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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

## THE NATURE OF SIN.

“You say, reader, that you know you are a sinner, but that you cannot *feel* it. You do not realize your guilt. You admit that your soul is under the influence of sin, but you do not *feel it as a burden*. I wish in this article to point out to your attention two particulars in the nature of sin, which may perhaps assist you to feel that it is really a burden.

1. It is the nature of sin to perpetuate itself. Where it gets hold it keeps hold. This is one of its worst features, and we can see it in all cases,—in all kinds of sin. If a man does wrong once, the greatest of all the evils which will result from it is, that, in similar circumstances, he will be ready to do the same wrong again. He brings himself into such a state by one act of transgression that he will yield more easily to temptation the next time. The bad principle acquires strength by indulgence, and conscience is discouraged and silenced by having been once overwhelmed.

This is true of all sorts of sin, so that the first act of transgression is not to be dreaded so much on account of its own direct and immediate injuries, as on account of its being the prolific parent of a thousand other sins. It is always so regarded in actual life. Suppose, for instance, a father were to see his little son stealing forth some evening to purloin fruit from a neighbor's garden. He watches him, we will suppose, from a window, and sees his hesitating step, and anxious, agitated countenance; and he knows that this is the first act of open dishonesty which his son has been led to commit. Suppose now that the father is in some way deprived of the opportunity of interfering, and that he must sit quietly by, and see his boy take his first step in the career of crime. I need not describe his feelings. The question I wish to bring up is, what will give his feelings their acutest sting? It is not the direct consequences of this first step. It is not the value of the property to be taken. It is not the fear of the injured neighbor's displeasure. It is not any apprehended difficulty in settling the affair with him. Nor is it the sufferings which he knows he must, in justice and in faithfulness, inflict upon his son, nor the remorse which his son must endure, when he comes, in sober mind, to look back upon his sin, nor even the single stain of guilt which this one act produces. What is it, then? Why, that the father sees, or fears he sees, in this first step, *the beginning of a long life of crime*.

I mean he sees that *the tendency* of this first step, *if not counteracted*, will be to lead to a long life of crime. Doubtless he will endeavor to counteract it; he will hope to do so;—but this danger that the first step will lead to others like it, and worse, is what gives the affair almost all its consequence. Were it not for this, many a father might perhaps

simply look upon it as a juvenile offence, worthy of very little consideration.

So with all sin. One of its darkest features is its power to perpetuate itself; where it gains admission, it establishes and perpetuates its own reign. If a child tells a falsehood, the worst of it is, that he has taken a great step toward fitting himself for telling many more. If a man deals once unjustly by his neighbor, he has probably commenced a long series of acts of injustice. Sin is thus a viper which breeds, in a most prolific manner, its own kind, and keeps permanent possession, wherever it is once admitted.

God seems to afford, in this world, the opportunity for sin to show itself in a variety of forms, that we may see its nature, and by the analogy of its effects between man and man, learn its character in respect to the relation between man and God. Now sin against God tends, in the manner above described, to perpetuate itself. When Adam first disobeyed his Maker's command, one of the worst aspects of the case was the fact that, left to himself, he would go on disobeying. So when, in early life, a child first commits sin, he admits something into his bosom which *will* stay there;—or rather he will keep it there. The wrong he begins to do, he will go on to do, if God leaves him to choose his own way. Therefore he who is living in sin, has brought himself under an influence which is, in its nature, perpetual. There must be a moral interference from above to save him from it,—or else just as of his own accord he first sinned, so he will perpetually, of his own accord, go on to sin.

Reader, are you still in sin? If so, the great difficulty,—the gloomiest and the most melancholy aspect of your case, consists in the future, not in the past. The past guilt is deep and dark enough, it must be acknowledged; but it is nothing compared to that which is before you,—directly in your path, which you are steadily pressing forward to, and will press forward to, as long as God leaves you to your own chosen way.

2. It is the nature of sin to perpetuate its own punishment. That is, though the sin may be over in a moment, the suffering remains. It remains, too, *indefinitely*; in fact, time very often sharpens its sting.

Suppose a man commits some sinful act;—in order to make the point clearer, we will take a very strong case;—in a fit of sudden passion, he kills his own child. He did not really intend to murder it, but in a fit of passion, excited by something in which the child was not to blame, he strikes a sudden blow which takes away its life. The sin is over in a moment. But how long will it be before the father can think of it without pain? It is an idea which many persons vaguely entertain, that sin carries its own punishment with it, at the time of its commission, and that it settles the account as it goes along. But nothing can be more inconsistent with facts. Sin leaves its sting *behind*. And it is a sting which time alone can never extract. The pressure of business or pleasure may remove for a time the recollection of guilt, but the re-

collection itself, when it comes, must be attended with pain, however remote may be the period of the transgression.

Any honest student of mental philosophy, who should endeavor, by observation merely, to investigate the human heart, would come inevitably to this conclusion. He will see this power of sin to fix a thorn which cannot be eradicated wherever it gains admission, acting universally. The wound may remain insensible for a time, but it cannot be cured. The sinner may forget his sin, but he cannot cut off his responsibility for it, or escape from the danger of having the corroding sufferings of it break out upon him at any time. They do sometimes break out in this world. After the lapse of many years, the bitter recollections of early guilt will come over the soul, and overwhelm it with suffering. God assures us, too, that, in another world they will come with all their power.

The nature of sin, then, is such that he who commits it, plants a thorn in his side, which at first he may not feel, but it will bring torture at last. It is as if a boy, whose body had lost its sensibility by some dreadful disease, should cut and tear his flesh wantonly in his sports, thus inflicting wounds which will inflame, and will drive him to distraction when sensibility shall return. The soul is morally insensible and dead. It does not feel the spiritual wounds, which are inflicted upon it; but *every wound remains*. There is no natural sanative process which can cure them. And sensibility is to return. In fact it is not wholly gone now, but, at a future day, it will fully return.

These are, perhaps, two of the most important characteristics of the nature of sin. Every person who is living in alienation from God, is under its dominion. Reader, are you such an one, and can you think of your condition with careless unconcern?"