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SERMON CCLXI.

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SUBMISSION TO CIVIL AUTHORITY.

1ST. PET. ii, 13 -17.—Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake; whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the King.

THE duty here inculcated is that of submission to civil authority. We shall notice,

I. The ground on which the scriptures rest the obligation to obedience.

II. Inquire to what extent obedience is required.

I. The ground on which the scriptures rest the obligation to obedience.

Why must I obey the laws of the land? "Because," say some, "in entering into society, you promised to yield to the conditions of that society." The people are supposed to have assembled; to have yielded, each, a portion of his natural rights; to have established some form of polity, under which the government assumed certain responsibilities, and the people promised, to a certain extent, obedience.

By others this theory has been rejected as inadequate and unsound. There never was such a compact. A fiction conveys no rights and imposes no obligation. If there had been such a compact, it might be just as difficult to tell why the individuals who made it were obliged to keep their engagements, as to answer the original question. Suppose a hundred men had stood

out against the compact, and reserved all their original rights; are they under no obligation to forbear such acts as by the laws of the newly-formed community are prohibited, as theft, robbery, arson and murder? Can we suppose that men coming together from a state of nature, with all their original rights, are competent to form a scheme of polity under which such acts shall be declared lawful and right? Has the community, in fine, a right to come together, and, (even if unanimous,) to dislodge all obligations, annul all law, and declare it right for every one to do whatever suits his pleasure? Is there no obligation, back of all this voluntary compact, which conscience acknowledges, which no mind can ever shake off, and from which no agreement among men can absolve the soul?

We need not have gone so far to show the absurdity of this theory of compact. When we inquire after the obligation to abide by the supposed compact, it is perceived at once that the obligation is shifted back to remoter ground.

The question remains: "Why am I obliged to yield obedience to the laws of the land?" "Because," answers another, "you will be punished if you do not." Am I, then, a brute, without reason, without honor, without conscience? If I can hope to rob or murder with impunity, may I as well do it as let it alone? If I can successfully evade or resist the penalty of the law, am I guiltless in disobeying it? Is there no right or wrong about it, save only the consideration of punishment? I am inquiring after that right to punish, and that obligation to obey, which makes the failure to obey *guilt*—such as should distress my conscience and cover me with shame. If a foreign tyrant overruns our country, plunders, devastates, butchers, lays our altars, firesides and laws in ruins, there comes no shame or remorse to the noble band who stand in the breach and jeopard their lives in defence of their homes and their country. Why not? If they are overcome and perish on the scaffold, they perish without shame and without remorse. Why so? It is not enough to bind conscience under an obligation of obedience, to show her that punishment will be the consequence of disobedience. She does not acknowledge the maxim that might gives right, and that weakness imposes obligation. Compulsion and obligation are different terms in her vocabulary.

On what, then, rests the obligation to civil authority? On the ground that it is the will of God. Here is authority to

which reason bows, and conscience submits. If that be a first principle which the soul feels instinctively; for which she requires no proof and no instruction, and which she cannot shake off if she would; then this is a first principle; to obey God is right; to disobey God is wrong; and that because he is God; and his will, the will of perfect wisdom and perfect goodness. Conscience so decides, and cannot decide otherwise.

That God wills the establishment and maintenance of civil authority, we might gather from the light of nature, and from the lessons of experience; but argument is unnecessary. God has declared it in his word. "The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." "Wherefore, ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man, for the Lord's sake; for so is the will of God, that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men."

The importance of the question concerning the obligation to obedience is this: Other grounds of obligation are fictitious and atheistic; they take no hold upon the conscience; they are created by a breath, and by a breath are they destroyed. They are no foundations on which to rest a nation's virtue and a nation's peace; they are utterly powerless in time of need. This binds the conscience. This takes hold upon the soul and its eternal destinies. You are bound, not simply because you have promised; whether you have promised or not, you are bound. You are under obligation, not simply because you will meet with civil pains and penalties if you disobey. God will punish you, if you shuffle yourself away from the vengeance of civil authority; and when you have suffered the penalty which human laws inflict, you have a still more dreadful account to answer at the bar of God.

You perceive, here, into what a dreadful error those fall who contrive to do the very thing which the laws prohibit, while they do it in such a way that, owing to the technicalities of law, they cannot be punished. They may keep out of the reach of the civil power, but they fall into the hands of the living God; and that under the double guilt of disobedience and fraud. Many a villain has rejoiced in the success of such an evasion of law, while, in evading the law, he has brought upon his soul

the damnation of hell. Of this nature are all those villainous contrivances for evading the laws concerning the sale of intoxicating drinks ; evasions to which, it should seem, none but the most abandoned of the vile could ever descend. Of this nature are those evasions of the laws concerning usury. Many seem to think that there is no guilt in doing these things ; and that they may do them, provided they are willing to risk the penalty. But if human laws sleep, the law of God does not. These gains are, like the gains of Judas, the wages of iniquity. If not the price of blood, they are the barter taken for integrity, for duty to the law, and for the salvation of the soul. This is what they gain who deal in arts of evasion and shuffling with law. It is no game of chance—win or lose ; no matter what the immediate issue, only try the game and you forfeit your soul.

But if evasions of law are so dangerous, what shall be said of the open and palpable disregard to law which is sometimes witnessed ? What shall be said of the wanton disregard of such laws as those made for the defence of suffering humanity, and for the protection of the virtue and the peace of the community—by prohibiting, save under certain regulations, the traffic in intoxicating drinks ? Magistrates, upon whose souls rests the oath of God, may be unfaithful to their trust ; jurors may trample on their oaths ; the community may wickedly endure the wrong ; but all together will be confronted with the widow and the fatherless at the bar of God ; and how think ye this unfaithfulness to the authority of law will fare at that tribunal ? If “ the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it,” against him that “ coveteth an evil covetousness ” to his house, by thriving on the gains of an unlawful and murderous traffic ; how will the voice of the betrayed law, and the voice of violated oaths, mingle with the cries of widows and orphans against the unfaithful magistrates who bear the sword in vain, and against the community that silently tolerate the wrong ? Will there be no account in the judgment for such things as these ?

Having shown the foundation upon which the scriptures rest the obligation of obedience, we inquire,

2. To what extent obedience is due. “ Without limit,” say some ; and back up their declaration by repeating the passages : “ submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s

sake : whose resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God." This doctrine goes against all resistance to arbitrary power ; against all non-conformity to civil or religious establishments ; it annihilates all constitutional rights, and gives the world over to hopeless despotism.

As our Puritan fathers resisted such claims, as our fathers of the Revolution rebelled against them, and as the people of these United States deem such sentiments subversive of all political and religious freedom, it becomes a matter of interest for us to inquire whether for all this we are liable to be condemned at the bar of God. Are we, and were all our fathers wrong on this fundamental principle ?

What is the design of these scriptures, which enjoin obedience to civil authority. Is it to enjoin submission in general, or do they speak especially of the extent of a submission whose obligation in general is not doubted? The questions are entirely distinct: Is submission a duty? Is unlimited submission a duty? If a child inquires, "Must I obey my father?" I answer, yes, and repeat the authority—"Children, obey your parents in all things." He goes away, and the next news I hear is, that his abandoned father has ordered him to commit murder, and he has obeyed. I talk with him, and try to show him the enormity of his guilt. He replies, "Sir, you taught me that it was my duty to obey my father, and I have but obeyed the word of God, which requires me to obey my father 'in all things.'" These are the words of scripture; they teach the duty of filial obedience; but they do not teach an unlimited obedience, to the destruction of the authority of the great moral law of God. It is altogether a perversion of these words of scripture to allege them in justification of the crime of murder. So in the present instance; if the design of the scripture is to teach the duty of obedience, it by no means follows, of course, that they teach unlimited obedience.

The passages to which we have referred are evidently treating of the duty of submission in general; they are not agitating the question of unlimited submission.

We have numerous approved examples to the contrary of such a doctrine. The rulers, elders and scribes, with the high-priest, once commanded the apostles not to speak at all, nor teach in the name of Jesus. The apostles took no exception to the authority of the tribunal, as not being the proper body to

take cognizance of proper matters ; they would have yielded to no authority. They simply answered : " Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." They disobeyed the mandate.

When Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to fall down and worship the golden image, they replied : " We are not careful to answer thee in this matter : Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou set up." God delivered them from the fiery furnace, and justified their disobedience.

Daniel chose to be cast into the lions' den, rather than yield obedience to a command that put it at his option either to give up his religion or lose his life. God justified his disobedience, and delivered him.

When Jeroboam set up priests " for the high places, and for the devils, and for the calves which he had made," most of the ten tribes submitted to his new institutions, and God punished them for yielding obedience, because they " left all the commandments of the Lord their God," in obeying this ordinance of man.

For disobedience to human laws, when human laws conflict with the laws of God, it is a sufficient justification to say, as Peter did when called to an account by the Jewish Sanhedrim, " We ought to obey God rather than man." The Bible is no instrument of tyranny. The firmest, boldest, most enlightened champions of freedom have been such as submitted their consciences to the word of God. But while the Bible is the best friend to liberty, it is also the best friend to law and the surest support of civil authority. A consistent Christian can never be a turbulent citizen. A Christian community will always be a community of order and law. If Christian missionaries follow the instructions and the examples of apostles, they will never encourage their converts to attempt a subversion of the government under which they live. If they go to the Sandwich Islands, to Persia, to Turkey, or Siam, they will never make a direct assault upon the civil institutions of the land, however absurd and despotic they may be. Christianity will break the yoke of thralldom, but it acts upon civil institutions only as an alternative, by a silent, gradual, irresistible impulse. Upon the individual soul the gospel is like a fire and a hammer;

political and civil improvements are fruits which it does not attempt to gather before they are ripe.

But if the scriptures furnish instances of approved resistance to human authority, let it be remembered that these were cases where human authority came into direct conflict with the rights of conscience and with the law of God. The warrant of disobedience should be of a nature like this, and undeniably plain. We must be able to plead that we could not yield obedience without rebellion against obligations of higher and paramount authority. In such a land as this, where those who make laws are to share in their operation; where those who make and those who execute the laws are soon to return to the common level, and are at any moment liable to impeachment and removal; where there is an independent judiciary ready to step in between the humblest citizen and the exercise of arbitrary power, or the operation of unconstitutional law; where no man is condemned without a trial by a jury of his countrymen, or without the aid of learned counsel to secure him whatever advantage there may be in any, the least, irregularity in the prosecution;—what plea in the wide world can be brought to justify disobedience to law, or the withholding of the deference due to the proper authorities? If they who “resisted the power” under the despotism of Nero “resisted the ordinance of God, and should receive to themselves damnation,” what vengeance will God visit upon him who is a contemner of law under such a government as this?

In conclusion, it is proper briefly to advert to a few things incompatible with the spirit of these instructions.

1. All captious railing at the properly constituted authorities is inconsistent with these commands, if not indeed directly prohibited. “Honor all men: Honor the king;” or, by implication, treat all in authority with the respect due to their office. “Render to all their dues: Honor to whom honor.” A Christian citizen should always be pleased with the management of the powers that be, where it is possible to be so, and be true to the constitution and best interests of the country. Captious fault-finding is not only prohibited by the scripture under consideration; it defeats its own end. The boy in the fable who was always crying out, “The wolf,” “The wolf,” was not believed when the wolf came in earnest. So captious fault-finding defeats its own end, and renders it the

more difficult to correct the evil when evil really exists.

2. This injunction of holy writ is scandalously disobeyed in those caricatures with which reckless partisans on either side assail the leaders of the opposite party, and especially the magistrates of the land. Oh what monuments of a nation's shame! What marks of loose morality, of corrupt taste, and of low scurrility, are those dishonorable prints that appear so often in the windows of the shops, and attach themselves so prominently to the walls of places of public resort! What a shame to a community it is, that self-respect and good taste—not to say respectable morality—do not thunder out in a voice that will not be disobeyed, take these things hence; let not the purveyors of politics and amusements cater for us as though we were a nation of blackguards.

Finally, nothing can be more directly incompatible with the spirit of these injunctions, than that usurpation of the functions of civil authority, which has so often been witnessed in our country in these days of excitement. The thief, the highwayman, the assassin, may plunder property and destroy life. But they do not strike at the foundations of all order and all law. They who take it upon themselves to administer what has been termed "Lynch law," are destroying the very foundations of all security for property or life. No other acts are so deadly to civil liberty. All history shows that a few short months of such misrule are enough to make a people tired of a government of law in form, but of the despotism of the mob in fact. The only remedy ever found, when such disorders could not be repressed, has been to hand over the liberties of the people into the keeping of a master. Anarchy is always, and of necessity, followed by despotism. If there be any crime that deserves to be punished with death, for the mischief which it works, it is the crime of usurping the prerogative of law;—joining with the mob, in the assumption of all the powers of lawgiver, judge, jury, accuser, witnesses, executioner. There is no greater foe to his country or to man, than the one who joins in a mob or abets it:—save perhaps the perjured magistrate who forbears to do his utmost to put it down. No matter what the cause; no matter how odious the conduct of them against whom the popular tumult is stirred; such things must cease, or we need no other judgments of God to bring us to speedy ruin.

Now, our duties in all these matters, are matters of religious concern. God requires them. If we fail in these, he will bring us to account in the day of judgment. It may be that some among us have thought this field of civil duties exempt from the supervision of the law of God. If so, oh fatal mistake! Let us see to it that we have, in this department of duty, no accounts with God left unsettled till the judgment; for "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."

SERMON CCLXII.

BY REV. EDWIN HALL.

TRUE FREEDOM.

JOHN viii. 36.—If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

THERE are those who imagine that the religion of Christ is made up of little else than unwelcome and onerous restraints. "The truth shall make you free?" They think, rather, that if Christianity be truth, it will bind them, and fetter them, and make this pleasant earth in the pleasant light of the sun henceforth a gloomy prison. If, for fear of worse evils, they think of turning to Christ before they die, they think of it as putting off their liberty, and taking up a yoke, which, for its own sake, they would never choose to bear.

The Lord Jesus Christ, however, declares that this "yoke is easy" and his "burden is light," He declares that if we "know the truth, the truth shall make us free;" and that, if the Son shall make us free, we shall be free indeed."

He does not mean that he has no laws. He has laws, which are to be obeyed under the most dreadful of all penalties. He does not mean that his yoke is easy and his burden light, because he requires little and gives large indulgences. He requires much. He gives not the least indulgence to the least transgression of any one of all his commandments. He requires perfect obedience.