

W. C. Dana

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THE SENSE OF HONOR:

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

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BY REV. W. C. DANA.

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DISCOURSE.

2 KINGS, XXIII: 10.

“And he defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech.”

SOUTH of Jerusalem, directly under the southern brow of Mount Zion, there lies a deep valley, called from the earliest times the “Valley of the son of Hinnom.” It took its name, doubtless, from one of its original proprietors. It is sometimes called the “Valley of the children of Hinnom,” and sometimes simply “Hinnom,” or the “Valley of Hinnom.”

It was originally a beautiful valley, well-watered, fertile, and shaded with groves of trees. Its name was then suggestive only of pleasant associations. But, like other places which God made beautiful, and which man's wickedness has desecrated, this valley, in the progress of human history, came to be associated with whatever was most loathsome, abhorred and vile; till at length its very name, “*Valley of Hinnom*,” (in Greek, “*Gehenna*,”) stood as the type and emblem of future misery and woe. When our Saviour spoke of those who should be “in danger of hell-fire,” the expression he used was, literally rendered, “the *Gehenna*

of fire." The simple name, "Valley of Hinnom," "Gehenna," had come to be the very word to designate the place of future misery—so associated was it with scenes of horror and of woe.

What was it that had so transformed this once beautiful valley, as to make what originally seemed almost a paradise, now only a fit type and representative of hell?

Its history was this: In early times it had been selected as a place of idolatrous worship. The special object of this worship was Moloch, the god of the Ammonites, a people descended from Lot, who were among the earlier possessors of part of the land of Canaan. The name of this idol appears in the Old Testament as *Molech*, taken directly from the Hebrew; in the New Testament, transferred from the Greek, it is *Moloch*, the name most familiar to English ears. The name in Hebrew means *king*. Moloch was perhaps the king of the Ammonites, before he became their god. He was probably, in his time, a great conqueror, that is, a great murderer; he was, therefore, a great object of admiration to his barbarous subjects, and when he died, they worshipped him as a god. And their mode of worshipping him was perfectly in keeping with *his* character and with *theirs*. They set up in the valley of Hinnom a huge image of brass, of which the trunk and arms were hollow. At the celebration of his rites, fire was applied within till the image was thoroughly heated; then they brought

their children, and offered them in horrid sacrifice to the idol, by laying them on the arms, or thrusting them into the embrace of the heated image. To drown their cries, drums were beaten; and hence, probably, the place came to be called *Tophet*, from the Hebrew word *toph*, which means a drum.

From the expression, frequent in the Old Testament, "to pass through the fire to Moloch," it would seem that the idol could only be approached through fire; perhaps by a hazardous process of passing over burning coals, not unlike what an American missionary to China testifies that he himself once saw at the worship of an idol in that country. A comparison of the different passages in the Old Testament in which the worship of Moloch is alluded to, favors the supposition that the offering of children to the idol involved not the absolute certainty of their death. But that this result did follow very frequently, if not generally, seems clear from various allusions to it in the Scriptures. It is charged against the children of Israel in the 106th Psalm, that "they *sacrificed* their sons and their daughters unto devils (demons), and *shed innocent blood*, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan." Isaiah says (chap. lvii. 5), "Inflaming yourselves with idols under every green tree, *slaying* the children in the vallies under the clefts of the rocks." The prophet Ezekiel also repeatedly charges his countrymen with causing their children to "pass through the fire,"

and with "sacrificing them to be *devoured*." These passages sufficiently prove the murderous character of this homage to Moloch.

It is not difficult to conceive that, in those ancient days of barbarism and blood, a brutal Ammonite, ignorant of the true God, and of man's true glory as consisting in likeness to God, might find some charm, some affinity with his natural tastes, in this barbarous worship of a deified murderer. He but worshipped in Moloch the qualities which he honored in himself. The sacrifice of human life was moreover an appropriate homage to one who had been a great destroyer of human life; and it may have seemed a badge of dignity, a *brave* and *chivalrous* thing, in honor of Moloch, to run the risk of being burned. But what fascination these cruel rites of idolatrous worship could have for an Israelite, acquainted with the true God, familiar with laws distinguished by the value which they set on human life, subjected to so much of moral and religious culture as was involved in the institutions of Moses—what there was to be said in favor of *his* joining in these barbarous rites to a fictitious deity, is not so easily imagined.

There must have been, however, a wonderful *prestige* about this passing through the fire to Moloch. It stood its ground boldly among the Hebrew people, from one generation to another, against the express interdiction of Heaven. The law of God said (Levit. xviii. 21): "Thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass

through the fire to Molech ; and again (Levit. xx. 2) :
 “ Whosoever giveth any of his seed unto Molech, shall surely be put to death.”

Yet even in the wilderness, in the midst of a people the sole depositary of a Divine revelation, and guided miraculously by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, there were those who carried with them the tabernacle or sacred tent of Moloch. “ Ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch,” says the prophet. Even Solomon, who, in the days of his wisdom, had built that most magnificent temple to the true God, in the days of his fatuity was persuaded to build “ a high place for Molech, the abomination of the children of Hinnom.” More than one of the wicked kings that succeeded him, is specially mentioned as having made his son to pass through the fire to Moloch. Thus, century after century, did this grim and grisly idol keep his state “ fast by the oracle of God.”

When, at length, better times, times of reformation, came, Moloch was discrowned and undeified; his cruel rites were abolished; and, to sweep away all vestige of them, and, if possible, prevent their recurrence, the spot which they had so long polluted, was given up to loathsomeness and abhorrence. The valley of Hinnom, especially that part of it called Tophet, became the receptacle of the filth and refuse of the city; fires were kept burning day and night, to consume the carcases that were thrown out there; the loathsome corruption and the lurid flames, the ever-gnawing

worm and ever-burning fire, marking a site so long associated with torture and with death, at length made the place so abhorred that the name *Gehenna*—valley of Hinnom—came to be the synonym for hell.

It is recorded to the honor of king Josiah that he inaugurated this new era. He dishonored the idol and desecrated the place of his worship. “He defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Moloch.”

That these barbarous rites of the ancient Moloch, outraging, as they did, the laws of God and the tenderest affections of humanity, could have subsisted for so many ages, in the very suburbs of the holy city, might seem incredible, were there no parallel to it in modern times. But is there not now, in the very heart of civilization and refinement, under the shadow of the choicest institutions of Christianity, a *modern Moloch*, worshipped as a god, and, by rites as barbarous and bloody as any that characterized the ancient idolatry? For what higher homage can man pay to the true Divinity than is exacted by this false one, namely, absolute obedience to his decrees, even to the sacrifice of life?

This false deity claims supreme dominion over his votaries; unhesitating submission is the very badge of discipleship; in competition with his laws, all the ties of nature, all the endearments of affection, all rational motive, all sense of duty to God and man, must be

cast aside as absolutely worthless. His laws, too, are all written in blood; the prescribed sacrifice upon his altar is human life; the noblest worship at his shrine, the culminating glory that invests his worshipper, is the "satisfaction" of killing or being killed.

This modern Moloch assumes the name of *Honor*. This law is termed the code of *Honor*. The celebration of the rites of his worship, the offering of sacrifices upon his altar, are termed "affairs of Honor." Never could there be a stronger illustration of the immorality of names—of names that gloss over the moral depravity of the things for which they stand. It is a crime against society to baptize bloody revenge by the sacred name of *Honor*.

What is this Honor, which boldly sets its oracles above and against the oracles of God? The law of God says, "Thou shalt not kill;" the law of Honor (so called) says, "Thou shalt kill." Is this an oracle of true honor, or is the name falsely assumed?

There are those, perhaps, who, in view of the perverted sentiments which obtain in the world as to what is *honorable*, would ignore the sense of honor as a worthy motive to action. The existence of honor as a principle or motive of action in the human breast, distinct from morality, they would scarcely be disposed to recognise. Yet that there is such a principle seems to me certain. The sense of *honor* is not precisely the same as the sense of *duty*. Both may point to the same conclusion—may indicate the same course,

and impel the soul in the same direction ; and yet exist as distinct principles in the mind. Instead of lessening the value, impairing the dignity, limiting the sphere of honor, as a principle of action, what the moralist has to do is to guard the sentiment of honor from perversion. The requirements of honor may be mistaken ; so may the requirements of duty. Saul of Tarsus “ verily thought ” that he “ *ought* ” to labor to extirpate Christianity. His sense of duty was perverted. It needed rectification by comparison with the true standard. So the sentiment of honor may be perverted ; it may need to be adjusted to the true idea of honor. But this is a very different thing from ignoring or undervaluing honor as a motive to action. To test the question whether there be such a principle in our nature as honor, or the sense of honor, distinct from other principles that incite to action and form character, let each one ask himself whether the sense of duty and the sense of honor are, or are not, distinct perceptions in his mind. Does the term, duty, suggest the same idea that is suggested by the term, honor ? If not, what is the precise difference between them ?

There are several distinct motives or principles of action, that can be very easily discriminated. Self-interest, duty, honor, affection, may be specified as distinct motives to human action. All may harmoniously impel the man to one specific course ; nevertheless, as principles or motives in his bosom, they are distinct. Some of these it is very easy to distinguish

from others. To be actuated by self-interest is one thing ; to be actuated by the sense of duty, is another and a very distinct thing. Again, affection, love to God or man, drawing us to a certain course, is distinguishable from the sense of duty, even when that impels to precisely the same course. Now, is there any distinction between *honor* and *duty* as principles of action ?

This question must be referred to our consciousness. We speak of conduct as *honorable* ; we also speak of it as *right*. Do these different terms refer to distinct perceptions in the mind ?

When we say of a certain course of action that we feel bound in *conscience* and in *honor* to adhere to it, do these two words stand for one and the same thing, or do they correspond to, and indicate, two distinct perceptions and impulses ? And if so, wherein consists the difference between them ?

These questions do not pertain to a matter of merely curious speculation. The solution of them bears directly upon the important inquiry, whether honor can ever counsel a different course of conduct from that which is dictated by duty.

What is honor, as a motive or principle of action ?

I would say, it is the sense of *the beautiful and the becoming* in human character. It is the perception of the inherent dignity and glory of certain moral characteristics as the ornament and crown of our nature. The *man of honor* is he in whom this sense is so acute,

this perception so refined and exquisite, that it stands to him in the place of law, as a guide and prompter to noble and worthy conduct. Law is not made for him; he needs not its stern compulsion—for he has within him a finer instinct, which makes him a law to himself. Hence honor has been styled, “the law of kings.” There is an inherent royalty in being a law to one’s self—in needing no constraint other than that of high principle, voluntarily enthroned within the soul.

The sense of *duty* is the perception of what we *ought* to be and to do; the sense of *honor* is the perception of the beautiful and sublime, the worthy and becoming, in character and conduct. *Duty* refers to the *obligation* to rectitude; *honor* to the *dignity* and *nobleness* of rectitude.

In looking at a piece of mechanism, our perception of the skilful adaptation of the parts is one thing; our sensibility to the beauty of that fitness is a different thing. So our perception of what it is right for us to do, is one thing; our sensibility to the beauty, the becomingness, the glory, of that rectitude, is a different thing. The same mechanism addresses itself to two distinct, though nearly allied perceptions, the sense of adaptation and the sense of the beauty of the adaptation. So the same moral rectitude—for nothing else than rectitude can be deemed the *beau ideal* of humanity—appeals to two distinct though closely allied perceptions in the human bosom—the sense of

duty appreciating the *obligation* to rectitude, and the sense of *honor* responding to the *dignity* and *glory* of rectitude.

These two perceptions will always be harmonious, will always run in the same line, although in different individuals they may exist in different relative proportions.

If this view be correct, the sentiment of *honor* is, and was designed by our Creator to be, a *noble auxiliary to virtue*. What virtue teaches us to *shun*, *honor* prompts us to *scorn*. What *conscience* denounces as *wrong*, *honor* disdains as *unworthy*—unworthy of the nature which God gave. What *conscience* dictates as our duty, the sense of honor prizes as our glory. To lose our personal hold upon it, would be felt to be a terrible laceration.

Honor has been well styled the “poetry of morals.” To the sense of duty, marking what is right, the Creator has superadded this fine sensibility to the attractive charm, the ennobling dignity, of moral rectitude.

The sentiment of honor gives nerve to virtue. It is an added stimulus and incentive to worthy conduct. It brings its quick perception, its acute sensitiveness, in aid of moral obligation. If virtue be the nourishment of the soul, honor is the zest and flavor of that nourishment.

What, then, can be more absurd than to place one of these principles in antagonism to the other? Both stand related to the same moral rectitude: one recog-

nizing the obligation to conform to it, the other discerning the inherent nobleness of such conformity.

Nothing, then, can be honorable that is not morally right.

But the sense of honor is liable to great perversion. Our Saviour spoke of "the honor that cometh from God," in contrast with that which cometh from men. He thus recognized a Divine standard of honor, in opposition to the perverted sentiments of men. Again he said, and no utterance of his lips bears more directly upon the subject before us, "That which is highly esteemed among men, is abomination in the sight of God."

If thy moral perceptions be perverted, if that in thee which was formed to pay homage to excellence, go astray from the true excellence, "if the light which is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"

To enthrone in our bosoms, as our highest principle of action, a notion of *honor* that openly and boldly militates against eternal rectitude, is to exchange the true Divinity for a false one; it is to renounce the Supreme Excellence, and pay homage to a deformed and hideous idol of our own creation; it is to put Moloch in the place of God.

To learn what is truly honorable, shall we go to the imbruted savage, or to cultivated, civilized, Christianized man? The one may honor strength, cunning, cruelty; the other pays homage to moral worth. Integrity, magnanimity, generosity, unselfishness, truth-

fulness, boldness in maintaining right—these and kindred qualities attract his admiration, as the ornament and glory of human nature. How opposite are these to petulant vanity and barbarous revenge!

The principle of honor is thus recognized in the oracles of God. “Whatsoever things are true, venerable, just, pure, lovely, of good report—if there be any virtue, and if there be any *praise*, think on these things.”

Christianity covers the whole ground of honor as well as of morals and religion. It shows it honorable to forgive; it also warrants us to “withdraw” from those whose “evil communications corrupt good manners.” It guards the sense of honor within us from degenerating into pride, by the severe purity of the standard which it sets before us, by assuring us that every good influence upon the soul is from above, and by presenting, not our own glory, but the glory of our Father in Heaven, as the pure, ennobling motive of all our aspirations and efforts for moral elevation.

No act which, claiming applause, yet tends solely to the accomplishment of personal ends, has in it anything specially chivalrous or ennobling. Of those great deeds, the recital of which thrills the soul and stirs the blood, self-sacrifice is an essential element. Roman virtue could perceive how sweet and honorable a thing it is to die for one’s country :

“How sleep the brave that sink to rest,
By all their country’s wishes blest!”
“There Honor comes, a pilgrim gray,
To bless the turf that wraps their clay.”

But who can pay the homage of the heart's admiration to any act which can easily be traced to an over-valuing of self? What is there ennobling in that exaggerated sense of one's own dignity, which seeks bloody revenge for a personal affront? Not the mere exposure of life—which may be easier to the imbruted than to the cultivated—not the mere exposure of life, but the readiness to sacrifice life, if need be, in a great and holy cause, is true glory. The love of country, the love of truth—these crown with unfading honors the hero and the martyr.

It is of the very essence of honor to test human conduct by the most elevated and refined moral standard, to acknowledge an inward constraint more comprehensive and more stringent than the coercion of human law, and to consider that course impossible which is felt to be *unworthy*.

“Let all the ends thou aim'st at—be thy country's,
Thy God's, and truth's: then if thou fall'st,
Thou fall'st a blessed martyr.”

A beautiful illustration of honor, is given by Montesquieu in his “Spirit of Laws.”

“After the massacre of St. Bartholomew, Charles IX. having sent orders to the governors of the several provinces for the Huguenots to be murdered, Viscount Dorte, who commanded at Bayonne, wrote thus to the King: ‘Sire, among the inhabitants of this town and your majesty's troops, I cannot find so much as one executioner. They are honest citizens and brave soldiers. We jointly, therefore, beseech your majesty to

command our arms and lives in things that are practicable.' His great and generous soul looked upon a base action as a thing impossible."

The voice of true honor in the human bosom is the voice of God. It is better to sacrifice life than honor. It is better to die, than to save life by the renunciation of those principles which give to character its dignity and worth. They acted on the purest principles of honor who, in the heroic age of Christianity, willingly, joyfully accepted martyrdom, choosing to "obey God rather than men." Theirs was an elevation of spirit, which made them superior to insult and scorn, as well as to torture and death; *their own consciousness sufficed them against the opinions of the whole world*; they "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name," whom they knew to be the incarnation of heavenly truth and love. "In their greatness of soul, they looked down with only pity on those whose moral degradation—whose want of sympathy with the good and the true—made them scoffers and murderers.

In proportion to our estimate of the nobleness of honor, as a principle of action, should be our hatred and detestation of whatever falsely assumes its name and fraudulently usurps its place. If we understand what constitutes the glory of human nature—if we know the true God, and can appreciate that pure offering and sweet incense of moral rectitude that rises to heaven as his accepted worship—then let our utmost abhorrence be concentrated upon the idol, that, taking

to itself the sacred name of Honor, demands of its devotees a worship as impious and profane, as irrational and senseless, as barbarous and bloody, as were the idolatrous rites of the ancient Moloch.

What bolder impiety can there be than that which, defying the law of God, dishonoring the precepts and the character of Christ—in revenge, perhaps, for a hasty word, which may be regretted, which might be forgiven—incur the awful hazard of rushing uncalled into the presence of the Supreme Judge, and of staining the soul with a brother's blood! “O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine *honor*, be not thou united!”

Even if private revenge were consistent with the law of God and the welfare of society, still what but infatuation could make any man count that *reparation*, *redress*, “*satisfaction*,” for injuries received, which proposes to the injured and the injurer an equal chance of wounds and death? Not more senseless would it be for both together to “pass through the fire to Moloch,” and see which would be most burned.

It is no idle fancy that traces a resemblance between the ancient and the modern idolatry. Place them side by side, and mark how much they have in common. Each openly defies the law of God. Each claims of its devotee supreme homage, unquestioning submission. The highest honor paid to each is the sacrifice of human life. Wide-spread misery, the rupture of the tenderest ties, the anguish of broken hearts, the earthly

paradise of love and joy turned into a scene of weeping and wailing—these are the common-place incidents of both forms of idol-worship. In each, too, the traditional idolatry is left a fatal legacy from one generation to another; the sin of the fathers is visited upon the children; the sin of society is visited upon individual victims. False notions of honor, early implanted and nurtured—baleful seeds sown in the quick receptive soil of childhood and youth—naturally, necessarily, yield a harvest of misery. The cruel tyranny of a false notion of honor drives many to a course of action, not stimulated by revenge, opposed to their own convictions of duty, and followed by bitter regret and life-long repentance.

If we would lay the axe to the root of that blasting tree, which poisons the atmosphere and withers all beneath its shade—if we would put into every honest hand a stone to hurl against that foul, grim-visaged idol which, delighting in human tears and blood, rears its horrid front in the midst of refined and Christian civilization—we must begin by rectifying the notion of honor, by adjusting it to the standard of eternal truth. Let society but attain to the true idea of honor, derived from those promptings in the human bosom which are from heaven, and not from hell; then will the idolatrous rites of the modern, as of the ancient Moloch, become as revolting and abhorred in the estimate of men, as they are an abomination in the sight of God.

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