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SERMON CCCLXIX.

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“Again I say unto you,—That if two of you shall agree on earth, as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”—Mat. xviii. 19, 20.

In the hour of distress we naturally seek relief. The least we can do is to ask help of any who have the means of giving us aid. If God only can relieve us, the same feeling prompts us to ask or seek his assistance;—to present ourselves before the mercy-seat of an all-hearing God, and humbly request him to consider our case, and give us help in our time of need.

To pray, therefore, is but to act in accordance with the unconstrained operations of our sinful and needy souls; it is but to deal with God, in whom we live, and move, and have our being, as with those of our fellow-beings on whom we are dependent. It is more incumbent, then, on those who deny the propriety and usefulness of prayer, to show why we should not pray, than for us who maintain the duty to show why men ought always to pray and not to faint.

Mutual wants and common griefs prompt to the union of the needy and sorrowing in drawing nigh to God. All human experience testifies that it is not enough to pray alone. “It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities; and the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying,—Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord of hosts; I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord.” The prophet in this passage does but express what has a thousand times taken place in every age of the Church. But why this desire for the presence and agreement of others—of many others, in the presentation of prayer? Why not each for himself be content to pray at home, and in the secret place where none but God can hear?

That mankind have ever felt that secret supplication, intercession, and giving of thanks, though indispensable alike to piety and its cultivation, are not enough, and that peculiar advantages attend the offering of united prayer, is clearly to be seen in their practice. There never

SERMON CCCLXX.

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THE DUTY OF CHRISTIAN JOY.

“Rejoice evermore.”—1 Thessalonians v. 16.

HABITUAL cheerfulness,—a glad and joyful temper, is here inculcated as a Christian duty. We are to be more than contented; we are to REJOICE. We are to do this habitually; “Rejoice evermore.”
Let us notice

I. THE NATURE OF THAT JOY:

II. THE CONSIDERATIONS WHICH ENFORCE THE DUTY.

1. *The nature of that joy.*—We are not required to be insensible to evil, nor careless of evil.

Our own follies and sins are a natural cause of distress. It was such a one as Paul, the aged and experienced Christian, who cried out, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

The sins and miseries of others will touch the Christian’s heart. He was a holy man who said, “Horror hath taken hold upon me,”—“Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.” The Saviour wept over Jerusalem, as he beheld the city, and thought of its approaching doom.

The calamities of Zion will, of necessity, fill the child of God with grief. “Why should not my countenance be sad,” cried the pious Nehemiah, “when the city, the place of my fathers’ sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?” Nor was he the only child of God who has “sat down and wept, and mourned, and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven” on account of the calamities of Zion. “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. For they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”

Sorrow in the afflictions of others is not forbidden. The Saviour wept at the grave of Lazarus. No precept of religion bids us dry up the fountains of sympathy, which God implanted in the human heart in

its best estate. Religion, in its principles and spirit, would make us kind-hearted sympathetic beings as "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep."

In one respect, the Christian is called to pass the time of his sojourn here in fear. His acquaintance with his own inconstant and sinful heart; his habitual thoughts of the judgment: his anxiety lest his own soul fail of the grace of life: these things require him to be sober, and to watch unto prayer. These things may so weigh upon the mind, as to give the countenance a cast of gloom; especially where grace in the soul is just sufficient to make one taste the anxieties of religion, but not sufficient to allow him to welcome its joys. But if the Christian will believe God, and obey God, and be faithful to seek his grace, he has a remedy even here. Instead of sinking down under despondency, he should give more diligence to make his calling and election sure.

The Christian is not to be always complaining, always sighing and groaning. He is not to be, nor is he to appear to be, an unhappy man, whose spirit is usually burdened and bowed down. He is to be habitually in such a frame of mind as to enjoy life: and to be such in his habitual temper as naturally to make all happy around him. It is as truly his duty to be of such a joyful temper, as it is to feel the sorrow of repentance for sin, or to be solemn in the presence of his God.

The amount of the precept is this: Never be morose: never be gloomy: be of a happy, cheerful disposition: never give way to despondency while God is upon the throne. Be contented;—do more: be so affected with confidence in God; be so grateful for his mercies; partake so largely of the comfort of the Holy Ghost, and of the hope of everlasting life, as to fill your heart with perpetual joy. "*Rejoice evermore.*" "*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say REJOICE.*"

II. THIS JOY IS A CHRISTIAN DUTY. And if so, the contrary temper is both a blemish and a sin.

1. *The Christian owes to God, this tribute of a grateful and happy heart.*—The Creator has spread the fields with fragrance and with beauty, and filled the air with music, and shed abroad upon the earth the light of his glorious sun, with no other design than that of making man happy, and of declaring his own glorious beneficence.

To be otherwise than rejoicing, when reconciled to our Father; assured by the exceedingly great and precious promises,—that pledge us his favor,—that engage all things to work together for our good; and that secure us heaven at the last, to be otherwise than habitually rejoicing under such circumstances is to be sadly ungrateful, and sadly at variance with the harmony and design of the great plan of Creation, of Providence, and of Redemption. What, my soul! discontented and gloomy: thyself the work of such an almighty hand; the object of his providential care; surrounded by so many tokens of his goodness; supplied with so many numberless superfluities, that bespeak the care and tenderness of a Father!

What, my soul! discontented, gloomy, and ungrateful, when redeemed from hell; when adopted into the family of God as a dear child,

and destined to be, ere long, translated to a fairer and eternal world; to live for ever in the presence of God, under his smiles, associated with angels and the spirits of the just made perfect! What, discontented; craving more; dissatisfied with thy Father's mercies; displeased with the lot thy Father gives thee!

Dissatisfied and gloomy Christian; pray tell, what must your Father do for you to make you happy? Cannot all the infinite fulness of Christ content you? Must you needs be unblest till the Lord bestows something which his infinite wisdom and his fatherly kindness see fit to withhold? or till he changes something in that course of his providence which he deems wise and good? Can you not be content to take the world as he suffers it to be under his government? Can you not bear, without impatience, the little trials which he has purposely left in the pathway of your pilgrimage to heaven? Must all the briars and thorns be removed from this fallen world before you can be pleased with the dealings of the Lord your God? Is there no dreadful discipline that your unthankful and unhappy temper may call down upon you, that you are not afraid to be found thus murmuring against God, and suffering your heart to fret against the Lord?

2. *The Christian owes it to himself to be of a rejoicing temper.*—Why should he make himself unhappy? Why should he starve amid the bounties of such a feast? Why should he look forth upon this glorious world of Jehovah, and bring over it a veil of clouds and darkness, only because his own gloomy spirit looks forth from a disordered and jaundiced eye? To be habitually gloomy and desponding is, of course, to be so without cause. Discontented Christian; suppose the Lord should see fit to remove his mercies, since they do not please you; suppose he should see fit to chastise that murmuring spirit, and undertake to subdue that rebellious heart, have you looked around you to see what blessings you are prepared to have taken away? Have you measured the judgments of the Lord that you are so willing to provoke, and so ready to meet them? Have *all* his billows gone over thee? Are you sure that your heart can endure, or your hands be strong in the day when he shall undertake to deal with thee? Take care, Christian, that gloomy dissatisfied spirit comes from a wicked temper—from distrust of God—from insubmission—from an impatient, unthankful, murmuring heart! It must be laid aside of your own voluntary movement; or, if God designs to save you, he will, very probably, efface it from your soul by some dreadful discipline!

3. *The Christian owes it to others.*—They have a claim upon his *justice*, not to render them unhappy by his unhappy looks, and by the unnecessary sighs and groans caused by evils that have their existence mainly in an unhappy temper; or prompted only by the forebodings of a gloomy imagination.

It is a cheap way of making others happy, to associate with them in a cheerful, happy, frame of mind. It is worth more to them than gold—it outweighs the benefit of many kindnesses bestowed. To be otherwise, is a species of dishonesty and of cruelty, the opposite of Christian integrity

and of Christian love. It robs others of their happiness. It is worse than the violence of some sudden outbreak of passion from a temper, in the main, full of generous kindness. With no benefit to one's self, it is a gratuitous infliction of misery, and often upon one's nearest kindred and friends; an infliction against which there is no defence, save that those who are able will generally retreat from it, and leave the unhappy being without friends: and the more unhappy in himself when he finds himself undervalued and neglected.

4. *It is due to the cause of religion.*—A contrary spirit belies religion, and inflicts upon its cause an injury which no open enemy could commit. No one has any right to give such an impression of that religion whose true characteristics are love, heaven, and joy in the Holy Ghost; and which never promotes unhappiness save when it comes into conflict with sin; and when it flings its arrows of conviction into the heart at enmity with God, people are thrown off from Christians and from Christianity by such an unhappiness of temper. Especially is it so, when, unfortunately, the Christian has taken it into his mind that such gloominess is a part of religion itself. What mischiefs such gloomy Christians may do to their families God only can tell. It is not impossible that many a Christian, who has often and fervently prayed for the conversion of his children, has, by his unhappy temper and gloomy deportment, been the cause of their eternal ruin.

5. *Nature concurs with grace in declaring the duty of holy joy.*—We may learn lessons from the fowls of the air, and from the beasts of the field. The groves are filled with melody and songs. The pleasures of intellect and hope, the inferior orders of creation have not; but witness the joyous flights of the birds of the air, and the happy gambols of the animals that sport in freedom upon the earth. The very insects seem sportive in happiness. The children of the human race, unless their joy is unwisely and unhappily hindered, partake of the same natural gladness. Their active sports, and even their rude mirth, and boisterous laughter, show how much of the instinct of happiness God has left in the bosoms even of fallen beings. As age comes on cares increase. The wicked habits of an unhappy world are easily learned. Pride, ambition, folly, fretfulness, and guilt, corrode the mind. When the capacities of the intellect and the heart ought to have fitted the soul for joys more extensive, rational, and refined, too often, alas! poor fallen man has grown more unhappy. But all this is just as unnatural as sin and rebellion against God. The buoyant spirits of youth ought to be succeeded by delight in the service of God. As the bodily strength declines, and earthly joys and earthly hopes depart, the soul ought to find a richer and still richer portion in God. The comfort of the Holy Ghost should more and more fill the soul, till at last it is gathered home, like a shock of corn fully ripe, into the garner of the Lord.

6. *The Christian has sufficient occasion to rejoice evermore.*—Speak you of trials? of afflictions? of sorrows? "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be

revealed in us." They are all only a "light affliction which is but for a moment, working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." They are scarcely to be thought of as any just hindrances of the Christian's joy. But our mercies! our causes for joy! They are innumerable. They are unspeakable. Rejoice in God. Rejoice in his government. Rejoice in his forgiveness. Rejoice in his salvation. It does not appear how infinite love and infinite power could give you, in your imperfect state, more or greater causes for rejoicing evermore.

Our Lord told his disciples of perils, reproaches, and persecutions; but, said he, "Those things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." "The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." How significant that prayer of Paul for the Christians at Rome! "Now, *the God of HOPE, FILL you, with ALL JOY AND PEACE in believing, that ye may ABOUND in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost.*"

APPLICATION.

And now, brethren, let us endeavor to apply this doctrine to our own improvement. It will cost us effort: it will cost us watchfulness: it will cost us self-denial: for we are fallen beings in a world of trials. But it is a part of the Christian warfare, and we must set out in earnest for the victory.

1. Fix in your mind *that it is your duty* to cultivate the temper of Christian joy. Address yourself earnestly and prayerfully to this work. It is a work which lies wholly in your own soul. Put off a sad and gloomy temper as you would put off a loathsome sin. Leave gloom and repining to the enemies of God: but make it your work to be so grateful, so full of hope and of confidence in God, as to rejoice evermore.

2. *Take the world and your pilgrimage through it as they must be.* Expect not everything smooth and pleasant. Expect not all sunshine. Read the prophets; read the history of days of old: it never was all smooth and pleasant even for prophets and apostles. Then why for you? Your Lord and Master was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And shall you have no need of patience, that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise?

3. If you ever find your soul sinking into a gloomy desponding frame, then ask yourself what it is that troubles you. Are you troubled with your own sins? or are you discontented with the providence of God? or are you distrusting his goodness, his grace and his government? If others have done wrong, then pray for them: but do not for that reason plunge your own soul into rebellion against God.

4. If afflictions, temptations, and trials, press upon you, think first of the duty of submission: you pray every day "Thy will be done." When, therefore, God has done his will, submit to it. "Take the

prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering, affliction, and of patience." "Behold, we count them happy which endure." If you are called to suffer, think how much less this suffering is than that eternal punishment which you have deserved. "Wherefore doth a living man complain?"

If you are bereaved, think that what God does he does well. He neither infringes your rights, nor intends any unkindness, when, in his sovereign pleasure, he takes away what he gave. The only tenure on which he has granted us friends or near kindred is, that we must one day follow them, or they must follow us to the grave.

Are your prospects dark? Do your duty, and commit all to God:—"Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you." Mark that expression: "Casting all your care upon him:"—"all"—the whole of it. The care is the heaviest part of the burden; and yet it concerns troubles which we may never see. Those troubles ten, fifteen, or twenty years distant! yea, even the care of *to-morrow!* Why, Christian, you may be sleeping in the grave, or if you live, God may not design to bring them upon you. Is not the evil of the day sufficient for it? Must you needs reach forward some days or years, and pull down upon your shoulders burdens which God may never design to lay upon you? The Saviour has charged you, in this respect, to "take no thought for the morrow." Are you so in love with trouble, as to break through the Saviour's command, for the purpose of making yourself unhappy?

Are you poor? Do you fear for want? You are privileged to ask for your daily bread. Say to your soul—"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." "The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger; but they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing." God is able to feed you and clothe you, and shelter you here, till he sees best to take you to heaven.

Are you in disease and weakness, sinking down to death? Your heavenly inheritance is just before you. If you are Christ's, this is a token that he is about to fulfil in your case, what he prayed to the Father: "Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory." If Christ removes you, fear not that he will fail to take care of your children and friends, for whom it seems to you so needful that you should be suffered to remain.

The cause of Christ, so dear to you, often languishes. So it must, while God suffers the wickedness of men, and allows them to unfold their true character. But the ark is safe. Cease not to pray for Zion; to care for Zion, and to labor for Zion, while you live; but never be distressed with Jesus for Zion: she is safe. She shall yet subdue and bless the whole world: and if you love her, your eyes shall see it: either on earth or in heaven, you shall behold it, and join the triumph which proclaims that "Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ."

You often, perhaps, feel sad for your country. But if your country is ruined, you are a citizen of the kingdom of God. It may be Jeho-

vah's purpose to overturn our boasted institutions, and to show that He is a jealous God who will not give his glory to another. But there is a kingdom dearer than our country; one fraught with richer blessings to mankind; and that is an everlasting kingdom, which shall not be destroyed.

Oh Christian, what infinite resources are yours! Do you lack wisdom? You may ask it of God. Do you want forgiveness? You may come to the mercy seat: and you have an infinite advocate and Redeemer. Do you want grace? The Holy Spirit shall be given you in answer to prayer. "Whether life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

6. If you would be happy, draw nearer and nearer to the throne, and drink from the purest springs of divine love. Here is light, and strength, and life. Here are unfailing springs of joy. Abide in Christ. Draw nigh to him in prayer. With Paul, "Bow your knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might, by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend, with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge; that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God."

It is only to *love God; obey God; trust in God; and submit to God;* and you may say with the Prophet, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

The Christian may rejoice evermore. But what rational and enduring joy is there for the impenitent sinner? The highest springs of enjoyment are never opened to his soul. At war with his own reason: at war with his own conscience: every moment of reflection, every thought of his prospects for eternity causing him distress: no hope in God; the justice and the strength of the Almighty against him: how can he be happy? There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked. "I said of laughter, it is mad; and of mirth, what doeth it?" It is but a sickly moment, and dream of joy. The lot of the child of God becomes reversed in the case of the wicked: Joy may endure for a night; but weeping cometh in the morning. "Delight is not seetaly for a fool." It is a melancholy sight to behold one made for the endless holiness and happiness of the eternal world, embittering his present life, posting on to eternal sorrow, and yet trying to fancy himself happy. The Saviour said, "Wo unto you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep." Not that flowing spirits and joy are displeasing to the Saviour: but that beings living in sin, and under the wrath and curse of God, can be so careless and so deluded, while living in such a character, and hastening to such a doom. Oh, how often I think

of this, when I see people possessed of every earthly means of happiness;—health, abundance, friends,—and having the appearance of joy! It pains me not that they can be joyful; nor yet so much that they go only to the lowest fountains for joy:—but to think that they can be so whole at heart, while at enmity with God!—and to think that their very mirth and gaiety may be the means of drowning reflection; of alluring them on in a more eager chase after earthly pleasures, till the things that belong to their peace are hidden from their eyes. How often I think of it, as I enter the mansions of elegance and ease, where God is not worshipped: how often this sentence of holy writ seems to sound in my ears: “The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked;” nor can all the refinement, the splendor, the social converse, or the pleasant music banish that dreadful sound. I think I see them stand on slippery places. Divine mercy calls, but they will not hear. The Saviour pleads, but they have no heart to hear. I look forward a little, and the power of that neglected Saviour darkens the skies. The storms of the last day are gathering. The thunders of the judgment shake the sky. Where then will the enemies of God appear?

Oh dying fellow-sinners, how can you be happy with the infinite God against you?

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which satisfieth not? Come, be reconciled to God. Lo! his own voice invites you: “Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come unto me; hear, and your soul shall live: and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.” Dying fellow-sinner, shall there be peace between your soul and the infinite God?