

THE TILLAGE OF THE POOR

Preached at Providence Chapel, Oakham September 13th, 1846

"Much food is in the tillage of the poor: but there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." Proverbs 13:23

The Proverbs of Solomon contain literal instruction as well as spiritual; and the one is usually made the foundation and basis of the other. For instance, in the words before us there is literal truth as well as experimental; and the experimental truth strictly coincides with and is based upon the literal. Solomon is here speaking of the "tillage of the poor," and says there is "much food" in it; thus contrasting the tillage of the poor with that of the rich. His meaning literally is this: when the poor man tills his patch of ground it is chiefly to obtain food therefrom, for his pressing necessities compel him to cultivate the soil to obtain bread for himself and his family. But often "for want of judgment," as not knowing exactly how to till the land to the best advantage, much is destroyed. For instance, he may lack agricultural knowledge; he may try to raise crops that exhaust the land; he may not know what manures to employ suitable to the soil. In a word, there may be many reasons why, though a poor man till the ground for the very purpose of obtaining food for himself and family, "there is that is destroyed for want of judgment," and he does not reap the full benefit of his garden or allotment. This is the *literal* meaning, which all may understand without having the fear and grace of God in his heart.

But coinciding with and based upon the literal meaning, we shall find, if the Lord enable, a spiritual and experimental meaning and it is to this that I shall, with God's blessing, confine myself this morning, endeavouring to show the

meaning of the Holy Ghost,

I. First, in the words, "*The tillage of the poor.*"

II. And, secondly, how "*There is that is destroyed for want of judgment.*"

I. By the "*poor,*" we are to understand here God's needy family, those who are poor in spirit. These come under the Lord's blessing: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mat.5:3). This spiritual poverty no man possesses by nature. But like the Laodicean church, he thinks himself "rich and increased in goods," and has "need of nothing." But when God teaches him that he is "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev.3:17), then he is brought to feel himself really poor; that is, completely empty, perfectly destitute of all that deserves the name of riches. For he now learns that in God's account nothing deserves the name of riches but that which makes a soul rich for eternity, the treasures that are in Christ for the poor and needy; and that he who is not possessed of these riches, in God's sight is nothing, and has nothing but poverty and rags. As, then, the Lord the Spirit works upon a sinner's conscience, he opens up to him his evil heart, shows him his transgressions which have exceeded, lays bare the depths of iniquity that are in his corrupt nature, discovers to him what God requires in his holy law; and thus makes him feel how completely empty and destitute he is by nature of all good. Now, when a man is brought to see himself a poor, vile, lost, undone wretch, having nothing, and being nothing but a mass of filth and corruption, completely destitute of everything that God can look down upon with acceptance, he comes under the expression in the text, he is a poor man spiritually. He is now brought down; he is effectually laid low; he is made to feel real poverty of spirit before God.

We read in the text that there is "much food in the *tillage* of the poor." In other words, in the spiritual tillage of the poor man whom I have been describing, there is much food of a heavenly nature. Let us with God's blessing enter a little minutely into this spiritual tillage, and show the much food there is in it.

I. What is the first process? Is it not to rake up all those weeds that have so deformed man's nature? Just as the natural earth is covered with weeds after harvest, and these must be all rooted up and put into heaps to be burnt, so it must be in "the tillage of the poor." I was walking in a field near Oakham yesterday, and I could but observe how they were with a light plough loosening and gathering the weeds and stubble together, and laying them into heaps to be burnt. How needful this same process seems to be with respect to the work of grace on a sinner's heart. How needful it seems that all the crops of sin which his corrupt nature has borne, should be gathered up and burnt. And not merely the rank weeds, but even the very flowers that we see in the cornfields, the great staring marigold as well as the pretty, blue-eyed forget-me-not, all are raked together with the thistles and couch grass, and put into one heap, and burnt together in one confused mass. So it is with respect to the weeds and flowers that grow in man's heart by nature. All the weeds of his bad deeds, and all the flowers of his good deeds, must be raked alike together, and set on fire, so as to reduce them to ashes.

Now, when this process is going on, and the blessed Spirit is thus raking up together the weeds and flowers that man's heart bears by nature, and burning them before his eyes, he does not see there is much food in this tillage. And yet it is a necessary, an indispensable preparation for the after crop. Is it not true that unless there be this raking together of our

sins and iniquities, and rooting up with them of the pretty flowers of nature that some are so much pleased with, there can be no room for that seed to be sown out of which the only true spiritual harvest can come?

2. But after they have rooted up and raked together in some measure the weeds and flowers that covered the ground, there is another process to be gone through. The earth has not yet been pierced; the plough has not yet cut through the soil. So in this "tillage of the poor," it is necessary that the plough of God's holy law should pass through a sinner's conscience. The first work of the Spirit was to root up and gather together, and burn the outward sins that grew more barefacedly on the soil.

But there is another process necessary in order that the seed may have a bed to lie in. The plough must pierce the soil pretty deeply. You know that in nature the mere scraping of the surface will not root up the couch grass that takes such a deep and firm hold. So spiritually. It is not the work of the Spirit merely to discover and cut up open sin, producing an outward reformation. There must be something deeper than this. The ploughshare of God's holy law must pass into a sinner's conscience, root up the sin that lies so deeply in man's heart, and bring to light (as the plough share does literally) the deep corruptions that lurk beneath the soil. And just as the natural ploughshare turns up that deep soil which before was hidden from view, and brings to light all that before was concealed beneath; so when God's holy law enters into and breaks up a man's conscience, it discovers the secret roots of sin which before lay hid, and upturns him so that he lies naked and open before the eyes of him with whom he has to do. And just as the natural eye, when the plough has done its work, can look upon the upturned soil which before was hidden from view; so man's heart now lies

bare in all its hideousness and deformity. This work is absolutely necessary for bread to come out of the soil; and indeed a person cannot in any other way obtain it. No one approves of casting precious seed on the unploughed soil; no one thinks of casting pure grain on the land that has not yet been cleared of the weeds that deformed its face. So the Word of God never takes deep root downward until the furrow has been made for the seed effectually to lodge in. This comes when the heart has been ploughed up. Then comes the precious seed, the good Word of God's grace. The ears are now open to hear of salvation by free grace, pardon through the atoning blood of an incarnate God, a righteousness that justifies from all things, from which we could not be justified by the law of Moses, salvation without money and without price, a complete deliverance from all curse, wrath, condemnation, and bondage, into the glorious liberty of the children of God. This is the Word of grace that is sown by the hands of God's servants in the hearts of his people.

3. But, next, the seed must be harrowed in by trials and temptations and exercises, so that the corn may not be eaten up by the birds of the air, may not lie on the surface, and be burnt and destroyed by the heat of the sun; but be so raked in that it may be covered, and thus have a deep firm bed to germinate and grow in.

4. But after this comes the pouring down of the rain from heaven upon it. The Spirit of God watering God's truth so as to make it take root downward, and bear fruit upward; visiting the heart with the sweet manifestations of his love, and making the soul soft with showers (cf. Psa.65:10).

Now this is "the tillage of the poor;" because none but the poor in spirit know anything experimentally of this tillage.

And much food is in this tillage; which none but these poor desire. The very object of the Lord in thus tilling the heart is to convince us of our deep poverty by nature, and that we cannot (as man vainly thinks) produce a crop from nature's soil acceptable to God. Thus if we ever do produce anything that God is well pleased with, it must be given us; communicated by God's own hand, sealed by God's own power in the soul. We thus learn that our hearts stand as much in need of God's hand to till the soil, to sow the seed, and bestow the dew and sunshine of his favour upon it, as the natural soil stands in need of man's hand to plough it, to scatter the seed in its bosom, and wait for the rain of heaven to fall upon it, that it may bring forth a bountiful produce.

5. But again; after the crop has sprung up, it needs to be hoed; for though the plough and harrow have passed through the furrows and made some havoc with the weeds, there are many roots left behind; and were it not for this hoeing, all these weeds would soon spring up again, and choke the grain. And is it not in grace as in nature? Do you find yourselves one whit better than you were before the Lord quickened your soul? Nay, in many respects, do you not often feel yourself worse? It is, to my mind, in grace as in nature. Let a field be well ploughed, well manured, and every attention paid to it, and then neglected; it will be more full of weeds than one left without any cultivation whatsoever. So there seems to be in the heart of a child of God more sin at work, more weeds springing up, a filthier crop manifesting itself; and these all growing with greater vigour than when it lay in nature's uncultivated soil. This is what so much tries the family of God, that they feel sin working in them more powerfully than in the days of old. They find stronger temptations, and often the workings of iniquities that before they were scarcely acquainted with, and more evil generally manifesting itself than they could believe ever dwelt in their

hearts. Hence springs the necessity of the hoe, to cut up these weeds, that the pure grain may spring up unchoked. And what is this hoe but divine reproof? The Lord brings on his people outward and inward rebukes, cutting rebukes, with sinkings of soul under a sense of his anger against sin; as so many hoes that keep cutting up these weeds, that they may not spring up and overtop the good grain. We have reason, then, to bless God for the checks and admonitions of the blessed Spirit, for the reproofs he administers, for the pangs of guilty conscience, and the trouble and grief that sin in any way indulged in brings with it; for by these things sin is kept under. Though the root of sin is never destroyed, yet the outward growth of it is more or less checked; nor does it altogether overgrow and over top the pure grain as it would otherwise do.

But to pass on. "*Much food* is in the tillage of the poor." The poor in spirit have much food, because they are brought to dig deep into the treasures of God's Word. For instance, look at the *promises* that God has filled the Scriptures with. Are they not stored with the sweetest and most suitable promises? But who need them? Is it not the poor? Are they not all addressed to the poor in spirit, to the self-condemned, to those who have nothing and are nothing in themselves but ruin and helplessness? "Much food," then, "is in the tillage of the poor;" because, as the soul is led into the knowledge of its own poverty, it digs deep into these promises; and when these promises are applied by the Spirit to the heart, there is much food that is lodged in them. So it is also with respect to the treasures that are in Christ Jesus. He "of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (I Cor.1:30). But who knows that he is made this? Who is supplied out of this fulness? Who drinks at this Fountain Head? Who feeds on this Bread of Life? Who can say, "I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his

fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love" (Song of Sol.2:3,4)? The poor, and the poor only; because the poor only feel their need of Christ. "The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet" (Prov.27:7). "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.5:3).

Thus, there is "much food in the tillage of the poor;" because the poor alone know how to dig into the riches of Christ. In the *blood of Christ* what rich food is stored! But for what soul? Only for one that feels the pangs of guilt. In *Christ's righteousness* what food is there! But for whom? Only for those who are completely destitute of any righteousness of their own. *Christ's flesh*, we read, is meat indeed, and *Christ's blood* is drink indeed. But for whom? For those who have nothing in themselves but emptiness and helplessness. So that there is "much food " in "the tillage of the poor;" because the poor, and the poor only, have that tillage which brings good food unto their souls. The rich man may cultivate his fields for pleasure and ornament. The nobleman may have acres and acres of park scenery to drive his carriage through, and to please his eye with beautiful prospects. But the poor man who has only a small plot of ground must use that scanty strip entirely to obtain food from. His poverty obliges him; he must have all that he can get from it to supply the immediate wants of himself and his family. So it is spiritually. A man who is not poor may read God's Word, and admire its beauty and sublimity; as the wealthy nobleman may admire the prospects in his park. But the man who is poor in spirit reads God's Word to have some food brought into his heart out of the fulness of Christ; to obtain some relief from his distresses, some consolation in his sorrow, some manifestation of God's mercy to him, a poor, guilty sinner at the foot of the cross. The poor in spirit, then, is

driven by actual necessity to dig deep into God's Word; and the blessed Spirit from time to time opens up the truth to his soul, so that he finds it to be food indeed. In proportion, therefore, as he is acquainted with the depths of spiritual poverty, will his tillage be chiefly to obtain food for his soul. When he is tempted, he will want deliverance; when he is entangled in a snare, he will want to be brought out of his entanglement; and when he is troubled, he will want the sweet consolations of the Spirit in his soul. Just, then, as a poor man literally is obliged to till his soil, that he may obtain food therefrom; so a poor man spiritually will find his chief concern and main object is to get food for his soul. It is not doctrines as they stand in the letter of the Word, nor empty notions to float in his brain like the flowers in a garden, that he needs; but the solid food which can alone support his sinking soul.

Now, how different this is from what we should naturally have supposed to be the case. We should not think that poverty, helplessness, and a deep knowledge of the fall would all be the preparation for receiving the truth as it is in Jesus; and that the poor should be the persons whose mouths the Lord would fill, and that abundantly, with the food of the gospel. We should think rather that man ought to do something to obtain this good food. But it is not so. Poverty, helplessness, guilt, and ruin are the only requisites; for "much food is in the tillage of the poor."

But again; the poor literally, can enter with understanding into God's *providential dealings*. They can see the hand of God from time to time supplying their temporal wants; and they can bless God from time to time for relieving their necessities as regards the things of this life. Thus they can dig into the providential parts of God's Word, into the temporal promises as well as the spiritual and experimental.

They thus get food for their souls as well as for their bodies: get food in grace as well as food in nature. Thus in every way there is "much food in the tillage of the poor."

II. But Solomon says, "*There is that is destroyed for want of judgment.*" I observed that this was true literally. A poor man sometimes lacks an acquaintance with agriculture; he does not always cultivate the land to the best advantage. Thus with all his care and attention, "there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." But if this be true literally, it is much more true in a higher sense, spiritually and experimentally. The poor in spirit has not always, nor often, a good judgment of his own case. When a man, for instance, is sinking down into the depths of soul trouble, he can form no judgment of his own case; he does not know that the Lord is at this time bringing about a blessing for his soul, and thus "there is that is destroyed," or lost, as to the comfort of it, "for want of judgment." The hand of God is not, the operations of the Spirit in his heart are not, known by him to be the work of the Spirit. Therefore, "there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." When the Lord was beginning to work upon your conscience with power, and was raking up all your sins together, and burning them to ashes before your eyes, for want of seeing it was the work of God upon your soul, the support of this evidence was lost. You did not see it was the teaching of God; therefore you could not bless and praise God for it. It was not housed in your granary as the work of God, nor fed upon by your mouth as the teaching of God, nor received into your heart as the precious gift of God; but it was lost for want of judgment. So when the law enters into a man's conscience, making the offence to abound, he does not know this is the work of God going on in his soul. These convictions, these fears of eternal ruin, these feelings of guilt and shame before God, these apprehensions of the wrath to come, this trembling at death,

hell, and judgment—he wants a clear judgment of his own case to see that all these spring from the work of God in his soul. He cannot see it is the work of God, and therefore cannot bless him for it.

Nay more. Even when the Lord is pleased to give him some glances and glimpses of his mercy and goodness, and sows the good seed of the Word of life in his heart, "there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." He has not arrived at a point to have a clear judgment of the dealings of God in his soul. The bright shining in, the foretastes, are so strange to him; he has had so little experience of them in his soul, that he cannot form a judgment that they are the work of the Spirit of God. "There is," therefore, "that is destroyed for want of judgment." He may have a hope sometimes that it was the work of God in his soul; that when the promise came, it was from God; that when he felt his heart strangely melted within him, and mysterious sensations came over his soul, it was from God himself. Yet for want of judgment it was lost. He could not from thence firmly conclude he was a child of God, for want of clear judgment in his own case. So when the Lord was trying him with afflictions and trials in providence or in grace, administering sharp and keen reproofs, bringing into his conscience a sense of indwelling sin, there was that was destroyed for want of judgment. He could not see that this was the work of God, and that this sprang from the same gracious hand that afterwards brought a larger measure of joy and peace into his soul. So also afterwards, when the Lord has more abundantly blessed his soul with the dew and riches of his grace, he will often, perhaps, trifle with it, or Satan will try to persuade him it was a delusion, that it did not come with the right words, or was not attended by right effects. There will be something of this kind whispering out of man's unbelieving heart, or by that adversary who is always ready to plunder the soul; so that

God is robbed of his glory, and the soul of its enjoyment. So also, in the case of others, not merely in our own, "there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." We want a very clear judgment to see what the work of grace is in a sinner's conscience. We may receive some whom the Lord has never touched with his hand; and we may reject others in whom the work is really going on. And thus ministers may often err here; may, for want of judgment, distress the Lord's people, and often plaster over hypocrites.

"Much food is in the tillage of the poor: but there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." The poor man does not take into his cottage all the produce of his soil. There is some devoured by birds; some not worth taking; and there is some which he leaves between his plot and his house. So it is spiritually, though nothing can be really destroyed of the work of God in his soul.

The Spirit of God does not mean any portion of God's pure Word to get lost or destroyed; for not one jot or tittle of anything can fail that God has spoken. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but God's Word cannot pass away. Yet so far as our feelings and experiences are concerned, there is that is destroyed. But afterwards the Lord may please to manifest it. As the corn that is shed in the farmer's field, and not carried into the granary, is not altogether lost, but springs up in its own time and way; so whatever God does for the soul is sooner or later manifested. The Spirit of God sooner or later brings all things to remembrance. As, then, God leads his people on, he gives them a clearer insight into the work of grace in the soul, takes them back to times that are past, revives in their memory his dealings with them in days of old, and gives them a clear light on them. Then they can cast out with their own hand much that they once prized and they can value much that they once lightly esteemed,

when they come to pass a right judgment on it, being established in the truth, and having a deeper experience in the things of God. But as to learning wisdom effectually and perfectly, we shall never attain to that. If a man think he has attained to such a height of wisdom as to be able to pass a clear judgment on all men and all things, he manifests his folly. Fools we shall be all our days; all our days, therefore, we shall err for want of judgment. And this to convince us that Christ is to be our "wisdom" as well as our "righteousness;" and to make us feel the certainty of that truth, "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise" (I Cor.3:18). The really wise people you will find for the most part to be those who know most of their weakness and folly, and feel how ignorant they are, except so far as the Lord himself is pleased from time to time to manifest himself to their souls, and communicate light to their understandings.

But yet it stands as an eternal truth that "much food is in the tillage of the poor;" and thus only so far as we are really poor in spirit before God, do we know anything of sound, solid, substantial food. But what a dreary path it is for the Lord's people to walk in! That they have to get food for their souls through spiritual poverty; that they can never get a promise without a previous state of soul trouble; can never have a deliverance without passing through some trial; nor can ever know Christ in his beauty, glory, and fulness, but as they are brought into the painful circumstances wherein he is needed. What a cutting reflection this is for the Lord's people! How it makes them at times sink low in their souls, that they can have no real peace or joy but that which comes through exercises, sorrows, and afflictions! But still it stands an eternal truth that "much food is in the tillage of the poor: but there is that is destroyed for want of judgment." And when the Lord is pleased to bless poor souls with this food,

and to make it sweet and savoury, and gladden their hearts with this precious truth, they can bless him for their trials, and thank him for their troubles, and look up in affection to him in the midst of their afflictions. And thus they will go on until the Lord brings them at last where sighs and sorrows are no more, and where he, the God of all comfort, will wipe away tears from all faces.