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SERMON CCXCVII.

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**THE METHODS OF THE ADVERSARY.**

*“In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” 2 Cor. 4 : 4.*

There are good influences in this world, at the head of which is God. There are also bad influences, at the head of which is the devil. In preaching, we often speak of the good influences, and admonish men not to defeat them. It is equally proper that we speak of the bad influences, emanating from the wicked agent referred to, and apprise men of their reality and power, and urge them to a decisive resistance.

The wicked agent who stands at the head of the bad influences is called in the text “the god of this world.” We hesitate at first in applying a phrase of so broad and exalted meaning to any other than the supreme Ruler, the rightful Lord of this and all worlds. But we find the Saviour, alluding to the same agent, saying, “The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me.” He is called “god of this world,” and “prince of this world,” on account of the sway which he exercises over the greater part of it, and on account of the service, the obedience, and homage which are generally paid to him rather than to Jehovah. Sometimes the agent in question is called “the adversary,” as arrayed against all divine and human interests. The name “Satan,” which he more commonly bears in the Bible, signifies an adversary, an enemy, an accuser. In one passage, (Rev. 20 : 2,) there are four terms by which he is designated : “dragon ;” “old serpent ;” “devil ;” and “Satan.” “He laid hold on the dragon, that old

SERMON CXC VIII.

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**THE CAUSES OF SUPERFICIAL AND TRANSIENT  
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.**

*“They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.”—Luke, 8 : 13.*

The parable, from the exposition of which this passage is quoted, is designed to illustrate the various reception and effects of the preached word among men. This is set forth in a description of the various sorts of hearers and hearing with which it would meet. For the more vivid illustration of the subject, he compares the word preached to seed; and the different classes of hearers are represented by the different kinds of soil in which it lodges. Some of this seed, our Saviour teaches, fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up it withered away, because it lacked moisture. In the text, he expounds this passage so that none may mistake his meaning. They who are on a rock are they, who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. The passage then teaches,

**I. THAT THERE IS A CLASS OF HEARERS, WHO, FOR A SEASON, ARE GREATLY CHARMED WITH THE THINGS OF RELIGION, WHILE THEY HAVE NO ABIDING ROOT OF FAITH, OR TRUE RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE IN THEIR SOULS.**

**II. THAT SUCH RELIGIONISTS OFTEN EVINCE THEIR UNSOUNDNESS, BY SWERVING FROM CHRISTIAN PURITY AND FIDELITY, OR BY UTTER APOSTACY, WHEN URGED BY SEVERE TEMPTATIONS.**

These propositions scarcely need confirmation. For, were they not affirmed in the unerring oracles of God, they would be manifest beyond all dispute to any intelligent observer. The

history of preaching, from the days of Christ until now, is a living exemplification, an eternal monument of their truth. There ever have been, and are, those in greater or less numbers, who hear the word anon with joy; who perhaps for the time soar above all others in the impassioned zeal and high-toned professions with which they appear to embrace religion; whose ardor not only faints, but expires, as soon as it ceases to be fanned by the breath of extraneous excitement which first gave it being; or, at all events, as soon as they are brought into a position in which religion involves any self-denial. As our Saviour elsewhere expresses it, when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by-and-by he is offended. This declension of multitudes, who did run well for a time, into listless indifference, or utter apostacy, has occurred with greater or less frequency in all ages, thus wounding the hearts of the pious, and the cause of Christ in the house of his friends. This being so, it behoves us to consider this phenomenon in its causes, and, if possible, seek some remedy or alleviation.

It is necessary, however, to guard against the inference which inconsiderate minds may be in danger of deriving from this passage, viz. that it militates against the doctrine of the saint's perseverance, inasmuch as it may be supposed to imply the loss of a faith and love which once existed, and a consequent falling from grace. But, let it be remembered that these persons withered away because they had no root in them; for it fell on a rock, and therefore could not root itself down into the depths of the soul. From which it appears that the heart in which this rapid and short-lived growth of seeming piety had appeared, had ever been a heart of stone, unchanged to an heart of flesh: also, that however such converts may have had appearances of faith and love in their own view, and the view of others, yet they had no living and abiding root or principle thereof in their souls. The text, therefore, instead of teaching their fall from grace, teaches by implication the direct contrary; for it teaches that the cause of their lapse is, that they never had the true root of grace in their souls, but only a plausible show of it; thus manifestly implying that a principle of true grace would have prevented such a catastrophe; that as it is a dog, and not a lamb

that returns to his vomit, so it is the sinner still unrenewed, and not the saint that returns with a sharpened appetite to his lusts.

With these preliminary explanations I will now proceed to inquire into some of the causes which contribute to make and multiply stony-ground hearers, instead of those good and honest hearts which hear the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

1. The depravity of the human heart is unquestionably the first and pregnant source of this superficial and illusive hearing of the word. This too arms all other influences with their power. The Bible attaches to the heart but two attributes, viz. that it is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. These two properties are causes adequate to the production of all the results in question. For that the heart in this case retains its wickedness unslain, is supposed. For the dominion of sin, and lack of renewing grace, is the reason given for their apostacy. Sin seeks to cherish, strengthen, and perpetuate its own existence. It strives to fortify itself by every device. If then the sinner who believes it will procure eternal torments for him, unless he repents and believes, can be persuaded that he does indeed exercise love towards God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ; while sin and lust are still unmortified, and reigning in his soul—however their outbreakings may be temporarily checked—this pacifies his conscience, and smothers all alarms, while it spares his sin, and extinguishes all desires and endeavors to eradicate it. We see, then, in the wicked heart ample disposition, stimulated by the most stirring motives and impulses to hear the Gospel superficially, and lay the flattering unction to the soul that it has complied with the Gospel, while it has never laid down the weapons of its rebellion against God. If the disposition arises from the desperate wickedness, the means of indulging it are found in the deceitfulness of the heart.

It is capable of assuming such specious disguises, that the prophet well inquires, Who can know it? Who can understand his errors? says the Psalmist. As it is an ingredient of the heart's wickedness that it masks and conceals itself, so it has ensnared multitudes of dying immortals to think they are something when they are nothing. While the heart cherishes sin as a sweet morsel, why should it not task all its craft, all its powers of self-

flattery, in devices to persuade itself of peace and safety, although treading on the extreme verge of the pit? Surely it is far more agreeable and soothing to believe that our affections, principles, and actions are conformed to the will and word of God; and, in the strength of that conviction, to be fascinated with hearing the word, than to hear it thrusting its reproofs and warnings as arrows and goads into the soul, and serving no other purpose than to torment it with a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation. But while this is the original and efficient cause of all superficial and spurious religious experience, there are various instrumental causes which greatly augment and aggravate its influences; some of which will now be specified. And,

2. A want of a thorough religious education often contributes to this superficial and transient kind of religious experience. While the Spirit of God is the efficient author of regeneration, yet he operates by the instrumentality of the Word. For of his own will begat he us by the word of truth. The fruit of his saving work in the soul is, that he produces a harmony between our hearts and the announcements of his word. The consequence is, that in proportion as the doctrines and precepts of the Bible are well understood and impressed upon the mind, the prospect increases that its religious experience, if any it has, will be pure, deep, and abiding; and not only so, but the subject of them being versed in the unerring and eternal standard of true piety—the doctrines and precepts of the Gospel—is enabled in some degree to compare his own state, feelings, and exercises with this only standard; and thus detect any unsound leaven, and learn whether his joy in hearing the word is genuine or counterfeit. Now mankind are by nature so depraved, sluggish, and stupid in divine things, that they rarely have any true and well-defined ideas of evangelical religion, except as it is impressed upon them by varied, reiterated, and never-ceasing instruction. And when it is thus iterated line upon line, and precept upon precept, it is surprising what indefinite and erroneous notions of religion often lurk in the mind. The most clear and impressive preachers are often painfully disappointed to witness what ignorance and misapprehension many who have heard them all their days betray on those fundamental points which

they have labored with the greatest care and frequency. The most distinct and abiding conceptions of religion which are obtained without the teaching of the Holy Ghost, are obtained in the nursery, before the family altar, under the ministry of pious parents; instilling with untiring assiduity the great truths of the Gospel into the minds of their offspring, while yet tender and susceptible; bringing them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and ever fortifying precept by example. They who have enjoyed, in addition to formal instruction, the example of pious parents carrying the principles of religion in all their power and beauty into acts, and shedding its benign influence over every action and attitude of existence, every sphere of life and love; they on whom this example has shone from earliest infancy, so that it is interwoven with the first and most imperishable associations and teachings of lisping childhood—these have a solid conception, a living image of the nature of religion ever present to their minds, such as men, books, and preaching of themselves never can convey.

“ But in thy life thy law appears,  
 “ Drawn out in living characters.”

Universal experience proves that an individual, or community, well-educated and indoctrinated in religion, is far more likely than an ignorant one, not only to make solid and durable advances in piety when wrought upon by a religious awakening, but also to discriminate true religion from false, and guard against those counterfeit hopes which end in the confirmed apathy or apostacy of their subject, and the dishonor of religion.

3. The same result is promoted by superficial and delusive instructions to those who are awakened and solicitous for their souls. In this matter we may say with pre-eminent justice, like priest, like people. Whoever, in Divine Providence, is called to the work of counselling and guiding inquiring souls in the way of life, is burdened with the most awful responsibility ever laid upon a worm of the dust. And here the temptation is most urgent to keep back what is most profitable to the soul to know, and shun to declare the whole counsel of God. The benevolence of the pious heart prompts it to hope and desire that as many as possible may be plucked as brands from the

burning; and the desire grows intense, in proportion to the natural ties and endearments subsisting in the case. How natural, then, to seek the gratification of such desires, by taking any plausible measures to induce them to hope, and be pleased with the things of religion, and thus assure their own hearts and ours that they have indeed passed from death unto life? How natural to array religion in meretricious attractions, for a carnal and selfish spirit; instead of showing its divine beauties, that they may know whether they love or hate them, and holding out in bold relief those scriptural tests, which show what manner of spirit we are of, and try the spirits, whether they be of God! How strongly will they incline to construe any change from distress to joy as a true conversion, and to estimate its genuineness rather by the degree of ecstasy produced, than by its conformity to the word of God! How many motives will urge him to keep out of view the self-denial, humiliation, cross-bearing, separateness from the world—the free and complete dedication to the will, command, service, and glory of God, which enter into the very nature and being of Gospel piety? May not the temptation be powerful to touch gently upon the indispensable necessity of a new birth by the Spirit of God, which shall not merely amend, correct, or develope old principles, but shall implant new ones—laying the axe at the root of the tree, and making him a new creature in Christ Jesus? May there not be a reluctance to expose the corruptions of the heart, the guilt and wickedness of innate moral affections, and the indispensable necessity of subjugating and mortifying them? May there not be a faintness in preaching the law, so as to convince the sinner of his guilt, condemnation, and helplessness,—slay his selfish hopes, demolish all excuses, evince his dependence on the unmerited and sovereign grace of God, and test his hope by showing in uncompromising terms the nature of that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord? May there not be a neglect to show the insufficiency of all affections which spring from no higher source than self-love, and do not fix on the intrinsic excellence and beauty of divine things? But why pursue such questions any further? Who does not see that nothing short of the most imperious convictions of duty to God and Christ, and perishing souls, can with-

stand the temptations to touch these subjects lightly, and refrain from marring the peace of any who are confident they are in the kingdom, while they are yet aliens and strangers to it? And what is this but to infuse peace by administering an opiate, instead of the medicines which, though painful to the carnal mind, alone can cure the disease! Alas for those who daub with intemperate mortar, and heal slightly the hurt of the soul, crying peace, peace, when there is no peace. Too often, indeed, the great Physician is summoned before the sword of the Spirit has made any wound, or discovered any hurt to be cured. Conviction of sin is discarded as needless or unimportant; and the remedy is as light as the disease. For how shall they repent who are unconvinced of any sin to be repented of? Clearly delusive as are such views, the purest and soundest ministers and christians are tempted in some measure to defer to them, unless they exercise the utmost care to keep the fear of God and the good of souls ever before their eyes. Unless they take heed to themselves, and the doctrine that in so doing they may save their own souls, and the souls of those that hear them, they will almost inevitably yield to that demand of the unsanctified heart to speak smooth things, and prophecy deceits. And what less can be expected than that the seed should fall on stony ground, and barely reach the surface of the soul, when the sower does not even seek to dislodge the heart of stone beneath? How can the seed root itself downward, when not even the fallow ground is broken by the ploughshare of Divine truth to give it entrance?

4. All extraneous influences other than Divine truth, presented to the mind, and applied by the Spirit, which are the cause of an interest in religion, tend, unless guarded against, to render that interest spurious. I refer now to sympathy, animal excitement, admiration of the eloquence and tact of the preacher, rather than the truths he enforces—addressing to sinners any considerations but those of a moral nature and bearing upon the soul, God, and eternity;—moving him by any force or influence but the truths of the Bible. For to these we must be conformed, if converted at all. And conversion, in view of any thing else, is not turning to God. All other influences are worse than vain, except as they serve to bring the mind in nearer contact, and

under the fuller power and effulgence of Gospel truth. But when they intercept the soul's view of truth, they are fraught with danger; and it is ever our duty to frustrate any such tendency with the most vigilant precautions. It is not in the fire, tempest, and whirlwind of human commotion, or human machinery, that the Spirit speaks in his errand of Divine benignity, but in the still small voice, summoning the soul to obey the message of his word.

But, without expatiating further on this branch of the subject, I dismiss it by observing that we see abundant agencies which the great adversary of souls can employ to multiply converts of that superficial stamp, that will never endure a trial of their faith by temptation, because they have never endured the searching trials of God's word.

The grand defect in their experience, as the event ever proves, is, that their affections had no higher origin than selfishness. Their delight in religion arose simply from the imagination that they should be saved, instead of their hoping that they were in Christ, and heirs of his salvation; because they delighted in divine things on account of their intrinsic excellence and loveliness. Hence, because they had no pleasure in holiness and holy objects on their own account, their attachment ceases as soon as it costs any self-denial to adhere to them, and their selfishness can find some more inviting channel of gratification. Because they have no root in them in time of temptation, they fall away. When tribulation or persecution ariseth they are offended, because of the word.

#### INFERENCES.

1. The subject teaches us that mere joy and delight on the subject of religion is no sufficient proof of a genuine conversion. The same principle which moves devils to tremble in view of their doom, would fill them with ecstasies if assured that they would be shielded from that destiny. Indeed, spurious conversions are perhaps most likely of all to incite frantic and boisterous rejoicings. So it is made the distinguishing characteristic of these stony-ground hearers, that with joy they heard the word. Indeed, the joy of a selfish and unhumiliated spirit will naturally be more tumultuous and forward than that which is ravished with the infinite majesty, purity, justice,

and grace of God. The latter is humble, placid, deep, and tranquil; and though often clouded and trembling, is still unspeakable and full of glory. And hence the religious meetings of those whose whole policy it is to inspire selfish and sudden hopes, are distinguished for their tumult and disorder.

We must not only ask whether there is joy, but what kind of joy it is. Is it humble?—self-distrustful? Is it a delight in God and Christ, the law and Gospel; and in a life devoted to the culture of holiness? or is it inspired merely by a vain imagination that we shall be saved?

2. How solemn and overwhelming is the responsibility of all who are stationed to watch for souls, as those that must give account, or who in Divine Providence are called in any manner to guide them in the way of salvation! When we reflect that the ministry is a savor of life unto life, or of death, shall we not say, indeed, who is sufficient for these things? Would not an angel, unsustained by communications of Divine wisdom and grace, be crushed by the burthen? Oh! what will be the embittered reflections in another world, of those who hear the shrieks and moanings of lost spirits chiding them with having cried peace, peace, when there is no peace; and thus lulled by them down to the fiery and returnless abyss! On the other hand, there is danger of breaking the bruised reed, and quenching the smoking flax—of pushing on the wounded spirit to the madness and stupidity of desperation, instead of healing by the balm of that grace, which, where sin abounds, doth much more abound; and of thus becoming a minister of death, and not of life. A rude and vain novice, who is unskilful in the word of righteousness, will be liable to err on either hand, either to heal slightly the hurt, or to hurt only to administer poison and death, instead of healing. Oh! how much of that wisdom which cometh from above, and is profitable to direct, is needed by ministers, in order that they may rightly divide the word of truth, or that they may be sons of thunder to the perverse and presumptuous, and sons of consolation to all contrite spirits; and so by words fitly spoken, feed souls with the bread of life? To this end, how greatly do they need the prayers of their people; and how awful the position of crude novices, who, ignorant of Divine truth, are set as shepherds over the flock of God; but know

not whether they are leading them to the green pastures of Divine truth, or the poisoned herbs of error and delusion.

3. This subject sheds light upon the period at which recent converts ought to make a visible profession of religion. The practice has been, and if I mistake not, still is widely prevalent, of gathering in all the subjects of an all-pervading religious excitement, as soon as they express a hope of their faith and obedience; nay, of urging and persuading them to this course as soon as the needful arrangements can be made. Now, all experience proves this course to be perilous. Under preaching the most sound, thorough and searching, every genuine and extensive revival will affect and startle more or less, and work in them a superficial and temporary change, who will speedily make it manifest that they have no root in them, and are not radically changed according to a beautiful comparison of Edwards, during the blossom and fragrance of a revival. There will be many fair blows that will bring forth no fruit to perfection, or, at best, none but bad fruit. In a short season the true character of such will develope and unfold itself. They will show that they have no relish for true religion. On how much larger scale will this occur, if artificial stimulants of the animal passions, and a superficial style of preaching are employed? Does not every dictate of prudence and benevolence bid us wait a brief season, that we and they may see whether there is ground of a comfortable persuasion that they are new creatures, or whether they are answering their consciences with insincere vows? Even after the utmost precaution, tares will be mixed with the wheat. But without this precaution, tares will so prevail, that we shall, at best, only be able to say the wheat is scattered sparingly among the tares. Is it said that the apostles received their converts at the moment of conversion in the days of Pentecost? I answer, the persecution which tests stony ground hearers was experienced in all its rigors on the spot. And when *we* have the supernatural gifts for searching the heart which were vouchsafed to the apostles, such reasonings may be more timely. But until then, our only basis of judging ourselves and others is this: by their fruits ye shall know them—and there must be reasonable opportunity to observe those fruits. It has been said that the remedy for premature admissions to the church is discipline. I answer; the piety of the churches now will scarcely sustain a wholesome

and effective discipline; and under the state of things contemplated, all discipline would be utterly prostrated. Besides, it is a cruel idea to construct our proceedings on the very design of bringing persons needlessly under pains of ecclesiastical censure. It is a mistaken idea, that entrance to the church is a completing and confirming part of a regeneration, otherwise defective and uncertain. The new creation exists as it does. If it does, it will be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. Union to the church, and enjoying its ordinances, is a divinely appointed means of sanctification; not of conversion: which latter notion is the error of the half-way covenant system, long since exploded. On the other hand, there is danger of a contrary extreme. Many delay a profession of religion beyond all reasonable limits, while they hope they are new creatures; they are ever waiting for more light and evidence; and in consequence of the neglect of so momentous a duty and privilege, clouds and darkness thicken around them, until they lose all evidences and all sensible delight in religion. No person of mature years ought long to indulge a hope which does not lead him to confess Christ before men, unless prevented by obstacles beyond his control. But in regard to the period which should intervene between hopeful conversion and union to the visible church, no uniform and unvarying rule can be laid down. It depends on a thousand circumstances, such as age, understanding, knowledge, capacity to discern the Lord's body, the clearness of evidence to themselves and others, all which must be weighed in all good conscience, with an unfeigned desire to do the will of God.

Lastly. There is reason to fear that every congregation comprises some stony-ground hearers, both among and out of its list of church members. Are there none such here? Would to God there were none. If there are, who does not say, Lord, is it I? is it I? And are not all urged by the danger of self-deception, to examine themselves, whether they indeed be in the faith? And if such an examination should prove that I might of a truth say, thou art the man, would it not be worth ten thousand worlds?

And what shall be said of those who are not even so much as stony-ground hearers? Who have no appearance or pretence of faith, either in their own or others' view? Who confessedly do not allow the word to reach and penetrate even the surface of the soul? If these things be in the green tree, what shall be in the dry?