

John Ploughman's Talks

CHARLES SPURGEON



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John Ploughman's Talks

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PREFACE

In John Ploughman's Talks, I have written for plowmen and common people. Hence refined taste and dainty words have been discarded for strong proverbial expressions and homely phrases. I have aimed my blows at the vices of the many, and tried to inculcate those moral virtues without which men are degraded. Much that needs to be said to the toiling masses would not well suit the pulpit and the Sabbath; these lowly pages may teach thrift and industry all the days of the week, in the cottage and the workshop; and if some learn these lessons I shall not repent the adoption of a rustic style.

Ploughman is a name I may justly claim. Every minister has put his hand to the plow; and it is his business to break up the fallow ground. That I have written in a semi-humorous vein needs no apology, since thereby sound moral teaching has gained a hearing from at least 300,000 persons. There is no particular virtue in being seriously unreadable.

—Charles H. Spurgeon

CHAPTER 1

TO THE IDLE

It is of no more use to give advice to the idle than to pour water into a sieve; and as to improving them, one might as well try to fatten a greyhound. Yet, as The Old Book tells us to “cast [our] bread upon the waters” (Ecclesiastes 11:1), we will cast a hard crust or two upon these stagnant ponds; for there will be this comfort about it: if lazy fellows grow no better, we shall be none the worse for having warned them, for when we sow good sense, the basket gets none the emptier. We have a stiff bit of soil to plow when we chide with sluggards, and the crop will be of the smallest. But if none but good land were farmed, plowmen would be out of work, so we’ll put the plow into the furrow. Idle men are common enough and grow without planting, but the quantity of wit among seven acres of them would never pay for raking: nothing is needed to prove this but their name and character; if they were not fools they would be idlers; and though Solomon says, “The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason” (Proverbs 26:16), yet in the eyes of everyone else, his folly is as plain as the sun in the sky. If I hit hard while speaking to them, it is because I know they can bear it; for if I had them down on the floor of the old barn, I might thresh many a day before I could get them out of the straw, and even the steam thresher could not do it. It would kill them first; for laziness is in some people’s bones and will show itself in their idle flesh, do what you will with them.

Well, then, first and foremost, it strikes me that lazy people ought to have a large looking glass hung up, where they are bound to see themselves in it; for sure, if their eyes are at all like mine,

they would never bear to look at themselves long or often. The ugliest sight in the world is one of those thoroughbred loafers, who would hardly hold up his basin if it were to rain with porridge; and for certain would never hold up a bigger pot than he wanted filled for himself. Perhaps, if the shower should turn to beer, he might wake himself up a bit; but he would make up for it afterwards. This is the slothful man in the Scriptures, who "*hideth his hand in his bosom; it grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth*" (Proverbs 26:15). I say that men the like of this ought to be served like the drones which the bees drive out of the hives. Every man ought to have patience and pity for poverty; but for laziness, a long whip or a turn at the treadmill might be better. This would be a healthy purgative for all sluggards; but there is no chance of some of them getting their full dose of this medicine, for they were born with silver spoons in their mouths, and like spoons will scarce stir their own tea unless somebody lends them a hand. They are, as the old proverb says, "as lazy as Ludham's dog, that leaned his head against the wall to bark"; and like lazy sheep, it is too much trouble for them to carry their own wool. If they could see themselves, it might by chance do them a world of good; but perhaps it would be too much trouble for them to open their eyes even if the glass were hung for them.

Everything in the world is of some use; but it would puzzle a doctor of divinity, or a philosopher, or the wisest owl in our steeple to tell the good of idleness: that seems to me to be an ill wind which blows nobody any good—a sort of mud which breeds no eels, a dirty ditch which would not feed a frog. Sift a sluggard grain by grain, and you'll find him all chaff. I have heard men say, "Better do nothing than do mischief," but I am not even sure of that: that saying glitters well, but I don't believe it's gold. I grudge laziness even that pinch of praise; I say it is bad and bad altogether. For look ye, a man doing mischief is a sparrow picking the corn—but a lazy man is a sparrow sitting on a nest full of eggs, which will

all turn to sparrows before long and do a world of hurt. Don't tell me—I'm sure of it—that the rankest weeds on earth don't grow in the minds of those who are busy at wickedness but in foul corners of idle men's imaginations, where the devil can hide away unseen like an old serpent as he is. I don't like our boys to be in mischief, but I would sooner see them up to their necks in the mud in their larks than sauntering about with nothing to do. If the evil of doing nothing seems to be less today, you will find it out to be greater tomorrow; the devil is putting coals on the fire, and so the fire does not blaze; but depend upon it, it will be a bigger fire in the end. Idle people, you had need be your own trumpeters, for no one else can find any good in you to praise. I'd sooner see you through a telescope than anything else, for I suppose you would then be a long way off; but the biggest pair of spectacles in the parish could not see anything in you worth talking about. Moles, and rats, and weasels, there is something to be said for, though there's a pretty sight of them nailed up on our old barn; but as for you, you'll be of use in the grave and help to make a fat churchyard, but no better song can I sing in your favor than this verse, as the parish clerk said, "all of my own composing":

A good-for-nothing lazy lout,
Wicked within and ragged without,
Who can bear to have him about?
Turn him out! Turn him out!

"As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes" (Proverbs 10:26), so is the sluggard to every man who is spending his sweat to earn an honest living, while these fellows let the grass grow up to their ankles, and stand cluttering the ground, as the Bible says.

A man who wastes his time and his strength in sloth offers himself to be a target for the devil, who is a wonderfully good rifleman and will riddle the idler with his shots: in other words, idle men tempt the devil to tempt them. He who plays when he

should work has an evil spirit to be his playmate; and he who neither works nor plays is a workshop for Satan. If the devil catches a man idling, he will set him to work, find him tools, and before long pay him wages. Is not this where the drunkenness comes from which fills our towns and villages with misery? Idleness is the key of beggary and the root of all evil. Fellows have two stomachs for eating and drinking when they have no stomach for work. That little hole just under the nose swallows up in idle hours that money which should put clothes on the children's backs and bread on the cottage table. We have God's word for it, that "*the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty*" (Proverbs 23:21); and to show the connection between them, it is said in the same verse, "*and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags.*" I know it as well as I know that moss grows on old thatch, that drunken, loose habits grow out of lazy hours. I like leisure when I can get it, but that's quite another thing; that's cheese, and the other is chalk. Idle folks never know what leisure means; they are always in a hurry and a mess, and by neglecting to work in the proper time, they always have a lot to do. Lolling about hour after hour, with nothing to do, is just making holes in the hedge to let the pigs through; and they will come through—make no mistake—and the rooting they will do nobody knows except those who have to look after the garden. The Lord Jesus tells us himself that while men slept the enemy sowed the tares; that hits the nail on the head, for it is by the door of sluggishness that evil enters the heart more often, it seems to me, than by any other.

Our old minister used to say, "A sluggard is fine raw material for the devil; he can make anything he likes out of him, from a thief right up to a murderer." I'm not the only one that condemns the idle, for once when I was going to give our minister a pretty long list of the sins of one of our people he was asking after, I began with "He's dreadfully lazy."

"That's enough," said the old gentleman. "All sorts of sins are in that one; that's the sign by which to know a full-fledged sinner."

My advice to my boys has been, "Get out of the sluggard's way, or you may catch his disease and never get rid of it." I am always afraid of their learning the ways of the idle and am very watchful to nip anything of the sort in the bud; for you know it is best to kill the lion while it is a cub. Sure enough our children have all our evil nature about them, for you can see it growing of itself like weeds in a garden. Who can bring a clean thing out of the unclean? A wild goose never lays a tame egg. Our boys will be off to the green with the ne'er-do-wells unless we make it greener still at home for them and train them up to hate the company of the slothful. Never let them go to the "Rose and Crown"; let them learn to earn a crown while they are young and grow the roses in their father's garden at home. Bring them up bees and they will not be drones.

There is much talk about bad masters and mistresses nowadays. I dare say that there is a good deal in it, for there's bad of all sorts now as there always was. Another time, if I am allowed, I will have a say about that matter; but I am sure there is plenty of room for complaint against some among the working people too, especially upon this matter of slothfulness. You know we are obliged to plow with such cattle as we have found for us; but when I am set to work with some men, I'd as soon drive a team of snails or go out rabbit hunting with a dead ferret. Why, you might sooner get blood out of a gatepost or juice out of a cork than work out of some of them; and yet they are always talking about their rights. I wish they would give an eye to their own wrongs, and not lean on the plow handles. Lazy lie-a-beds are not working men at all, any more than pigs are bullocks or thistles apple trees. All are not hunters that wear red coats, and all are not working men who call themselves so. I wonder sometimes that some of our employers keep so many cats that catch no mice. I would as soon drop my

halfpence down a well as pay some people for pretending to work. It only irritates you and makes your flesh crawl to see them all day creeping over a cabbage leaf. "Live and let live," say I, but I don't include sluggards in that license. "They who will not work, neither let them eat." (See 2 Thessalonians 3:10.)

Here, perhaps, is the proper place to say that some of the higher classes, as they are called, set a shamefully bad example in this respect: our great folks are some of them quite as lazy as they are rich, and often more so; the big dormice sleep as long and as sound as the little ones. Many a parson buys or hires a sermon so that he may save himself the trouble of thinking. Is not this abominable laziness? They sneer at the ranters; but there is not a ranter in the kingdom that would not be ashamed to stand up and read somebody else's sermon as if it were his own. Many of our squires have nothing to do but to part their hair in the middle; and many of the London grandees, ladies and gentlemen both alike, as I am told, have no better work than killing time. Now, they say the higher a monkey climbs, the more his tail is seen; and so, the greater these people are, the more their idleness is noticed, and the more they ought to be ashamed of it. I don't say they ought to plow, but I do say that they ought to do something for the state besides being like the caterpillars on the cabbage, eating up the good things; or like the butterflies, showing themselves off but making no honey. I cannot be angry with these people somehow, for I pity them when I think of the stupid rules of fashion which they are forced to mind, and the vanity in which they drag out their days. I'd sooner by half bend my back double with hard work than be a jack-a-dandy, with nothing to do but to look in the mirror and see in it a fellow who never put a single potato into the nation's pot but took a good many out. Let me drop on these Surrey hills, worn out like my master's old brown mare, sooner than eat bread and cheese and never earn it; better to die an honorable death than live a good-for-nothing life.

It would be better to get into my coffin than be dead but alive, a man whose life is a blank.

However, it is not much ease that lazy people get by all their scheming, for they always take the most pains in the end. They will not mend the thatch, and so they have to build a new cottage; they will not put the horse in the cart, and so they have to drag it themselves. If they were wise, they would do their work well, so as to save doing it twice, and tug hard while they are in harness, so as to get the work out of the way. My advice is, if you don't like hard work, just pitch into it, settle it off, and have your turn at rest.

I wish all religious people would take this matter under their consideration, for some professors are amazingly lazy and make sad work for the tongues of the wicked. I think a godly plowman ought to be the best man in the field and let no team beat him. When we are at work, we ought to be at it, and not stop the plow to talk, even though the talk may be about religion. For then we not only rob our employers of our own time, but of the time of the horses, too. I used to hear people say, "Never stop the plow to catch a mouse," and it's quite as silly to stop for idle chat; besides, the man who loiters when the master is away is an eye-server, which, I take it, is the very opposite of a Christian. If some of the members at our meeting were a little more spry with their arms and legs when they are at labor and a little quieter with their tongues, they would say more for religion than they now do. The world says the greatest rogue is the pious rogue, and I'm sorry to say one of the greatest sluggards I know of is a professing man of the "Mr. Talkative" kind. His garden is so overgrown with weeds that I feel often half a mind to weed it for him, to save our meeting the shame which he brings upon it: if he were a young lad, I'd talk to him about it and try to teach him better, but who can be a schoolmaster to a child of sixty years old? He is a regular thorn to our good minister, who is quite grieved about it and sometimes says he will

go somewhere else because he cannot bear such conduct; but I tell him that wherever a man lives, he is sure to have one thorn bush near his door, and it is a mercy if there are not two. However, I do wish that all Christians would be industrious, for religion never was designed to make us idle. Jesus was a great worker, and his disciples must not be afraid of hard work.

As to serving the Lord with cold hearts and drowsy souls, there has been too much of it, and it causes religion to wither. Men ride stallions when they hunt for gain, but snails when they are on the road to heaven. Preachers go on see-sawing, droning, and prosing; and the people fall to yawning and folding their arms, and then say that God is withholding the blessing. Every sluggard, when he finds himself enlisted in the ragged regiment, blames his luck; and some churches have learned the same wicked trick. I believe that when Paul plants and Apollos waters, God gives the increase, and I have no patience with those who throw the blame on God when it belongs to themselves.

Now I have come to the end of my tether. I am afraid I have been beating a dead horse, but I have done my best, and a king can do no more. An ant can never make honey if it works its heart out, and I shall never put my thoughts so prettily together as some do, book-fashion; but truth is truth, even when dressed in homespun, and so there is an end of my rigmarole.