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A
SERMON,
DELIVERED IN THE
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE
CITY OF BALTIMORE,
ON
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 8th, 1808.
BEING
A DAY OF FASTING, HUMILIATION, AND PRAYER,
APPOINTED BY THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

BY THE
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A

SERMON.

Isaiah 55. 7. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

Repentance, or Evangelical Reformation, to which these words exhort, like medicinal applications to the sick, cannot but be offensive to the natural man. He quarrels with every ingredient in the cup. It is a work of no small difficulty to convict him of iniquity, and when it is effected, it is often neither so profound nor so durable, as to produce salutary contrition or acknowledgement. And to be converted from vice to virtue—to turn from the intoxicating draught of worldly vanity—to forsake the rosy paths of pleasure for the thorns of selfdenial—how painful the task—how forbidding the Religion that would impose it!

We will endeavour to evince, however, that the art of the Physician is, frequently, not so indispensable to the recovery of the diseased body, as this grace of Repentance to the happiness of the Soul.

First. Let us hear what reason says to us on this matter.

It is an undeniable position that, while we are sinners, we must be at variance with our Maker. His holy nature must ever be infinitely opposed to evil; and were it not that we know him to be merciful as well as holy, we should forever lie down in despair. But we cannot open our eyes without witnessing the displays of his goodness. We cannot exist one hour without experiencing his paternal kindness. This consideration may induce us to hope that if we turn unto him, he also will turn unto us; if we forsake our evil ways, he also will relinquish the severity of his justice, and mingle mercy with

its demands. It is impossible for us to suppose that while we continue to transgress his law we can avert his displeasure ; but it is very reasonable in us to suppose that conversion from unholy to pious lives will be agreeable to him, and may attract his pity and forbearance. When the Prophet of the Lord, by divine command, repaired to Nineveh, that great city ; when he lifted up his voice, and proclaimed “ yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown ;” the threatened inhabitants, acting upon this supposition, which, we say, is reasonable, “ proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.” Their Monarch arose from his Throne ; laid aside his royal attire ; covered himself with sackcloth ; and sat in ashes. He published his decree requiring a general fast thro’ his dominions ; and ordering his subjects to cry mightily unto God ; and to turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that was in their hands ; and all this was done in compliance with the suggestion of reason, “ who can tell if God will turn, and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not ?” * Surely that duty must be important, which nature so strongly urges, and interest so warmly recommends. Surely when hope solicits ; when the miseries of this life and the more formidable pains of another threaten ; when we have every imaginable reason to conclude that to be happy in heaven we must be holy on earth ; we shall not deny the value and necessity of Repentance.

But, altho’ in the light of nature we may read the truth, “ without holiness no man can see God ;” altho’ we may be led, by analogical inductions from the manifestations of God’s goodness, to hope that our repentance and conversion may be acceptable to him ; still Reason will not warrant us in forming the *positive conclusion* that they *will be accepted* by him. This is the part of Revelation. Let us hear, then,

Secondly. What are its decisions.

The Holy Scriptures abundantly confirm those impressions of the Divine benignity which we receive from reason. They characterise their Almighty Authour as a God of infinite compassion, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, and, altho’ determined not to clear the guilty, yet dis-

* Jonah, ch : 3d.

posed to look favorably upon those who repent of their sins. They inform us in express terms that repentance towards God is a duty of sovereign importance, and, in connexion with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only path to salvation. God mercifully endured the times of ignorance which were prior to his manifestation in the flesh, but now he commandeth all men every where to repent. And can we charge upon the Almighty the arbitrary procedure of requiring the performance of an unnecessary, or even an unimportant, duty?

If he who spake as never man spake, whose lips breathed the unction of the wisdom that cometh from above, preached repentance; if the Prophets, his inspired precursors, preached repentance; if the Apostles; whom he appointed to succeed him in the superintendence of the church and the instruction of the world, preached repentance; who will hesitate to confess its importance? who will deny its necessity?

Let us pause here, my brethren, and pay a tribute of praise to God. How dark is nature's light, which may reveal to us that God and man are at variance, but which is insufficient to lead us to the consolatory truth that repentance and pardon are connected! How miserable he, whose reason teaches him his misery, but draws an impenetrable veil over the future, and leaves him in the suspense of ignorance as to the issue of his destinies! How refulgent that light, which beams on the gloom of nature, and illuminates the path to happiness! which shews us that sincere repentance is accepted thro' the expiatory sacrifice of the cross; and that pardon is, not merely the fruit of compassion, but, the award of justice, the result of the pledged fidelity of a covenant sealed by the blood of God!

Yes, my brethren, while the merits of Christ shall avail; while the dispensation of grace shall stand; the returning sinner shall be received. It is confirmed by the promise of him who cannot lie; and not by his promise only, but by his oath, when in the majesty of a self-existent God, he swears by himself; "As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but would rather that he should turn from his evil ways, and live."

Thirdly. It is only from repentance that we derive comfortable fellowship with God here ; and it is only on this foundation that we can rest the hope of intercourse with him hereafter. What agreement can subsist between light and darkness? What concord between Christ and Belial? As by sin we lose the favour of heaven, by sin also we lose the capacity of relishing spiritual pleasures. To correspond with a God, holy as is the Christian's God, we must be, in our measure, holy. We must delight in his perfections, and seek to imitate them. We must regard him as the supreme good, infinitely surpassing the composition of the highest created good ; and, as such, seek to possess him. But these are the views, and such the state and disposition, of the Penitent only. It is of importance that we bear in mind that which is the principal ingredient—the crowning act—of true penitence—"Conversion." Here does this amiable grace appear to most advantage ; as qualifying us for heavenly intercourse, by changing our habits and dispositions ; as introducing us into society the most honourable to our nature—the society of God—of Christ—of the Holy Spirit—and of our own souls ; as restoring to us the divine favour which we have forfeited, and the divine image which we have lost ; and as reinstating us in the dignified rank we were destined to occupy among pure and holy Beings. When we consider that repentance, or reformation of heart and life, is the only road to these blessings ; and that to the impenitent there remains no sacrifice for sin—no hope of favour ; when we carry our views beyond the limits of the grave ; when we look into that bright world where nothing shall ever enter that defileth, or worketh abomination, or maketh a lie ; where shall we find language sufficiently energetic to express the worth and indispensableness of repentance.

Fourthly. "Except we repent, we shall perish."

Happy would it be for the impenitent, if this life, notwithstanding its miseries, were all he had to dread : happy would it be for him, if the turf, that covers his remains, could bury his fears, and the blackness of annihilation hide him forever. But it will not be so. Beyond the limits of time there exists an Eternity. When the grave, with the dust it conceals, shall form a part of the ruins of dissolving nature, scenes of horror shall open upon the impenitent, which defy the most

vivid colours of fancy to depict. We read of a worm that shall never die never cease to prey upon the vitals of the sinner; of a lake that burns thro' interminable ages; of a smoke of torment that ascends forever and ever. From this fate, at which nature shudders, repentance only can deliver. "Except we repent, we shall perish."

Let us consider the import of this awful commination. To perish?—What is it?—It is to feel the agonizing stroke that sunders the invisible tie of soul and body—that condemns the last to moulder in the tomb, and returns the first to God who gave it.—To perish?—It is to rise again with new capacities of suffering, and feelings more susceptible of pain.—To perish?—It is to be separated from many most beloved by us, who live in the mansions of peace, while we are lost to them forever—it is to be excluded from communion with the spirits of the just made perfect, from the glorious society of Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, from the seraph tribe whose ceaseless hallelujahs echo thro' the vaults of heaven, from the blissful presence of Jesus who died for us, and the exalted fellowship of the eternal comforter—it is to be imprisoned among impure, unholy, and unhappy, spirits, the liar, the oppressor, the blasphemer, the adulterer, the murderer—it is to witness, and assist, their infernal orgies—it is to worship on the altars of hell—it is to exist forever under the horrors of despair, and in the shades of a darkness made visible by the unquenchable fires of destruction. To perish?—Great God! It is to behold thy face no more; and to pine under the tortures of thy displeasure, which shall know no limits but thine own existence.

Say, then, my brethren, Is not that grace invaluable—is not that duty indispensable—which opens a refuge from miseries otherwise inevitable! Is not repentance both important and necessary? And ought it not, accompanied, as we admit that it is, by something which may comparatively be called painful and inconvenient, ought it not, by every reasonable mind, to be preferred to the deceitful and fatal pleasures of sin?

Let us, then, make no delay in complying with the exhortation of the text. If we are convinced that the duty it em-

braces is important and indispensable, let us instantly cultivate those dispositions which are congenial with it. By procrastination, we only increase its necessity, and at the same time harass performance with a load of accumulated difficulties.

- In order to excite and cherish penitent affections, let us throw a retrospect on our past lives. Without breach of charity, it may surely be asserted that the most upright of us will discover enough in his own conduct to affect him with remorseful feelings. Let us consider in how many instances we have acted against our better judgment; doing what we knew to be wrong, and neglecting what we knew to be right: in how many instances we have set at nought the admonitions of those who have a claim to our respectful attention: in how many instances we have offered violence to conscience, wantonly overleaping the barriers it erects against vice: in how many instances we have extinguished the dawnings of grace, and resisted the motions and solicitations of the Holy Spirit. If, upon a candid review of the past, self-love shall not be able to repel the charge that we have come very far short of our duty, let us not, at the peril of our lives, suffer conviction to perish in the vortex of Dissipation. Believe it, Dissipation is hostile to virtue. Let us be self collected. Let us reflect. Had Adam reflected, this might have been a sinless and a happy world. Let us retire occasionally from the active scenes of life. Let us shut out its cares—its noise—and its pleasures. Amidst the shades of holy solitude, penetrated with regret for our multiplied offences, let us pour our sorrows into the bosom of Jesus. Let us unreservedly confess our sins to him who is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let us abjure our most beloved idols. Let us drag forth our cherished lusts from their lurking places in our hearts, and slay them at the foot of the cross. Let an even tenour of obedience; a conscientious discharge of every duty to God—to our neighbour—and to ourselves; evince the sincerity of our repentance. And, that these blessed features of Christian virtue may adorn our lives, let us implore the enlightening and converting influences of the Holy Ghost. He is the Authour of Repentance and every other grace. But for him, no virtuous impression would ever be felt by the human heart; no good resolves would

ever be fostered until Providence calls them forth to benefit and beautify human life.

On this day, which the Piety of the Supreme Judicatory of our Church hath set apart for the special purposes of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, let this great work of Repentance be effectually begun; let resolutions of amendment and reformation take deep and firm root in our hearts. As members of the social body, we participate in its sins; and its sins, without doubt, are manifold and atrocious. Were I to attempt the enumeration of them, the catalogue, however defective, would be at once melancholy and disgusting; such as would compel every good, loyal, and publick spirited man, to exclaim, "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night" for my Country's transgressions! *

To suggest but a few particulars.

Is it not evident that the crime of murder is on the increase? that so far from fixing on the perpetrator of it the well earned mark of infamy and abhorrence, it, for the most part, elevates him in the estimation of society? Does he not frequently defy the very front of authority Divine and human? Do we not see him among the foremost to trample on the Sovereignty of the Laws; that sovereignty which he is bound by office and by oath to support? And for all this, is he not most nefariously rewarded by the Publick respect? Is not the serious part of the Community insulted by avowed statements of his violations of law, and audacious panegyrics on his intrepidity in crime? And do not these things occur in the face of the civil power which too often sleeps over this abominable treason against decency?

Is it not evident that offences against the Laws of honour and honesty are on the increase? Forgery—Swindling—Frauds against Individuals and the Publick?

Is it not evident that covetousness, extortion, gaming in all its diversified shapes, are the reproach of persons in every walk and condition of life?

* Jeremiah, Ch : 9th.

Is it not evident that there is a spirit abroad not more hostile to the purity and simplicity of our holy Religion than to the genius of our Republican Constitutions? A spirit of Luxury and Dissipation—pomp and fastidiousness—profusion and voluptuousness—prodigality and debauchery—revelling and wantonness—pride and ambition?

Is it not evident that the publick presses too frequently groan under the weight of falsehood and calumny, and teem with the vile fabrications of a party spirit at war with truth and candour, with the dignity of the most established reputation, and the peace of the most unblemished character?

Is it not evident that iniquity abounds and the love of many waxeth cold? that there is a reigning indifference as to all religious truth and duty, principle and practice? Is it not too evident to need demonstration that acknowledged irreligion is no bar to the enjoyment of popular esteem and favour, but is, in many cases, the surest road to opulence and honour?

Would to God that all these things were less evident.

Hitherto I have had reference to the Publick manners—the moral condition of our country—at large, and in the general. But it is proper that we arraign ourselves at the bar of enlightened conscience for those delinquencies with which we have more particularly to upbraid ourselves as members of the Ecclesiastical Community governed by that very Rev. Assembly whose recommendatory resolution hath convoked us this day.

My Brethren—There was a time when zeal in the cause of God, a zeal according to knowledge, was honourably characteristick of our Denomination. There was a time when the fire of devotion flamed on our altars. Our pious forefathers “were exceeding jealous for the Lord God of hosts.” They were fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Their morning and their evening sacrifice ceased not. The sabbath was their delight, and they counted it honourable: They remembered it, and kept it holy: Their heart’s desire was to be in the Spirit through out the Lord’s day. They were familiar

with the book of life. They watched. They prayed. They neglected not the dedication of their infant offspring to God: They were faithful in training them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; in teaching them, at home, the principles of Religion; and presenting them to receive the catechetical instructions of their Pastors. These were a part of their pious usages. Ah—how unlike our venerable sires are we?

It is in vain that we flatter ourselves with a name to live, while all that can distinguish the man of grace from the man of the world, the children of the Kingdom from the children of this generation, the real from the nominal Christian, appears to be either dead, or dying, in most of us.

Religious fervour of Spirit is a quality few among us possess. Family worship is almost banished from the practice of too many of our churches. The services of the sanctuary are a heavy tax upon the patience of most of our people; who attend upon them with a remissness and an irregularity deserving the highest and most pointed censure. So far is the Divine Institution of the sabbath from being treated with even the semblance of respect, by multitudes within our pale, that, if there be one day in the seven more than all the rest surrendered to the reign of pleasure, or to the usurpations of a supposititious convenience, to feasting, to rioting, to noise and confusion, to visiting in town and country, *it is this sacred day*. Few search the scriptures; fewer still think it worth their while to lift up their hearts with their voices in prayer to God: and none, I had almost said, cultivate a spirit of watchfulness against temptation. The seasonable Baptism of children is reputed an affair of minor importance, if important at all: and their religious education, the instilling into their young minds sentiments of reverence for the Divine Majesty, and forming them to Christian principles and habits, is neglected to a degree which argues a destitution of the best affections of a parent's heart, and threatens the next generation with the most alarming consequences.

O Zion! how is thy gold become dim, thy most fine gold changed! Daughter of my People; how is the glory departed from thee, and thy beauty consumed from thy dwelling!

Where is our zeal? Where our holy jealousy? Where the fire of our devotion? Over such degeneracy, the pitying Angels might weep, that minister to the Church.

From this deplorable state of Apostacy and degradation, every motive that can influence a rational and immortal soul, offers itself to reclaim you. The Church, by whose Supreme Council you are convened, calls on you, this day, thro' my voice, to submit to these motives. The Holy Spirit requires you to submit to them, and is ready to assist you by his grace.

If you love your Children—Repent: If you love the Church—Repent: If you love your Country—Repent: If you love the Saviour of the World—Repent: If you would escape the righteous judgments of Almighty God—Repent: If you would live in the realms of glory, when Death shall be destroyed, and sin shall be no more—Repent: Repent: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

I said, if you love your Country—Repent. In the words of the Assembly, “your Country appears to be threatened with great calamities.” We live in an age pregnant with occurrences of unusual magnitude and terrific importance; and heaven only knows what formidable evils the ambition and other vices of blood stained Europe may plant upon our peaceful shores. The general diffusion of that righteousness which ordinarily exalteth a nation will be the most effectual means to conciliate Him, whose kingdom ruleth ever all, and the mysterious dispensations of whose Providence embrace the alternate depression and prosperity of States and Empires. As a Community cannot but suffer from the vices of the Individuals of whom it is composed, so, on the contrary, we have reason to conclude that the reformation of those Individuals will essentially benefit the Community; and, consequently, every real penitent, every person who renounces that which is evil, and cleaves to that which is good, lightens, in a greater or less degree, the pressure of national iniquity. Remember that the sincere followers of the Son of God are called the salt of the earth, by which it is seasoned, and preserved from the inroads of corruption: and let the faithful records of history inform you how often the chosen few who

do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God, prove the Salvation of the State; how often the prayers and intercessions of the soldiers of Christ triumph over the mightiest arm of flesh. What encouragement this to the man whose heart is susceptible of the emotions of real patriotism!

If the goodness of God is ever calculated to lead men to repentance, such should be its operation here. Never has there been a nation more highly favoured in many respects, than the United States of America. And, at present, however painful the privations under which some portions of the Community may labour, however severe the aspect of the times upon all, the aspect of the times loses much of its severity, and the privations sink into comparative insignificance, when we contrast our general condition with that of the nations of the old world. Our cities are not wrapt in flames. Our temples are not insulted by military profanation. Our youth are not dragged into the field to fight the battles of unprincipled ambition. Our aged men and our infants are not massacred before our eyes. Our wives and our daughters are not the prey of lustful violence. If we are chastised, no man can deny that our chastisements are indescribably less than our ingratitude has deserved. Herein, then, is the unmerited goodness of God most signally and luminously manifested. Let us be devoutly thankful for it; and let the impression of it lead us to repentance. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

He will remit our personal guilt, and restore us to his favour. He will scatter the gathering clouds which seem to threaten desolation to our country; he will encamp round about her; be her munition of rocks; her wall of guardian fire; and will so watch over her peace and her glory, that no weapon, foreign or domestick, formed against either, shall prosper.

To this, every good Christian and loyal Citizen will join me in saying, Amen--So let it be.