

LITTLE OATHS.

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"I WAS sorry to hear you swearing just now, Robert," said Mr. Somers to his son.

"Swearing, papa; me swearing? no indeed, you were mistaken. I would not do such a thing for the world."

"You are very much in the habit of doing it, however," said his father.

Robert appeared quite shocked, and replied very earnestly, "Indeed, sir, I do not think that you or any one else ever heard me take the Lord's name in vain."

"Perhaps not: but you can break his commandment without naming him. That commandment is, 'Swear not at all:' I am sure I heard you swear by your honor not long ago."

"Oh, papa, I did not think that was swearing; I only intended it as a strong assertion."

"Call it what you will, Robert, it was a breach of the command which I have just repeated. All such assertions are forbidden. Look at the fifth chapter of Matthew, 34th verse."

Robert read, "But I say unto you, swear not at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."

"Well, Robert, and do you understand the meaning of the last words? From evil, cometh whatsoever form

of speech is used to confirm these plain declarations—yes or no—it is, or it is not. It comes from Satan, the evil one, who is ever on the watch to betray us into breaking the law of God; or from the evil that is in man's heart, which makes him unwilling to trust another person, and therefore afraid that others will not trust him. Passion and violence also help to produce these things; and all are *contrary to the spirit of Christ.*

“You are afraid to call upon the Most High God, by name, to bear witness in your idle discourse; but when you appeal to things that are his, you appeal to him. He who forbids you to swear by your head, and who has said, ‘Swear not at all,’ cannot hold you guiltless when you swear by your honor, your soul, your word, your faith, or any thing above, beneath,

around, or within you. I have been astonished to hear some persons, who would have shrunk from taking the name of God in vain, assert or deny a thing by words which allude to the character or attributes of God. Surely such do most awfully swear by the throne of God, and by Him that sitteth thereon."

"I never thought there was such harm in it," said Robert. "People get a habit of using words of this kind, and they do it almost without knowing what they say."

"Yes; and what does this prove but that 'God is not in all their thoughts?' They forget that he is ever present, and they insult him to his face. Much idle and foolish talking takes place, I fear, between those laborers at work in the fields yonder; but if I sent for one of them, would

he talk in the same way before my family? Certainly not. Neither the long habit of using bad language, nor real ignorance of its extreme sinfulness, would cause him so far to forget himself. What excuse then can they find, who allow themselves to treat the great and terrible God with less reverence than that man would show to me?

“But my present object is to prove to you, that the expressions which you and others too often use, are really oaths; and as such, forbidden by the Lord, and exceedingly sinful in his sight. Little oaths they may be called, compared with the more open and wilful guilt of those who sport with the name of God; but they are all of the same family. The small twig that sprouts from the trunk of the oak belongs to the tree, and grows

upon it, as much as the great branches that spread forth above our heads, and overshadow the ground. Cut down the tree, and they all fall together.⁵⁷

While Mr. Somers was thus speaking to his son, two gentlemen came up, and joined them. After some remarks on other things, Mr. Somers told them what he had been talking of. He knew that they were men who had not the fear of God rightly before their eyes, and he hoped that the conversation might be useful to them.

It is strange that religious people should so often keep silence in the presence of those who are still irreligious; and even converse in a worldly manner to please them, instead of trying to do good to their souls. It certainly is not what our Lord meant when he bade his disciples let their

"light shine before men." We know not how a pious remark, made in an affectionate manner, may be blessed by the Lord to the most thoughtless of our companions; while, by avoiding religious subjects, we do harm to ourselves, and lose all hope of doing good to them.

Mr. Somers knew this very well; so he said, "I was just now talking to Robert on a very important subject: the sinfulness of little oaths."

"I don't know what you mean by a little oath," said one of them, at the same time making use of an oath to confirm what he said.

"You have now uttered one," replied Mr. Somers: "you have sworn by your faith."

"Do you call that swearing?"

"Certainly I do: if it means any thing, it must mean that your words

to me are as true as your faith in God is sincere; and thus you call on Him, who alone can judge, to witness both to the soundness of your faith, and the strictness of your truth."

The gentlemen looked surprised, and rather angry. Men do not like to be reminded of their danger, while yet unwilling to forsake their sins. But Mr. Somers spoke so seriously, and his looks were so kind, that they could hardly take offence at the words which their consciences told them were true.

"Well," said one, "if a thoughtless expression is to be visited so severely, what becomes of the downright swearer?"

Mr. Somers replied, "Out of his own mouth he is judged, and so are we. It will not avail us, while breaking the laws of God, to point out

others who do so more daringly than ourselves. Thoughtless expressions, as you call them, may destroy a soul. Our Lord declares, 'I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.' Matt. 12:36. And surely those words are most truly idle, which are used to confirm what no one, probably, would doubt, if plainly stated; and what, if it was doubted at all, would never be the sooner believed because of them. He who does not fear an oath, will not fear a lie: both are contrary to God's laws. The man who breaks one law, rather than give up a foolish and useless custom, will hardly scruple to break another, when he thinks it may be for his present advantage.

"The apostle tells us that between men, 'an oath for confirmation is to

them an end of all strife.' Heb. 6:16. He speaks of those solemn oaths which may be required before a magistrate, when, the life or property of some person being at stake, it is thought needful to bind men in this way to give a true testimony. But who believes a man the more, when he attempts to strengthen his assertions by profane cursing and swearing, even though the matter should be important? Or who will pay the greater regard to what is said in common conversation, when the expressions that I called LITTLE OATHS are brought to give weight to it?

“Surely, then, such words are idle, useless, and absurd in themselves: but when we reflect that there is a plain command of the Lord Jesus which positively forbids them, we should tremble at the prospect of that

tremendous hour, when, before the judgment-seat of the Most High, we shall be called to render an account of these things; to say why we disobeyed the laws of Him who will not be mocked—why we hated to be reformed, and cast his words behind us—why we lived in the deliberate practice of what he tells us 'cometh of evil,' and refused to lay aside such 'foolish talking' as we knew to be offensive, nay, most dishonorable to our God. For, as I have been telling Robert, he who swears by any thing belonging to the Lord, swears by him: and what can we name that does not belong to him? 'He is the Former of all things.' 'Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honor, and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.' "

The two gentlemen seemed at a loss to answer this: at length one of them observed, "I keep pretty clear of the sin which you speak of; for when I do swear, it is by something that does not exist, nor ever did—such as by some one of the heathen gods, or by some word which means nothing at all, so far as I can tell."

Mr. Somers replied, "With regard to the heathen gods, let us hear the apostle: 'The things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice unto devils, and not unto God; and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils.' 1 Cor. 10:20. This ought to be an alarming consideration to those who make choice of devils to attest the truth of what they say. As to the silly, unmeaning words that are often invented for the same purpose, it only serves to prove how far

men will go, even from common sense, rather than not continue to violate the law of God. Or rather, it proves the dreadful power of Satan in suggesting to our evil hearts what our unguarded tongues are so ready to utter; sadly showing that the whole matter 'cometh of evil.'

"He who is convinced that he must no longer continue in the practice of this evil, will soon find the difficulty of entirely rooting it out, if he attempts it in his own strength; nor will his forsaking the sin now, render any atonement for his breach of this law in times past.

"No, my dear friends, and you, Robert, you must deeply consider how wantonly you have offended against 'a just God, and a Saviour,' and flee for refuge to the Saviour from the vengeance of the just God. Do not

be satisfied to resolve on forsaking a bad habit: mourn over it as a sin, and go to the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness, that the guilt of many days may be washed away in the precious blood of Christ; beseech the Most High, in prayer, that the new heart and the right spirit may be given you, by which alone you can walk in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless; and while resisting the motions of that corruption which will cleave to this body of death, gratefully remember that 'we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.' "