his Christ. It's being found out that the rapacity was not a cause of, but a hindrance to, wide and permanent influence. It is beginning to be seen that not wealth and material comfort, and commercial prosperity and political power, are the greatness of nation; these are good and desirable, but the true greatness of a nation does not abide in them alone.

It is under the influence of these convictions that the young Emperor William of Germany is giving Europe a sensation - troubling the rapacious instincts of his race by the suggestion of an international labor conference, with a view of meeting the needs and desires of the working classes -- to promote their health, morality and proper remuneration, and to preserve their claims to equality before the law. He is endeavoring to make the laws of his country in relation to the poor, the enslaved, the overworked, the lost and the outcast, Christian laws.

Mr. Gladstone, also, the leader of the advanced views of the other great - perhaps the greatest - Caucasian nation, is endeavoring to bring the glad tidings of the Gospel to the poor. We all know his self-denying labors for Ireland. Only a few weeks ago, speaking of India, he said,

"There are many transactions, which ought to raise a blush of shame on the cheeks of Englishmen; but principles of right were remembered by those who now governed India. \*\*\* Enormous as was the field for enterprise (in that country) still more remarkable was the field for courage and for virtue, and for showing that the Christian profession of England was not a mere name, but that they hoped to recommend Christianity to the good will and favor of the people of India by showing the fruits that it produced in the lives of those who professed it." \*

European explorers and pioneers are paying respect to the teaching of Christianity. The civilized world read with surprise and gratification, a few days ago, that Stanley, the great African traveler, was an earnest student of the Bible-- that for six months he had been studying the new version of the Holy Scriptures-- that he had a reverential turn of mind; while others speak of luck he speaks of Divine Providence.

The missionary work in Africa is also taking a forward move and will be conducted on a higher plane - that is, more in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Men from the higher Universities of Europe - of deeper culture, greater spiritual insight, wider sympathies, are now enlisting in the work. On the Niger, on the Congo and on the great Lakes these enlightened heralds of Christianity are lifting up the standard of the cross.

All this insures a better future for humanity. The natural rapacity of the Caucasian is coming under the controlling influence of the Prince of Peace.

Science is also contributing toward this humane end. Men are learning more and more the vastness of humanity and persistency of the great types, and the importance to the whole of this persistency. It is only as we move in narrow grooves, and know nothing of the vast life beyond us, that we are narrow and contracted, and think that outside of our little sphere there is nothing worth consideration - nothing worth respecting or preserving. Some of you here will remember the description given by Wordsworth of how he felt when he first went from the country to London. A weight of ages, he says, descended on his heart - no thought embodied, no distinct remembrances, but weight and power -- power growing under weight.

This was met in him by a corresponding amplitude of mind; and the sense of all the great city had done and suffered, was doing and suffering still. Then followed the deep impression of the vastness and unity

of man. He began to realize their joys, sorrows, sins, efforts, passions as outside of his own personality.

Something like this we see taking place in the bosom of Europe - in relation to the great dark continent. By a better acquaintance with the vastness of its tribes, scientific and commercial adventures are learning that the newly discovered peoples are too valuable, in their intellectual and moral possibilities, to be destroyed. The terrible indictment drawn by Canon Farrar against the drink traffic in Africa is haunting Europe like a nightmare. Representatives of the various branches of the European races are meeting in conference to devise measures to protect the African from the ravages of their unscrupulous trade. Europe is rising and her leading minds are contending for an international reparation to that continent for the wrongs inflicted upon her.

The examples of the past in dealing with weaker races are being ignored. It is no longer considered creditable to " expunge the savage like figures from a slate. " A spirit is being more and more infused into the progress of the world, which tends to destroy race enmities, to diminish the victims of race rapacity, and to reconcile nation with nation. Men begin to feel that when for their own interest, or their own selfish purposes, they violate by war or by oppression justice or freedom or individuality in other nations or support those who violate these things, they are not acting in accordance with Christian but Pagan traditions.

And it is to the progress of these principles in this land that we must trust for the rectification of whatever is unjust and oppressive in the relation of the races. Those who claim that this is their country exclusively, as against all who wear the " shadowed livery of the burnished sun." and aspire after a better country by means of oppression and injustice are performing the labors of Sisyphus or weaving the web of Penelope, or, worse still, sowing the wind. The only solution of suffering on the one hand and of arrogance and anxiety on the other is the application of the other Golden Rule--"All things what so ever ye would that men should do to you do ye even so to them. "

In my travels in this country and my observations among the colored people, I have been struck with the marked improvement which they have made in the brief period since the fundamental laws of the land have recognized their manhood. The history of no modern people furnishes such evidences of providential guidance and innate possibilities. Twenty years of freedom find the Russian serfs very little if any better of than they were when freed from their masters. The American Negro, in view of his achievements in five and twenty years, is a wonder to the world; and among the candid observers of his history, he inspires the hope and confidence in his capacity for the work of the future -- the great work of reconstruction in the land of his fathers. For him as to his future influence upon and position in the great human family, nil desperandum is the doctrine I preach. Having overcome so much he will overcome more.

"O passi-gravoria dabit deus quoque finem."

He now pines with desire amid his uncomfortable surroundings for a better country, he will reach one and, in many respects, here in the land of his birth.

He is learning to organize, to think, to express himself. The influence of this, both upon himself and upon his neighbors, must be transforming and elevating.

The courtesy of your pastor has allowed me the opportunity of saying a few words to you before I leave the country. I am glad to thank you for the kind reception and cordial welcome which you have always accorded to me. I know that many of you live in a state of dissatisfaction and unrest on account of the

conditions of our people in this country. But believe me, I see no grounds for despondency or despair. On the other hand, there is much for encouragement and joy. Remember the reply of Samson's mother to Manoah, when he said, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God." She said, with true womanly insight, "If the Lord were pleased to kill us, He would not have received a burnt-offering and a meat-offering at our hands, neither would He have showed us all these things, nor would He at this time, have told us these things" - Judges xiii-23.

There is a talent entrusted to you. It is your duty to call into action the highest forms of your being. Do not invert the true order of your lives by loving yourselves and the world instead of the Lord and your neighbor. It does not matter what your calling may be - whether it be what men call menial or what the world calls honorable - whether it be to speak in the halls of Congress or to sweep out those halls - whether it be to wait upon others or to be waited on-- it is the manner of using your faculties that will determine the result- that will determine your true influence in this world and your status in the world to come.

If you desire a better country in this world let your motto be "Onward and Upward. "

*Not enjoyment and not sorrow,  
In our destined end of way;  
But to act that each tomorrow  
Find us further than today. "*

Every one should do his part to advance humanity. Each should exert himself to be a helper in progress. Whatever your condition, you do occupy some room in the world; what are you doing to make return for the room you occupy? There are so many of our people who fail to realize their responsibility, who fail to hear the inspiring call of the past and the prophetic call of the future.

Brethren, are you living the daily round of the present without care of prayer, without effort or sacrifice for the cause of human progress? When you look back at the distance which, as a people, you have traversed, you have cause for gratitude, and when you look before you and around you to the facilities for growth and work which Christian civilization supplies, and the increasing responsibilities, there is surely sufficient to stimulate your zeal.

The great fields of wide and increasing necessities do not lie afar off now. Man can go around the world in less than eighty days. This brings to your very doors the needy continent across the waters to which by blood you are allied. Events are moving on for its regeneration; and the grand march of progress will go on whether you join it or not. There are many for whom the past has no inspiration and the future no meaning. But the way to the Golden Gate of the better country for the race will be hewn out whether they aid or not.

Now I commend you to God and to the world of his grace. I urge you to desire and seek after that better country to which the text refers, even heavenly. For, after all, the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal.

To those who are just entering life; upon whom the freshness and joy of youth still rest, I would say, life is fleeting and it is hardly worth while to follow anything but that which makes for the up building of humanity. Fill your life with love and righteousness, with meekness and peacemaking, with humbleness of heart, with faithful work for God and man.

In a short time, most of us, who have reached the middle way in life, will find our feet stumbling among the graves. If it is my privilege to return to this country, I may find that those who are now bright and young have ripened in years - sadder without - but I trust more joyful within. But whether I may be permitted to return or not, I know that in a few years at most, there will be nothing left of any of us but a few green spaces in the burial ground. Therefore, let me urge you, amid all your temptations and trials, believe in the eternal Love. Keep love yourselves, never lose its impulse, and you will be more and more fitted for a final citizenship and enfranchisement.

When you approach the close of the crisis, your fellow citizens of the glorious city will come to you, angel visitants will attend you and minister to you as you cross the stream to that better country, whose inhabitants never say I am sick, or I am weary or foot sore.

And there should be no more curse; but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and His servants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there, and they need no candle, neither the light of the sun; for Son of God giveth them light; and they shall reign forever and ever.

---

## FOOTNOTES

1 The Prodigal son is one of the most well known parables/moral stories of the Christian Bible. It illustrates forgiveness that is given when the offender finally finds the strength to seek it out.

2 Exodus. . . . Or as in the case of the children of Israel, in their frustration following Moses into the promised land from Egyptian bondage when he chastised them saying "Wherefore criest thou to me?". . . .

3 Philipians chapter 3, verse 13.

Phillips was one of the abolitionists, those who led the movement for the abolition of slavery, as were William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner. Horace Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell were famous English poets who espoused the abolitionist cause.

4 Jefferson Davis was a leader of the confederacy movement that fought to maintain the *status quo* with regard to slavery in America.

5 John Brown was a champion of the cause of freedom for slaves. He is immortalised in precisely the sense that Blyden tries to illustrate here in the famous song "John Brown lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on, glory , glory halleluiah!"

6 James Russell Lowell. Both quotations are from Lowell who died that year.

1 Later Dean Farrar of Westminster Abbey.

The brothers Alexander and Francis Grimke were personal friends of Blyden. One was the pastor of the 15th Street AME church in Washington, DC where this sermon was delivered. They are alleged to have been illegitimate sons of one of the Founding Fathers of the republic, their mother being a slave. At the death of their father, they were educated by their legitimate half-sister.