

Primary Source: A Father's Advice to His Sons ^[1]

Charles Pettigrew (1744–1807) was an Anglican minister and planter 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.

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

My dear sons,

Life is [precarious](#) ^[2], and [it is not likely that I shall long remain with you...](#) 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](#) ^[3] duty, have [recourse](#) ^[4] to them, as speaking for *me*, when I shall be silent in the dust.

Then, my sons, that you may [derive](#) ^[5] 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](#) ^[6] happiness will greatly depend on the principles which you have, and may yet [imbibe](#) ^[7] of *justice*, honor, and *religion*. To acquire, and to maintain these principles with unshaken firmness and [fidelity](#) ^[8] in your transactions, both of a moral and religious nature, will secure to you the [approbation](#) ^[9] 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](#). This hope towards God is a source of [consolation](#) ^[10] and support under the heaviest [calamities](#) ^[11] 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](#), 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](#) ^[12]. [word](#) In the view of gain, 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](#) ^[13] 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](#) ^[14]; 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 [jealous](#) 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.](#)

Let me then [entreat](#) ^[15] you to let simple honesty, and undisguised truth characterize your transactions, both civil and social, and particularly in your matters of [trade and traffic](#). Honesty is, and will ever be found, the best policy.

There is nothing more disgraceful to a man, than [adisposition](#) ^[16] to deviate from the simplicity of truth, either by misrepresentations, [prevarications](#) ^[17], or a passion for [idle](#) ^[18] story-telling, whereby some men who might otherwise have been respectable, have rendered themselves very ridiculous, and even [contemptible](#) ^[19]. 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](#) ^[20], 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](#) ^[21], [sobriety](#) ^[22] and economy; lest you finally sink into *idleness*, [extravagancy](#) ^[23] and [dissipation](#) ^[24], 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](#). 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](#) ^[25] 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](#) ^[26] character.

The character of a christian and a gentleman are very consistent. The latter is highly improved by the softening and [meliorating](#) ^[27] 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 [28] the softer tempers, in the exercise of resolution and firmness. Beware of giving the reins to passion; unbridled passion will grow daily more and more turbulent [29], 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 [30]; I have found it so. I would therefore put you on your guard, lest their provocations [31] should on some occasions transport you beyond the limits of decency and christian morality [32].

Let this consideration plead in their favour, and at all times mitigate [33] 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 [34] to the ideas of honor and even honesty....

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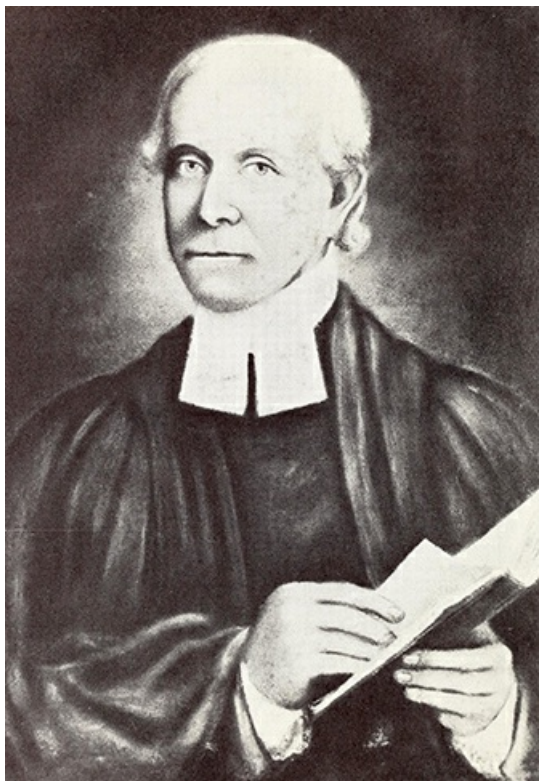
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Charles Pettigrew

3 January 2018

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