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→*SERMONS*←

REJECTERS OF GOD'S WORD.

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This evil people, which refuse to hear my words, which walk in the imagination of their heart, and walk after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, shall even be as this girdle, which is good for nothing.—JEREMIAH xiii, 10.

THERE is a prevailing and strong dislike, among educated and thoughtful people, to sensational preaching. We probably on various grounds share in that feeling. But we must be sure that our dislike be discriminating and intelligent. We do not, for example, object to the preaching that *produces a sensation*. I am sure for my part I wish I could produce a sensation of alarm and terror in the careless, of responsibility in the believing, of joy and irrepressible gladness in the saintly. Whitfield surely produced a sensation. So did Nettleton, and Edwards and Tennant. So did Erskine and Henderson and Knox. So did Luther. So in earlier times did Paul and Peter, when whole cities were moved, and thousands owned the irresistible power with which they spoke.

And if we could not object to such results we could not object to *the means adopted and intended to produce them*. If vivid painting—in words or deeds—if dramatic presentation, if quaint manner, and queer titles would do it, even though they offended taste and shocked the refined, we should be willing to make the sacrifice for the sake of the imperishable results. To hesitate about it, to stand up for literary propriety and the canons of taste, when disregard of them would reclaim souls, would be as base and contemptible as to refuse help to a drowning man or the terrified inmates of a burning house, because it would derange our dress or necessitate awkward and

ungainly attitudes. I hope I should be willing to sacrifice any preferences for correct taste and sober expression if souls could be saved by the sacrifice—and the mass of mankind would approve the act. It is not, therefore, against anything of this nature the true and valid objection is directed. Here the end is so great, so transcendent, that, in the judgment of average mankind, it would justify any means not immoral.

But the true and well-founded quarrel is with the sensational preaching that does not aim at this end—that, indeed, does not aim at any higher end than the producing of present excitement of the lower portions of our mental nature—of wonder, of surprise, of delight, of admiration. This effort terminates on itself, so to speak. It opens men's eyes in amazement—not in the sense of spiritual illumination; it leads the hearers to follow not Christ, but the preacher, and its immediate impression is not "what a wonderful Saviour is Christ!" but "what a wonderful man is that preacher!" Whenever the best part of mankind believe, rightly or wrongly, that a man is thus laboring they will set him down as "sensational," even when they own his power, and enjoy the sensation. But whenever they are convinced that, however exciting, startling, strange, or even extravagant a man is, he is looking beyond present impression, and, oblivious of self, is aiming at great good to others, they will refuse to put him among the sensational, or any other inferior order of public servants.

I make this long preface because the style of this teaching of Jeremiah looks sensational. He is bidden to take a fine, new linen girdle—a most important and ornamental part of an Oriental gentleman's garments—and bury it for a time near the Euphrates. Taking it up afterwards, he was to exhibit it to the people of Judah and Jerusalem, with all the marks of injury and decay upon it, as a sign and type of the decline and decay that the Lord would bring on them in Babylon, when, parted from Him to whom they had been bound as a girdle to a man's body, they should be buried under the oppression and contempt of their proud and domineering captors.

From the verse we may gather the following statements:

1. Even the most highly-favored persons may reject God's word. The question is often put wonderingly: How can educated men, who have the means of judging of the originals, of examining authorities, of weighing evidence, of exploring the lands of the Bible, who in some instances are accomplished naturalists, conversant with the divine works, be at the same time indifferent to the word of the Lord? But how much greater may the wonder be that Judah—whose national history was supernatural, whose annals were full of miracle, whose fathers God led as by the hand, the very title-deeds to whose lands had the signature of Jehovah to authenticate them—that a nation whose worship, whose habits, whose festivals, whose very meals were regulated on a definite principle by the Lord, should reject His words! But so, according to sacred and profane history, of the truth of which every Jew among us is a living witness, Judah transgressed the covenant of the Lord and rejected His words.

2. The transgressors in such cases prefer their own imaginations to God's revelations. This preference for *one's own* is universal and proverbial, even when the choice lies between our own and the proposals of our equals. But when it lies between our own and the Lord's, the mind, which is "enmity against Him," has so little congenial with His, does not hesitate about the choice. It is one form of human pride. Religion says to God, "Thy will be done." The natural heart says, "My will be done"—"who is the Lord that I should obey Him?"

3. The moral influence of such perverseness is bad, progressively bad. Having cast off God, the human nature cannot stand up alone. It needs a support. It must worship. So it goes after other, and of course false, gods. When the Hebrews had not God or His visible representative, Moses, they must have the golden calf. And a stone sent rolling down a hill will as little stop of itself as a people falling off from God. This is a view of sin not enough dwelt upon. One sin brings another, often makes another necessary, and at the same time makes another easier of commission. Every sin has three distinct effects, apart from the punishment of the future: (a) It depraves and deteriorates the nature that sins. The brain is not broken, but strained; the marble is not fractured, but the eye of omniscience sees the flaw. (b) It familiarizes with evil and goes so far towards making an evil habit. And (c) it renders some other sin not only easier, but apparently necessary. "Having done one thing," says the sinner, "of course I had to do the other."

4. The effect of rejecting God's word is lamentable in the extreme. "Shall be as this girdle." And the meaning of that is obvious in the light of Jewish history. A prosperous and powerful nation, in the van of civilization and of power, with growing commerce, great material resources and powerful armies, was reduced under a foreign yoke, their capital taken, their king carried away in ignominious exile, their people exiled from their own land, their men sold as slaves, their women to worse than slavery, and their name made a mockery and a byword among the nations. This was the effect with God's favored people of rejecting His words. "If these things were done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" If the fire of divine anger burnt up that vine which He had planted, how will it be with the common tree of the forest?

This leads us naturally to inquire by whom is the word of the Lord rejected?

1. In a certain strict and literal sense every unbeliever is an infidel—*i. e.*, he is without faith. But many are without faith who yet assent to the general truths of God's word. We have come to apply the term infidel to those who *positively* deny the truth and authority of God's word, and emphatically do we apply it when they become aggressive upon it with argument or ridicule. This they are naturally—by the process above described—led to do in many cases. I am aware that one may do injustice to individuals by condemning classes, and that too hasty generalizations may be only angry depreciation. I would not willingly be betrayed into this; but truth com-

pels me to say that many *infidels* have made it their own interest to impugn and deny divine revelation. A man has broken its precepts—perhaps suffered socially in consequence—has not repented, but only been embittered, begins to count those who censure or condemn him first bigoted, narrow-minded, then pharisaical, and hypocritical or fanatical. They justify their action by the Scripture, and he begins to transfer his dislike to the Scriptures, feels a pleasure in any doubt cast on them, flatters himself that to weaken them is to strengthen his case, and that contempt poured on them is respect won back for him. Hence the bitterest scoffers have often been the religiously-trained sinners. I speak now of my own class, and of what I have known, when I say that ministers whose immoralities have stripped them of their office have sometimes been the most profane assailants of Revelation. When you read in the papers, for example, cool, intelligent, contemptuous allusions to divine things it is horrible to think that in too many instances the hand that wrote them gained its skill in writing sermons. What happens with an individual, happens with *classes*. A Sabbath-breaker enjoys any gloss on the Fourth Commandment that lifts it off our heads and assigns it to the Jews, and dislikes the opposite teaching. I have seen men in the liquor trade *wince* under the simple quotation of Holy Scripture. Carry this book to the drinking saloons, the green rooms, the billiard rooms, the gambling hells of this city, and it will be spurned, decried, and rejected. Why? Have the habitués of these places carefully examined the evidence and come to an intelligent conclusion against it? Not one in ten thousand of them. What? "It is against me, and I will have none of it." They do not say so. "My opinions are different," will be their defense. But it is absurd. They have no "opinions;" for "opinion" implies a careful judgment formed upon examination of a case. They have rooted prejudices and instinctive dislikes of exactly the same nature and weight with Ahab's concerning Micaiah, the Prophet. "I hate him, for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." I Kings, 22: 8.

Such *infidelity* mars a man and a community, makes both the one and the other "good for nothing." To such infidels, argument is not the main want. "Cease to do evil, learn to do well . . . come now and let us reason together" is the fitting mode of address to them.

2. *Sceptics* are included among the rejecters of God's word. Not that they are necessarily irreligious, or deniers of a Divine Being and of obligation to Him; but they deny the Scriptures as an authoritative revelation from Him and make *nature* a sufficient teacher. The history of scepticism is the best explanation of it I can give. It arose in a time of godlessness and formalism in the Christian Church. Lord Herbert, who died in 1648, reduced all religions to five points: 1, God's existence; 2, man's dependence on Him; 3, the harmony of the human faculties, constituting piety; 4, the difference of good and evil; 5, and future rewards and punishments. All which, he taught, man knew intuitively. Toland, Hobbes, Shaftesbury, Tindal, Collins, Bolingbroke followed, improving this deist's confession of faith, of which David Hume was the

most eminent modern high priest. France caught the infection from England; and Voltaire, Rousseau, D'Alembert and Diderot dressed up English deism for the French taste. The effects of that poison are still in the French constitution. Sceptics commonly imagine that they alone have knowledge of these books, and that if intelligent Christians could only get over their prejudices and read them, they would cease to believe. This is not, in point of fact, the case. Educated Christian men know these books, arguments and obligations, and we know the men, too, and a more disreputable group it would be difficult to find. We do not circulate their books, nor encourage the reading of them. It is not necessary to eat a whole barrel of bad flour to know it is bad: wise men do not leave poison loosely about their dwellings, and of them and their views it is true "by their fruits ye shall know them." One thing is very noticeable in nearly all of them. They are devoid of that calm, dispassionate spirit which ought to mark instructors in solemn truth. This puts their candor in doubt. No Christian is so fanatical for his Crucified Lord as the sceptic for his doubts. To them Christ is a wretch to be crushed, and Christianity is a superstition to be put down by enlightened reasoning like Hume's on Miracles. They do their work in a temper which suggests the words, "They *hated me* without a cause."

Such rejecters of Scripture are dreadful losers, for themselves, and dreadful evils to others. To make men even communicants "good for nothing," you could not do better than entangle them in the folds, bury them in the caves of scepticism.

3. If I include Romanism among the rejecters of God's word it must be with a qualification. That system admits the inspiration, divine origin and partial authority of God's word, and so far as it can appeal to Scripture does so. Its sins in this regard are: (1) Putting up beside the word tradition, which, like that of the Pharisees, makes the word of God of no effect. (2) Making the authorization of the Scripture depend on the Church, and constituting the Church the only expounder of Scripture. Her folly in this appears from the fact that while she alleges the Church the only expositor, you could not put your hand on a verse of Scripture of which the Church has given an authorized exposition. A Catholic says so; but a Catholic alone is not authority. A Pope says so, but is not authority. "Well, a Pope and Council said so;" but not the Church. The Catholic faith is what has been held always, and everywhere. Find out that, and you have an authoritative exposition. Blaise Pascal's letters explain this view.

4. And following from this, she withholds the Scriptures from her people. Ask yourselves where is her Bible Society? Where is her depository in Rome, or any place she can control? An overwhelming majority of her people never read a page in the Bible. It is a poor and insufficient excuse that many of them cannot read. Of those who can an overwhelming majority never read a page in the Bible, and it is here that the Old Catholic movement, if it is to come to anything, will find its strength.

If the "Old Catholic" movement is to come to anything, if it is to become

a power for good in Christendom, it must recant Rome's errors on this point; it must stand up for a Church which grows out of the Scriptures, and not a Church which gives authority and interpretation to them. It finds the Bible like Lazarus in his grave, and a stone laid upon it, and so long buried that it is in bad odor with the ignorant masses. It must roll away the stone; must stand by the grave like Christ, and cry to the Father, for the sake of them who stand by, and having got power from Him, it must cry to the buried Bible, "Come forth;" it must command its followers, "Loose it, and let it go."

5. But the indifferent and unbelieving reject God's words.

You have heard it explained, read it, had it urged on you by beloved ones, now praising God in the rest of the saints. Have you believed it? Received Christ? Are you resting on Him? Doing His will?

For if not, your condemnation is doubly sure. Light comes to you and you love the darkness rather than the light. Deny and disregard the Scriptures, and you—no matter how moral, cultivated, socially excellent—weighed in the final and unerring balances that God holds, shall be found wanting, and in the last classification of His creatures "good for nothing."

We venture two remarks—one with a personal, and the other a public application. It was my duty to begin in this pulpit in 1867 with an appeal for the Bible. Many happy years passed since then, and I have never once looked back. I make preparation with a still more vivid appreciation of it, and the same purpose to hold it up, teach it, preach it, and the same unshaken belief that it is the one great thing for the Sunday-school teacher, the ministry, the congregations, the churches to know. Love to this involves hatred to all opposing courses. I avow that hatred. I am liable to be regarded as a bitter foe of Roman Catholics. If persons be meant, it is untrue. I shall go farther than my censors for their benefit. In the years long gone by, when I was permitted to be identified with national education, I was sometimes censured for defending—against the feeling and judgment of many—what I believed to be their natural rights. But for the *system* that enthral and degrades populations—some of them, like my countrymen, naturally the finest on the earth—I can only cherish deep and deliberate dislike. If any one shall represent this dispassionate judgment against a system as hatred of the persons who hold it, he utters an atrocious calumny.

The people of America, bursting away from European traditions, have done much in *levelling down* kings, thrones and sceptres, and institutions kindred to these have been reduced. But there is something to be done in levelling up, and as if to test the power of republican forms, Europe is casting on our shores enormous masses of the lowest of her people. Can we also level up? This is the problem—a hard one for American Christianity. Without the Bible and Bible Christianity, it is impossible. Let us abandon it in despair. With the Bible and a living Church fed by it, we can. "All things are possible to him that believeth."