

Earlston the Younger

by Alexander Whyte

The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking Christ and conversion, and the need for young men to labour in their hearts to understand the evil of sin.

Scripture: Psalm 51:10, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 5:17, James 4:8, 1 Peter 5:8

Topics: "Christian Discipleship", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the remarkable life of William Gordon of Earlston, a man devoted to religion, godliness, and the cause of the Bible and the Church of Scotland. Through Samuel Rutherford's letters to Gordon, we see the deep friendship, mentorship, and guidance provided to a young man of remarkable character and understanding of divine things. Whyte emphasizes the importance of early and complete conversion, urging young men to seek Christ, mortify their lusts, and make conscience of their thoughts to lead a life of holiness and growth in grace.

Transcript

'A renowned Gordon, a patriot, a good Christian, a confessor, and, I may add, a martyr of Jesus Christ.'--Livingstone's Characteristics.

Thomas Boston in his most interesting autobiography tells us about one of his elders who, though a poor man, had always 'a brow for a good cause.' Now nothing could better describe the Gordons of Earlston than just that saying. For old Alexander Gordon, the founder of the family, lifted up his brow for the cause of the Bible and the Sabbath-day when his brow was as yet alone in the whole of Galloway; his great-grandson Alexander also lifted up his brow in his day for the liberty of public worship and the freedom of the courts and congregations of the Church of Scotland, and paid heavily for his courage; and his son William, of whom we are to speak to-night, showed the same brow to the end. The Gordons, as John Howie says, have all along made no small figure in our best Scottish history, and that because they had always a brow for the best causes of their respective days. As Rutherford also says, the truth kept the cause in the south-west of Scotland largely through the intelligence, the courage, and the true piety of the Gordon house.

While still living at home and assisting his father in his farms and factorships, young Earlston was already one of Rutherford's most intimate correspondents. In a kind of reflex way we see what kind of head and heart and character young Earlston must already have had from the letters that Rutherford wrote to him. If we are to judge of the character and attainments and intelligence of Rutherford's correspondents by the

letters he wrote to them, then I should say that William Gordon of Earlston must have been a remarkable man very early in life, both in the understanding and the experience of divine things.

One of the Aberdeen letters especially, numbered 181 in Dr. Andrew Bonar's edition, for intellectual power, inwardness, and eloquence stands almost if not altogether at the head of all the 365 letters we have from Rutherford's pen. He never wrote an abler or a better letter than that he wrote to William Gordon the younger of Earlston on the 16th of June 1637. Not James Durham, not George Gillespie, not David Dickson themselves ever got a stronger, deeper, or more eloquent letter from Samuel Rutherford than did young William Gordon of Airds and Earlston. William Gordon was but a young country laird, taken up twelve hours every day and six days every week with fences and farm-houses, with horses and cattle, but I think an examination paper on personal religion could be set out of Rutherford's letters to him that would stagger the candidates and the doctors of divinity for this year of grace 1891.

'William Gordon was a gentlemen,' says John Howie, 'of good parts and endowments; a man devoted to religion and godliness.' Unfortunately we do not possess any of the letters young Earlston wrote to Rutherford. I wish we did. I would have liked to have seen that letter of Gordon's that so 'refreshed' Rutherford's soul; and that other letter of which Rutherford says that Gordon will be sure to 'come speed' with Christ if he writes to heaven as well about his troubles as he had written to Rutherford in Aberdeen. What a detestable time that was in Scotland when such a man as William Gordon was fined, and fined, and fined; hunted out of his house and banished, till at last he was shot by the soldiers of the Crown and thrown into a ditch as if he had been a highwayman.

The first thing that strikes me in reading Rutherford's letters to young Earlston and to several other young men of that day is the extraordinary frankness and self-forgetfulness of the writer. He takes his young correspondents into his confidence in a remarkable way. He opens up his whole heart to them. He goes back with a startling boldness and unreserve and plainness of speech on his own youth, and he lays himself alongside of his youthful correspondents in a way that only a strong man and a humble could afford to do. Let young men read Rutherford's letters to young William Gordon of Earlston, and to young John Gordon of Cardoness, and to young Lord Boyd, and such like, and they will be surprised to find that even Samuel Rutherford was once a young man exactly like themselves, and that he never forgot the days of his youth nor the trials and temptations and transgressions of those perilous days. Let them read his Letters, and they will see that Rutherford could not only write home to the deepest experiences of Lady Boyd and Lady Kenmure and Marion M'Naught, but that he was quite as much at home with their sons and daughters also.

Rutherford told young Earlston how terribly he had 'ravelled his own hesp' in the days of his youth, and he tells another of his correspondents that after eighteen years he was not sure he had even yet got his ravelled hesp put wholly right. Young Edinburgh gentlemen who have been born with the silver spoon in their mouth will not understand what a ravelled hesp is. But those who have been brought up at the pirn-wheel in Thrums, and in suchlike hand-loom towns, have the advantage of some of their fellow-worshippers to-night. They do not need to turn to Dr. Bonar's Glossary or to Jamieson's Scottish Dictionary to find out what a ravelled hesp is. They well remember the stern yoke of their youth when they were sent supperless to bed because they had ravelled their hesp, and all the old times rush back on them as Rutherford confesses to Earlston how recklessly he ravelled his hesp when he was a student in Edinburgh, and how, twenty times a day, he still ravelled it after he is Christ's prisoner in Aberdeen.

When the hesp is ravelled the pirn is badly filled, and then the shuttle is choked and arrested in the middle of its flight, the web is broken and knotted and uneven, and the weaver is dismissed, or, at best, he is fined in half his wages. And so, said Rutherford, is it with the weaver and the web of life, when a man's life-hesp is ravelled in the morning of his days. I stood not long ago at the grave's mouth of a dear and intimate friend of mine who had fatally ravelled both his own hesp and that of other people, till we had to get the grave-diggers to take a cord and help us to bury him. Horace said that in his day most men fled the empty cask; and all but two or three fled my poor friend's ravelled hesp. He had recovered the lost thread before he died, but his tangled life was past unravelling in this world, and we wrapped his ragged hesp around him for a winding-sheet, and left him with Christ, who so graciously took the cumber of Rutherford's ill-ravelled life also. Young men whose hesp still runs even, and whose web is not yet torn, as Rutherford says to Earlston, 'Make conscience of your thoughts and study in everything to mortify your lusts. Wash your hands in innocency, and God, who knoweth what you have need of before you ask Him, will Himself lead you to encompass His holy altar, and thus to enter the harbour of a holy home and an unravelled life.'

Rutherford's Letters are all gleaming with illustrations, some homely enough, like the ill-ravelled hesp, and some classically beautiful, like the arrow that has gone beyond the bowman's mastery. Writing to young Lord Boyd about seeking Christ in youth, and about the manifold advantages of an early and a complete conversion, Rutherford says: 'It is easy to set an arrow right before the string is drawn, but when once the arrow is in the air the bowman has lost all power over it.' Look around at the men and women beside you and see how true that is. Look at those whose arrow is shot, and see how impossible it is for them, even when they wish it, either to call their arrow back or to correct its erring flight. And thank God that you are still in your youth, and that the arrow of your future life is not yet shot. And while your arrow still lies trembling on the string be sure your face is in the right direction and your aim well taken. Rutherford, with all his experience and all his frankness and all his eloquence, could not tell his young correspondents half the advantages of an early conversion. Nor can I tell you half of the changes for good that would immediately take place in you with an early, immediate, and complete conversion. Perhaps the very first thing some of you would do would be to get a new minister and to join a new church.

Then on the week-day some of you would at once leave your present business, and seek a new means of livelihood in which you could at least keep your hands and your conscience clean. Then you would choose a new friend and a new lover, or else you would get God to do for them what He has been so good as to do for you, give them a new heart with which to weave their hesp and shoot their arrow. You would read new books and new journals, or, else, you would read the old books and the old journals in a new way. The Sabbath-day would become a new day to you, the Bible a new book, and your whole future a new outlook to you; --but why particularise and specify, when all old things would pass away, and all things would become new? Oh dear young men of Edinburgh, and young men come up to Edinburgh to get your bow well strung and your arrow well winged, look well before you let go the string, for, once your arrow is shot, you cannot recall it so as to take a second aim. With an early and a complete conversion you would have the advantage also of having your whole life for growth in grace and for the knowledge of yourself, of the word of God and of Jesus Christ; for the formation of your character also, and for the service of God and of your generation. And then when your friends met around your grave, instead of hiding you and your ravelled hesp away in shame and silence, they would stand, a worshipping crowd, saying over you: 'Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age, they shall be fat and flourishing.'

And then, like the true and sure guide to heaven that Rutherford was, he led his young correspondents on from strength to strength, and from one degree and one depth of grace to another, as thus, Common honesty will not take a man to heaven. Many are beguiled with this, that they are clear of scandalous sins. But the man that is not born again cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The righteous are scarcely saved. God save me from a disappointment, and send me salvation. Speer at Christ the way to heaven, for salvation is not soon found; many miss it. Say, 'must be saved, cost me what it will.' And to a nameless young man, supposed to be one of his Anwoth parishioners, he writes, 'So my real advice is that you acquaint yourself with prayer, and with searching the Scriptures of God, so that He may shew you the only true way that will bring rest to your soul. Ordinary faith and country holiness will not save you. Take to heart in time the weight and worth of an immortal soul; think of death, and of judgment at the back of death, that you may be saved.--Your sometime pastor, and still friend in God, S. R.' The civility of the New Jerusalem, he is continually reminding his genteel and correct-living correspondents, is a very different thing from the civility of Edinburgh, or Aberdeen, or St. Andrews. And so it is, else it would not be worth both Christ and all Christian men both living and dying for it.

And this leads Rutherford on, in the last Place, to say what Earlston, and Cardoness, and Lord Boyd, while yet in their unconversion and their early conversion, would not understand. For, writing to Robert Stuart, the son of the Provost of Ayr, Rutherford says to him, 'Labour constantly for a sound and lively sense of sin,' and to the Laird of Cally, 'Take pains with your salvation, for without much wrestling and sweating it is not to be won.' A sound and lively sense of sin. As we read these sound and lively letters, we come to see and understand something of what their writer means by that. He means that Stuart and Cally, Cardoness and Earlston, young laymen as they were, were to labour in sin and in their own hearts till they came to see something of the ungodliness of sin, something of its fiendishness, its malignity, its loathsomeness, its hell-deservingness, its hell-alreadyness. 'All his religious illuminations, affections, and comforts,' says Jonathan Edwards of David Brainerd, 'were attended with evangelical humiliation, that is to say, with a deep sense of his own despicableness and odiousness, his ignorance, pride, vileness, and pollution. He looked on himself as the least and the meanest of all saints, yea, very often as the vilest and worst of mankind.' But let Rutherford and Brainerd and Edwards pour out their blackest vocabulary upon sin, and still sin goes and will go without its proper name. Only let those Christian noblemen and gentlemen to whom Rutherford wrote, labour in their own hearts all their days for some sound and lively and piercing sense of this unspeakably evil thing, and they will know, as Rutherford wrote to William Gordon, that they have got to some sound and lively sense of sin when they feel that there is no one on earth or in hell that has such a sinful heart as they have. The nearer to heaven you get, the nearer will you feel to hell, said Rutherford to young Earlston, till, all at once, the door will open over you, and, or ever you are aware, you will be for ever with Christ and the blessed; as it indeed was with William Gordon at the end. For as he was on his way to join the Covenanters at Bothwell Bridge, he was shot by a gang of English dragoons and flung into a ditch. Jesus Christ, says Rutherford, went suddenly home to His father's house all over with his own blood, and it was surely enough for William Gordon that he went home like his Master.

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