Sir Francis Bacon  
1561-1626

The name Francis Bacon is important in seventeenth-century history, philosophy, and literature. A man of brilliant intellect and keen observation, Bacon rose quickly under James I: Solicitor General (1607), Attorney General (1613), member of the Privy Council (1616), Lord Keeper of the Great Seal (1617), Lord Chancellor (1618). Knighted in 1603, he was named Baron Verulam in 1618 and Viscount St. Albans in 1621. His political fall in 1621 was as sudden as his rise was spectacular. Charged with taking bribes, Bacon, pleading guilty, was fined £40,000, banished from court, imprisoned in the Tower of London, and barred from holding public office. Though the fine and prison sentence were remitted, Bacon's career was ruined, and he retired to St. Albans, Hertfordshire, to pursue his private interests.

Chief among his private interests was the "advancement of learning." The "learning" he wished to promote was the practical knowledge by which man, according to Bacon, subdues the earth in obedience to God (Gen. 1:28) and wins benefit to himself. As Bacon surveyed the past, three inventions—printing, gunpowder, and the compass—seemed to him to have done more for the world than two thousand years of philosophy. What is needed, he concluded, is more direct observation of external phenomena and less dependence on ancient authorities such as Aristotle and Galen for information about the physical world. His Novum Organum (1620) explains the "new instrument"—scientific induction—by means of which this observation should proceed.

Bacon is often called the father of modern science for his recommending of the scientific method—inductive investigation that uses experiments to verify a hypothesis. This view of Bacon is appropriate not because he originated the scientific method or achieved spectacular results with it but because his writings produced a climate favorable to scientific progress. Bacon proposed a vast program of scientific inquiry that would bring a new physical prosperity for man. His program called for a survey of present knowledge by disciplines, separating genuine from erroneous knowledge and preserving this knowledge as the starting point of further investigation. His Advancement of Learning (1605) states his objections to traditional philosophy and then gives a preliminary overview of the kingdoms of knowledge. His essays (1597; rev. 1612, 1625) exemplify what he recommended to be undertaken in all realms of knowledge, both of nature and of human beings and their institutions; concise formulations of fact that have practical value to man. "Of Studies" (1591) states the value of book learning, of which Bacon himself was proof. "Of Great Place" (1625) offers wisdom that would have helped Bacon keep his high position had he heeded it.

The style of the essays, especially those of 1597, shows balance and extreme compression. The sentences amount to a series of aphorisms, or "sayings"—like the "commonplaces" Renaissance schoolboys would cull from their reading and record in their "commonplace books." Bacon's wise sayings have been condemned as amoral advice for "getting ahead." Do the examples below also reflect Christian moral principles?
Of Studies
Sir Francis Bacon

STUDIES serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight, is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment, and disposition of business. For expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs, come best, from those that are learned. To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament, is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules, is the humor of a scholar. They perfect nature, and are perfected by experience: for natural abilities are like natural plants, that need prouning, by study; and studies themselves, do give forth directions too much at large, except they be bounded in by experience. Crafty men contemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them; for they teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them, and above them, won by observation. Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention. Some books also may be read by deputy, and extracts made of them by others; but that would be only in the less important arguments, and the meaner sort of books, else distilled books are like common distilled waters, flashy things. Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man. And therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit: and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know, that he doth not. Histories make men wise; poets witty; the mathematics subtile; natural philosophy deep; moral grave; logic and rhetoric able to contend. Abenunt studia in mores. Nay, there is no stond or impediment in the wit, but may be wrought out by fit studies; like as diseases of the body, may have appropriate exercises. Bowling is good for the stone and reins; shooting for the lungs and breast; gentle walking for the stomach; riding for the head; and the like. So if a man’s wit be wandering, let him study the mathematics; for in demonstrations, if his wit be called away never so little, he must begin again. If his wit be not apt to distinguish or find differences, let him study the Schoolmen; for they are cymini sectores. If he be not apt to beat over matters, and to call up one thing to prove and illustrate another, let him study 197 the lawyers’ cases. So every defect of the mind, may have a special receipt.
Of Great Place

Men in great place* are thrice servants; servants of the sovereign or state; servants of fame; and servants of business.* So as* they have no freedom; neither in their persons, nor in their actions, nor in their times. It is a strange desire, to seek power and to lose liberty; or to seek power over others and to lose power over a man’s self. The rising unto place is laborious; and by pains men come to greater pains; and it is sometimes base; and by indignities* men come to dignities. The standing is slippery, and the regress is either a downfall, or at least an eclipse, which is a melancholy thing. . . Nay, retire men cannot when they would, neither will they when it were reason;* but are impatient of* privateness, even in age and sickness, which require the shadow:* like old townsman, that will be still* sitting at their street door, though thereby they offer* age to scorn. Certainly great persons had need to borrow other men’s opinions to think themselves happy; for if they judge by their own feeling, they cannot find it: but if they think with themselves* what other men think of them and that other men would fare as they are, then they are happy as it were by report, when perhaps they find the contrary within. For they are the first that find their own griefs, though they be the last that find their own faults. Certainly men in great fortunes are stranger to themselves, and while they are in the puzzle of business they have no time to tend their health either of body or mind. Illi mars gravis incubat, qui notus nimius omnibus, ignotus mortue sibi.* In place there is licence to do good and evil, whereas the latter is a curse: for in evil the best condition is not to will, the second not to can.* But power to do good is the true and lawful end of aspiring. For good thoughts (though God accept them) yet towards men are little better than good dreams, except they be put in act, and that cannot be without power and place* as the vantage* and commanding ground. Merit and good works is the end of man’s motion;* and conscience* of the same is the accomplishment of man’s rest. For if a man can be partaker of God’s theatre,* he shall likewise be partaker of God’s rest. . .

In the discharge of thy place* set before thee the best examples; for imitation is a globe* of precepts. And after a time set before thee thine own example; and examine thyself strictly whether thou didst not best at first. Neglect not also the examples of those that have carried themselves ill in the same place; not to set off thyself by taxing* their memory, but to direct thyself what to avoid. Reform therefore, without bravery or scandal* of former times and persons; but yet set it down to thyself as well to create good precedents as to follow them. Reduce* things to the first institution,* and observe wherein and how they have degenerate;* but yet ask counsel of both times: of the ancient time, what is best; and of the latter time, what is fittest. Seek to make thy course regular, that men may know beforehand what they may expect; but be not too positive and peremptory,* and express thyself well* when thou dost gressest from thy rule. Preserve the right of thy place; but stir not questions of jurisdiction; and rather assume thy right in silence and de facto* than voice it with claims and challenges. Preserve likewise the rights of inferior places; and think it more honor to direct in chief* than to be busy in
all. * Embrace and invite helps and advices touching the execution of thy place: and do not drive away such as bring thee information, as meddlers: but accept of them in good part. The vices of authority are chiefly four: delays, corruption, roughness,* and facility.* For* delays, give easy access; keep times appointed; go through with that which is in hand, and interlace not business* but of necessity. For corruption, do not only bind thine own hands or thy servants' hands from taking,* but bind the hands of suitors* also from offering. For integrity used* doth the one: but integrity professed, and with a manifest detestation of bribery, doth the other. And avoid not only the fault but the suspicion. Whosoever is found variable, and changeth manifestly without manifest cause, giveth suspicion of corruption. Therefore always when thou Changest thine opinion or course, profess it plainly, and declare it, together with the reasons that move thee to change; and do not think to steal it.* A servant or a favorite, if he be inward,* and no other apparent cause of esteem, is commonly thought but a by-way to close corruption. For roughness, it is a needless cause of discontent: severity breedeth fear, but roughness breedeth hate. Even reproofs from authority ought to be grave* and not taunting. As for facility, it is worse than bribery. For bribes come but now and then; but if importunity or idle respects* lead a man, he shall never be without.* As Solomon saith, "To respect persons is not good: for such a man will transgress for a piece of bread."** It is most true that was anciently spoken, "A place showeth the man."**

And it showeth some to the better, and some to the worse... It is an assured sign of a worthy and generous spirit, whom honor amend.* For honor is, or should be, the place of virtue; and as in nature things move violently to their place and calmly in their place, so virtue in ambition is violent, in authority settled and calm. All rising to great place is by a winding stair; and if there be factions,* it is good to side a man's self* whilst he is in the rising and to balance himself when he is placed. Use the memory of thy predecessor fairly and tenderly; for if thou dost not, it is a debt will sure be paid when thou art gone. If thou have colleagues, respect them, and rather call them when they look not for it than exclude them when they have reason to look to be called. Be not too sensible* or too remembering of thy place in conversation and private answers to suitors; but let it rather be said, "When he sits in place he is another man."