

A father's advice to his sons

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Last advice of the Rev. Charles Pettigrew to his sons, 1797 (publisher unknown), pp. 3–6, 8–10.

As you read...

THE PETTIGREWS

Charles Pettigrew (see http://docsouth.unc.edu/browse/bios/pn0001345_bio.html) (1744–1807) was an Anglican minister and planter (a large-scale farmer) in Tyrrell County. His son John was a student at UNC in 1797, and his son Ebenezer Pettigrew, then only 14, grew up to become a state legislator and the owner of several plantations in eastern North Carolina.

LAST WORDS

Pettigrew wrote this letter to his sons when he believed himself to be dying. (In fact, he lived another ten years.) In the letter, he gives advice about how to live a good, Christian life.

- What qualities in a person did Pettigrew think were most important?
- What sins or bad habits did he fear his sons would fall into?
- What was his opinion of “gentlemen”? of the lower classes?
- What was his opinion of slavery?

My dear sons,

Life is precarious, and it is not likely that I shall long remain with you¹.... I think it an indispensable duty now to testify to the love which I bear to you as a father, who desires above all things to promote your interest and happiness through life and in death. In order to do this I shall leave you a few cautionary hints and observations on paper, that you may, from a principle of filial duty, have recourse to them, as speaking for *me*, when I shall be silent in the dust.

Then, my sons, that you may derive some advantage from my age and experience, and the observations I have made, during my progress through life, for more than half a century, attend while I assure you, that your temporal happiness will greatly depend on the principles which you have, and may yet imbibe of *justice*, honor, and *religion*. To acquire,

and to maintain these principles with unshaken firmness and fidelity in your transactions, both of a moral and religious nature, will secure to you the approbation of the wise and discerning part of mankind; and, what is infinitely more desirable and happifying, it will secure to you the enjoyment of an approving mind. It will at the same time inspire you with a rational hope in the divine approbation.² This hope towards God is a source of consolation and support under the heaviest calamities of human life.

A dishonest man, who has no regard for the principles of *justice* and equity in his intercourse with the world, lives like Cain,³ in a state of self-condemnation, which excludes the possibility of his being happy. Sentiments of honor have no influence upon such a man. He is under the entire government of selfish principles. The interests of his neighbour cannot stand in competition with his own, which, when laid in the opposite scale, always preponderate. In the view of gain,⁴ he loses sight of reputation and descends to such meannesses as often render him an object of just contempt. With their good opinion, men are induced to withdraw their confidence from such a man, leaving him to make his way through life the best way he can. This you will think a very uncomfortable state of dereliction; indeed it is. And I pray God that you may never fall into it.

To prevent this it will be necessary to act always on your guard. Never to be too self-confident, but rather jealous⁵ over your own heart; for such is the imperfection of human nature, that men are often deceived in themselves, while exposed to the eye of the world, in a very different light from that in which they are accustomed to view themselves.⁶

Let me then entreat you to let simple honesty, and undisguised truth characterize your transactions, both civil and social, and particularly in your matters of trade and traffic.⁷ Honesty is, and will ever be found, the best policy.

There is nothing more disgraceful to a man, than a disposition to deviate from the simplicity of truth, either by misrepresentations, prevarications, or a passion for idle story-telling, whereby some men who might otherwise have been respectable, have rendered themselves very ridiculous, and even contemptible. In respect to these things, I wish you never to be off your guard....

The moment you become *irreligious* and insensible of your obligations to God, you will begin to grow remiss in your duty towards men, and cease to be happy. You will ever find that the truest happiness results from an unshaken integrity in the exercise of your duty both towards God and towards your neighbour. I can truly say I have found it so, and when I have heard myself unjustly reproached, I have derived great consolation from the approbation of my own mind. I am however mortified on a retrospect, to think that my life has been so imperfect, and I wish you to improve on my imperfect example; and as you tender your happiness and respectability in life, be ever on your guard against whatever may tend to seduce you from the practice of virtue, *sobriety* and economy; lest you finally sink into *idleness*, extravagancy and *dissipation*, which are sure to terminate in disgrace and misery.

You can never be treated with superior respect unless your conduct should entitle you to it, by its superiority to that of the vulgar and low-bred.⁸ People are generally better judges of merit than we think they are: and where it really is, it never fails to command less or more of respect and esteem. Unjust pretensions set a man in the light of a counterfeit — despicable pretender to what he is not.

They are often no less accurate in their judgment of what is becoming the character of a gentleman; and on the contrast of what fixes a disgraceful stain upon a conspicuous character.

The character of a christian and a gentleman are very consistent. The latter is highly improved by the softening and meliorating influence of the former. I wish you, my sons, to unite them, that you may be in favour with both God and man.

To this end cultivate the softer tempers, in the exercise of resolution and firmness. Beware of giving the reins to passion;⁹ unbridled passion will grow daily more and more turbulent, and at last spurn all restraint from the rules of decency and good breeding. This renders a man a truly pitiable object. To manage negroes without the exercise of too much passion, is next to an impossibility, after our strongest endeavours to the contrary; I have found it so. I would therefore put you on your guard, lest their provocations should on some occasions transport you beyond the limits of decency and christian morality.

Let this consideration plead in their favour, and at all times mitigate your resentments. They are slaves for life. They are not stimulated to care and industry as white people are, who labor for themselves. They do not feel themselves interested in what they do, for arbitrary masters and mistresses; and their education is not such as can be expected to inspire them with sentiments of honor and gratitude. We may justly expect rather that an oppressive sense of their condition would naturally have a tendency to blunt all the finer feelings of nature, and render them callous to the ideas of honor and even honesty....

On the web

The duties of a young woman

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4483>

Even in her early youth, what essential aid may an affectionate daughter render to a mother, "cumbered," perhaps, and overburthened with the cares of her household. By her assiduous attentions towards...

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Notes

1. Charles Pettigrew recovered from his illness and lived another ten years after writing this letter.
2. The approval of God.
3. In the Bible, Cain was the first son of Adam, the first man. Cain was a farmer, while Abel, Adam's second son, tended sheep. In Genesis 4.1-16 (see [http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%204:%201-16;&version=9](http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%204:%201-16;&version=9;)), Cain and Abel both made a sacrifice to God. Cain burned some of the crops from his field, while Abel sacrificed one of his lambs. God accepted Abel's sacrifice but rejected Cain's. In a fit of rage, Cain killed Abel and hid his body. In punishment for being the first murderer, Cain was banished from his land and forced to roam the earth.

4. In order to be successful.
5. To be *jealous* in this context means to guard carefully or to protect.
6. That is, you might see yourself one way, but people you interact with will see you another way. He is cautioning his sons against being prideful, selfish, or conceited, lest other people come to dislike or distrust them.
7. Wealthy farmers, or “planters,” were typically involved in business and commerce. In addition to selling the produce of their plantations, they might be involved in importation and wholesale business, even owning ships to transport goods as well as shops and warehouses. Thus they were involved in trade and “traffic” — the movement of goods.
8. Poor people or people who lack manners and are not educated.
9. People in the eighteenth century were very concerned that they might give in to their “passions” or emotions. A passionate man might have a temper, or he might be tempted to seduce women. Men and women were advised to educate their minds so that reason and ratiion would guide their actions and they would not commit immoral acts. This did not mean that people shouldn’t have emotions, only that all feelings should be checked by reason.

About the author

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