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SERMON XXVI.

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THE PURE GOSPEL REJECTED BY THE PERISHING.

1 COR. 1. 18.—*For the preaching of the cross is, to them that perish, foolishness.*

In the Christian revelation, there is an evident purpose of infinite wisdom, that in all the provisions for man's salvation, his moral agency should be left free and uncontrolled. Instead of accommodation to human prejudices, there is ample scope for captious objections. And if additional proof were needed, of the divine origin of the Bible, it would be found in this characteristic. Were it a system agreeable to the narrow views, in unison with the selfish feelings, and gratifying to the depraved taste of human nature, it would more resemble the fabrication of man, than the workmanship of God. But as the current of its doctrines is so entirely opposed to our natural inclinations, as to render a moral renovation indispensable to a perception of the glory of revealed truth ; all such ground of skepticism is removed.

Thus the obscurities and difficulties of revelation are admirably adapted to exhibit human character, and constitute this state of existence a real probation. For if the light of truth came upon the mind with resistless energy, and the operations of the divine government were clearly disclosed ; if the motives and designs of infinite wisdom were fully explained, and the realities of the spiritual world completely laid open to view ; one principal aim of this dispensation would be frustrated. On the one hand, there would be no field for the exercise of faith and humble confidence on the part of Christians ; and thus a precious test of their submission and obedience would be destroyed. On the other, there could not be a full disclosure of the true feelings of the unrenewed heart. Because, as all would be evident as the noon-day sun, there would remain no choice in the matter of embracing the truth—no means of evincing whether its reception were cordial or compulsory.

In this respect, there is displayed a matchless skill, as well as a gracious

condescension, in adapting revelation to the actual character and condition of our race. While sufficient light is afforded to guide the sincere inquirer, there is an obscurity to perplex and offend the proud and self-confident. While the truth is accompanied by evidence abundantly satisfactory to every mind open to conviction, enough of mystery remains, to form an impassable barrier to those who are inclined to disbelieve the testimony of God. While to the eye of faith there appears a glorious system of wisdom and mercy, depraved reason and prejudice may discover little else than an assemblage of inconsistencies and absurdities.

It is not without design, then, that the great facts of revelation are made liable to misrepresentation ; that its essential principles are arrayed against the pride of human wisdom ; and that its blessed institutions are so obnoxious to abuse and opposition. Such a constitution of things is evidently intended to furnish a decisive criterion of human character—to exhibit, in striking contrast, the humble votaries of faith, who reverently bow to the authority of Scripture ; and the adherents of a haughty, self-confident rationality, who will receive the testimony of God himself, no farther than it accords with their opinions and prejudices—and thus to elicit a fair and full manifestation of every man's real disposition and feelings.

Such, uniformly, has been the effect of the Bible, wherever its sacred contents have been made known. To all who have received it with penitence, humility, and confidence, as the infallible word of God, it has proved their pleasure and delight—their fountain of consolation—their guide to peace : while the self-righteous and unbelieving have transformed it into a subject of perplexity and disputation—a *cause of deeper guilt and more aggravated ruin*. The Gospel has appeared transcendently beautiful and glorious to all who have been savingly enlightened by the Holy Spirit—while, to the impenitent and skeptical, it seems obscure, irrational, and incomprehensible. The former rejoice in the scriptures, just as they are, and willingly yield to the obedience of faith : the latter are ever anxious to lower the standard of divine truth to the level of their views of fitness, and to mould its materials into a form suited to their unholy inclinations.

On these principles it is easy to perceive the real nature and causes of the insidious warfare, which is maintained, in various forms, against the essential doctrines of the Gospel. It is just an effusion of the malignity of the unsanctified heart. Its prevalence is an exact fulfilment of prophecy ; and therefore an irrefragable proof of the truth and divine authority of that system which it is labouring to destroy. The emphatic declaration of the apostle, in the text, strikingly describes the state of feeling which now actually prevails, among many who enjoy all the external privileges of the Christian dispensation—*The preaching of the cross is, to them that perish, foolishness.*

In illustration of this passage, it will be attempted, to explain the import of the phrase, *the preaching of the cross*—to enumerate some of the *instances*

and *causes* of such preaching being accounted *foolishness*—and to describe the *fearful state and prospects* of those who hold it in such low estimation.

The preaching of the cross is a plain and full announcement of all the essential truths of that system which provides pardon and salvation for the lost and guilty. The cross is the symbol of that amazing expedient of infinite wisdom and mercy, by which a treaty of reconciliation is offered to convicted traitors against Jehovah's government. Its exhibition therefore must require a development of the principles, and a defence of the doctrines, peculiar to this gracious dispensation.

The grand fact, which constitutes the very essence and glory of the Gospel, and which it is the leading object of the Christian ministry to announce, is, that He, who took upon himself the form of a servant, and offered up the sacrifice of Calvary, is *God over all, blessed for ever*. This gives to the cross all its glory and efficacy. It is on the supreme Deity of Christ—on the expiation made for sin by the Maker and Sovereign of worlds—that the whole fabric of evangelical truth rests. On any other supposition, the sacrifice of the cross was a very ordinary affair. If the Saviour of sinners be not God—if he be a created being, of whatever grade,—where is the *mystery of Godliness*?—Where those unfathomable depths of divine love, *into which the angels desire to look*? If Christ be only a servant of God, however exalted, what was there, in his appearance on our world, to constitute a new era in heaven, and to fill its inhabitants with astonishment and ecstasy? Did the heavenly host descend in rapture, and cause the mountains of Judea to reecho with their acclamations, because a *dependent creature* had *consented* to do his Maker's will? Whence the ascription of *glory to God in the highest*, and why do the courts above resound with a new song of praise to God for his redeeming mercy, if this redemption was effected by the labours and sufferings of one inferior to the Deity? Was such a dispensation as that of Moses, designed simply to prepare the way for a messenger of God to declare his will, and to seal the testimony with his blood, as many good men have done, both before and since? Why did patriarchs and prophets foretell his coming, and celebrate his praises?—Why did the continual offering of divinely appointed sacrifices, for many centuries, typify his sufferings?—And why did nature shudder, and shroud herself in darkness, at the consummation of those sufferings? All these things are utterly inexplicable, on the supposition that Christ is a created dependent being.

But view him as *God manifest in the flesh*—view him as voluntarily laying aside his glory, and descending from the throne of infinite majesty, to assume the nature, and expiate the guilt of a ruined race;—and we are struck with the appropriateness of all the attending circumstances. The splendid ceremonials of the Jewish ritual, and the raptured songs of prophets and of angels were well employed to prepare the way for the visi-

ble manifestation of Deity among men. The annunciation of the divine nature of the Redeemer must, therefore, be an essential part of *the preaching of the cross*.

Equally indispensable is a decided testimony to that perfect *atonement for sin*, which was made by this great offering. Here is the only foundation of human hope. This was the grand object accomplished by the Saviour's sufferings. Thus was completely solved the mysterious problem, which all created intelligences had deemed inexplicable—how sin could be remitted, without infringing the rights and tarnishing the honour of the divine government—and how the guilty could be rescued from wrath, without a forfeiture of the divine veracity. Never indeed was the divine law so completely vindicated, or the claims of justice so awfully asserted, as when the Lawgiver offered himself as a ransom. And no other possible manifestation of the malignity and atrocity of sin, of the divine abhorrence of all iniquity, and, at the same time, of the exhaustless treasures of redeeming mercy, could equal that which was witnessed on Calvary. As, therefore, Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so is the cross to be held up now, by its heralds, to a perishing world. Its atoning sacrifice is to be proclaimed, and its purchased blessings offered to lost sinners, as their only hope—their only remedy.

Another important part of *the preaching of the cross* consists in a full disclosure of *the entire depravity and helplessness of our fallen nature*. This doctrine lies at the foundation of Christianity. It is from the corruption of our race, the dominion of spiritual death, and the actual sentence of condemnation, that the necessity arises for *so great salvation*. If hope could have been afforded from any other source, if there had been any possibility of the sinner's expiating his own guilt, and restoring himself to the divine favour, the great Sacrifice would never have been offered. But until men are convinced of their apostacy and corruption, they will never be persuaded of the truth and necessity of the great atonement. And until they feel themselves justly condemned, and utterly helpless, they will never come as humble suppliants to a Saviour's feet.

The work of the *Holy Spirit, in enlightening and renewing the hearts of sinners*, and thus carrying on to their accomplishment the purposes of divine mercy, forms also an important portion of the message of the Gospel. It is the glorious achievement of the cross, to slay the enmity and subdue the stubbornness of the sinful heart: and the infinite blessing purchased by the Saviour's blood, is the gift of the Holy Spirit, to effectuate that transformation of character, that spiritual regeneration, without which salvation is utterly impossible. The preaching of the cross, therefore, must include an unwavering declaration, that *the working of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost* are indispensable to salvation.

It is moreover essential to a faithful *preaching of the cross*, that *justification by faith in Christ*, should be distinctly declared as the only ground of a sinner's hope. That view of the Gospel which represents it as bestowing upon man a power of fulfilling God's holy law—or as so lowering its demands as to render his imperfect obedience acceptable—is most dishonourable to God, and ruinous to the souls of men. No such provisions are found in the treaty of reconciliation sent from Heaven. So far from abrogating, the Gospel exalts and honours the law. So far from diminishing its strictness, it adds emphasis to its claims, and fully meets its unmitigated requisitions. Most gloriously has Christ vindicated the divine justice, by receiving its avenging sword in his own bosom, as the Substitute, or surety for sinners; and most effectually has he provided for their salvation, by rendering the exercise of pardoning mercy consistent with the principles of the divine government, and by working out for them a perfect righteousness, which may render them just before God. By faith, the penitent sinner receives all these blessings—is rescued from wrath, delivered from the guilt and bondage of sin, and made a child of God, and an heir of eternal life. Thus the triumph of the cross is complete, the pride of human merit is humbled in the dust, and all the glory of the salvation of sinners is rendered to the riches of redeeming mercy.

In fine, *the preaching of the cross* includes a faithful denunciation of *eternal misery*, as the inevitable doom of all who pass from this state of probation, unrenewed by the Spirit of grace, unwashed in the blood of the Lamb.

Such are the essential principles of that system of redemption, which engaged the counsels of Heaven from eternity; and which was carried into effect, not like the work of creation, by a single word of the Son of God, but by his assuming human nature, enduring a long exile of toil and reproach, and humbling himself unto death, even the death of the cross.

With what gratitude, then, ought this Gospel to be received by the guilty, perishing creatures, for whose rescue from perdition it is designed. How should this display of divine compassion melt and captivate the hearts of those, whose sins have been thus expiated, and for whom an offer of free pardon and endless blessedness has been thus dearly purchased.

But *be astonished, O heavens, at this*—these tidings of salvation are received by many with chilling indifference—the sufferings of the cross are regarded with unconcern—the treaty of reconciliation, written in atoning blood, is by some contemptuously disregarded—by others repelled with determined opposition. These appalling facts display more of the malignity of sin, its blinding, deadening influence, and more of the rancorous enmity of the carnal heart against God, than all the other enormities which blacken the world's history. All other crimes appear less atrocious than this scorn

of a Saviour's love—this *trampling under foot the blood of the covenant*. While no finite mind could have conceived it possible, that Almighty love should be so slighted, yet the Spirit of prophecy announced this impious ingratitude, long before the incarnation. When Isaiah *saw the glory of Christ, and spake of him*, he also saw that he would be *despised and rejected of men*. And by all their hostility to the doctrines of grace, sinners are only verifying the description, which inspiration gave long ago, of their blindness and perverseness. By all their vain reasonings and presumptuous objections, they just corroborate revealed truth, and evince the desperate wickedness of the natural heart.

As in the days of the apostles, so in this period of increased light, *the preaching of the cross* is esteemed *foolishness*. The message of redeeming mercy is often received with utter listlessness—often with an evident disgust—and sometimes with an openly avowed hostility. In the apostolic age, it might be supposed that the resistance, with which the Gospel had to contend, arose from the prejudices of a Heathen or Jewish education, and from a very imperfect knowledge of Christianity. But, at the present period, the undiminished hostility, which is displayed against the pure doctrines of redemption, can be attributed to nothing, but that hatred to the ways of God, which the Scriptures represent as rankling in the natural heart, and for which they contain the only remedy.

It requires but a transient view of the religious state, even of enlightened and refined society, to see that to very many, now, *the preaching of the cross is foolishness*. While any temporal interest excites feeling, this theme is listened to with apathy. O, how often are those statements, which fill heaven with ecstasy, rehearsed to vacant, listless hearers! How many weep at fictitious woes, who contemplate the bloody scene of Calvary without a tear! How many hearts glow in admiration of the benevolence or heroism of a fellow worm, while entirely unaffected alike by the sacrifice or the triumph of the Son of God! How often do men express sentiments of the most fervent gratitude towards earthly benefactors, who would be ashamed of uttering one emotion of thanks to Him who *gave himself to die* for them! And is not this treating the Gospel as *foolishness*? But this heartless unconcern, criminal as it undoubtedly is, in the sight of God, is not so fearfully impious—affords not so appalling a disclosure of depravity, as the absolute disgust and contempt, with which the doctrines of the cross are sometimes received. In almost every community, there are those who utterly despise the whole system—who do not disguise their abhorrence—and who evidently hate the very mention of the subject. How indignant are such at any effort, in private conversation, to urge upon their attention themes connected with the dying love of Christ! How chilling is the effect, when such discourse is attempted, in many circles of refinement and elegance? And what a brand of infamy is affixed to the human character, by the fact, that from most such circles all these topics are absolutely excluded!

Let a man confine his conversation to such subjects as engaged the attention of Christ and his apostles—such subjects as now employ the hosts of heaven,—let him be accustomed in company, to bring forward the holy mysteries of redemption,—and by how many would he be shunned like a pestilence? And with what scornful hatred are those churches avoided by many, where nothing is heard but *Jesus Christ and him crucified*? Such are the open, unequivocal expressions of contempt and disgust, with which many treat the doctrines of the cross. Do not *they* esteem them *foolishness*?

But there is a class of the contemners of evangelical truth, characterized by more active zeal and decided measures. Far from the giddy thoughtlessness of those who hardly reflect upon the subject at all, and from the strange inconsistency of such, as profess to respect what they really despise and hate,—these feel and express a deep interest in religious opinions; devote time and attention to theological studies; and, as the result of their investigations, avow their utter disbelief of the peculiar doctrines of the cross; and undertake to demonstrate their falsehood and absurdity. They tell you, they have maturely examined the whole subject—that they have brought to the investigation all the aid that extensive reading and critical research can furnish—that they have carried the lights of science and philosophy into the dark regions of fanaticism—and have become perfectly convinced, that the whole system is an assemblage of the grossest errors. When, however, the array of argument is produced, its force seems to consist in the unwelcome impressions which the pure Gospel itself makes upon their minds. They can see no wisdom or fitness in such an atonement. They see nothing so very terrible in sin, as to require such an expiation. Pardoning mercy, say they, is one of the natural attributes of Deity; and the doctrine of eternal punishment seems to them too horribly inconsistent with divine justice to bear reflection. As for the substitution of the innocent for the guilty, and satisfying the claims of law by the blood of a sinless victim, they are amazed that any rational man can credit such absurd notions. Tell them of the maladies and wounds of the soul, which can only be healed by the Physician of Calvary—they can hardly conceal their contempt. Tell them plainly, as the Bible does, that they are lost, perishing sinners—that the wrath of God is revealed against them—that the avenging sword is uplifted, and that, unless they fly to the cross and embrace it by a living faith, they must sink to perdition—and you will witness the smile of derision or the frown of indignation. They esteem the doctrine of the Trinity as a monument of human credulity and folly. Their feelings are shocked beyond measure, at the incarnation of Deity, in the person of Jesus Christ. The personality and direct influences of the Holy Spirit appear useless and incredible; and the necessity of a change of heart excites their utter scorn. They cannot endure it. Their disgust is inexpressible.

Instead, therefore, of these offensive principles, they substitute a system, not modelled from the Bible, but from what they consider reason and propriety. This they adorn with all that is beautiful and attractive to the carnal

eye. Before this fair and flattering idol, of their own workmanship, they bow down in delighted homage. This is a religion they can love, for it flatters, exalts, and dignifies human nature! But as for human depravity, and other hated doctrines of the orthodox creed, they want words to express their aversion. The simple account of the matter is, that *the preaching of the cross*, in their estimation, is *foolishness*.

Such are the various grades of hostility to the vital principles of the Gospel, from contemptuous indifference, to malignant and rancorous opposition.

We now proceed to enumerate some of the causes, of this deplorable state of feeling towards the *truth as it is in Jesus*.

The depravity—the unholiness—of human nature, may be considered the grand cause of all the enmity which has appeared against the doctrines of grace. It is true, nevertheless, that the various degrees and forms, in which this enmity is manifested, depend upon the peculiarities of individual character and situation.

Destitution of early religious instruction, generally leads to an entire indifference to the whole subject. Persons who are brought up in *prayerless*, worldly families—whose young minds are not moulded by a pious influence—are usually found very insusceptible of religious impressions. In such hearts the power of ungodliness reigns uncontrolled. Uncultivated and waste, they produce nothing but *thorns and briars*. Nor is it surprising, that this numerous class of the hearers of the Gospel should exhibit an utter disregard and contempt of its authority. *The preaching of the cross is foolishness* to them, because they do not understand it, and will not take the trouble to examine it.

A similar apathy is frequently observed in persons who have been well instructed, when their whole souls have become engrossed in some worldly pursuit. Their heads and hands are so entirely occupied, that serious reflection is absolutely excluded.

Contempt of evangelical religion is sure to be exhibited in places where its professors are asleep or dead. In communities where real religion flourishes, where its power is felt, and its votaries are consistent and decided; whatever hatred may rankle in the breasts of opposers, they are not apt to indulge in contemptuous derision. But where formality and worldliness prevail, and no conspicuous standard of Christian character is visible—the hearts of sinners will be manifested. They will, without hesitation, avow, in how low and degrading a light they regard the doctrines of the cross. Their contempt and loathing are wholly irrepressible.

In many instances, the pride of rank and intellect is the cause why *the preaching of the cross* is utterly despised and accounted *foolishness*. The

lofty speculations of an aspiring intellect can with difficulty come down to the simplicity of the Gospel. The command, to come to the Saviour's feet with the humility of a little child, fills the proud heart of those *who are wise in their own eyes*, with indignation. They cannot endure doctrines, which level all vain distinctions, and require the noble, the affluent, and the learned, to assume the same station of penitence and contrition, with the lowliest peasant. They cannot consent to lay their honours in the dust, and address themselves only to sovereign mercy. It is beyond endurance, that the messages of grace should come *to them*, as condemned, guilty, and perishing sinners; and that as such they should be invited to the cross. Hence the scornful air, the undissembled disgust, with which so many, in high life, turn their backs upon *the preaching of the cross*. And hence, encouraged by their example, multitudes cluster round the standard of a haughty and malignant opposition to the Gospel.

While thus so many regard *the preaching of the cross as foolishness*, and earnestly wish it were utterly false; it is not wonderful, that efforts should be made to prove that it actually is so. Probably some, engaged in this opposition, are perfectly sincere, and actually suppose, as Saul of Tarsus did, that they are *doing God service*, by combating the doctrines of the cross. But whoever obeys the natural dictates of his own heart, and submits himself to the guidance of his own perverted, blinded reason, refusing to supplicate the illuminations of divine grace, will be likely to come under the power of *strong delusion to believe a lie*.

One other cause of opposition to the Gospel is found in the absolute contrariety of its requisitions, to the habits of life, which men have contracted, and which they are resolved not to abandon. While *the preaching of the cross* prescribes, as indispensable to salvation, conditions with which many, who have no doubt of being saved, wholly refuse to comply; and while it declares that eternal perdition will be the result of a course, which they are determined to pursue; it must be the object of their settled detestation. Hence the love of sinful pursuits and gratifications, and an invincible repugnance to a life of devotion, are the true reasons why many esteem *the preaching of the cross foolishness*.

It ought, however, to be kept in mind, while these causes are recounted, that the operation of each of them is rendered more efficacious, by the agency of that spirit of darkness, *that worketh in the children of disobedience*. To increase disgust against the plan of redemption, to exasperate the natural enmity of the carnal heart, to give a specious appearance to objections, and to enforce, with seductive arguments, the cause of unbelief, is the untiring employment of the grand foe of God and man. It is indeed the darling achievement of infernal skill, to inflate a poor worm with pride of talent, and fill his heart with hatred to the Gospel, and then persuade him that his hatred arises from its falsehood and absurdity. No event can afford the tempter

greater joy, than success in persuading perishing sinners to reject the only possible way of escape from eternal death, and to condemn, as foolishness, that doctrine which is the *wisdom of God and the power of God to salvation to every one that believeth.*

It only remains, that we briefly describe the fearful condition and prospects of all to whom *the preaching of the cross is foolishness.*

And here we have only to repeat the decision of the Searcher of hearts—the Judge of the quick and dead. His infallible Spirit has, in our text, divulged the tremendous fact, that the indifference, contempt, and disgust, which have now been described, are characteristics of **THEM THAT PERISH.** This authority, as well as the nature of the case, renders it certain, that all, who indulge such feelings, are *in the gall of bitterness and under the bond of iniquity—dead in trespasses and sins—treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath.* Nothing short of utter blindness of mind can be insensible to the glory of the Gospel—nothing but entire depravity of heart can render its doctrines offensive—and nothing but the most obdurate impenitency can resist the melting influence of a Saviour's dying love. It is utterly impossible, that a scornful neglect or disregard of the preaching of the cross should exist, without fearful guilt and imminent danger. All those, among the hearers of the gospel, who will finally be children of wrath, are now characterized by such guilt. And all the lost spirits in the world of wo, who once enjoyed the offers of mercy, cherished the same fatal feelings towards the plan of redemption. It was *foolishness* to them. Many, even in this land of light, seem to be ripening for the same tremendous doom. Whether in the ranks of open opposition, or under the false colours of pretended regard, the deadly symptom is upon them—a settled disgust and aversion to the *preaching of the cross.*

Say not, 'It is no matter what a man believes, provided he is sincere.' God has settled this question.—"*Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved; God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be damned, who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*" Is there not then, appalling evidence, that those, who hold such preaching in contempt, occupy very perilous ground, and exhibit fearful tokens of the divine abandonment? And especially might not the angels in heaven tremble for those, who have enjoyed great light and privileges—have witnessed rich displays of divine grace—and have once felt a deep solicitude for their own souls—but who now despise and hate those truths, and that cause, which they were once *almost persuaded* to embrace?

How clearly and terribly, my hearers, does this subject discover the ungodliness of the unrenewed heart. Those feelings of contempt and hostility, towards what is most precious and glorious in the view of God,

constitute the summit of human guilt. That feeble worms of the dust should thus dare to sit in judgment on the divine administration, and pronounce that needless which God has declared indispensable, and call that folly which God esteems the highest wisdom, is not merely presumptuous ;—it is inexpressibly *impious*.

How resistless is the evidence, hence arising, of the necessity of an entire change of heart—an entire change of feeling—to prepare men to dwell with God. No wonder then, that our Lord should declare with such emphasis, *Ye must be born again, or ye cannot see the kingdom of God.*

I beseech you, fellow sinners, lay these things seriously to heart. Do any of you habitually hear the preaching of the cross with heartless indifference—with a light and trifling temper ? Beware, lest your heart become fatally hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Are any of you conscious of disgust and aversion, produced by such doctrines ? O, beware, lest that come upon you which is spoken in the prophets, Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish : Beware lest you convert the bread of life into the poison of death !

Have any of you already attained such a degree of blindness and perversity, as to persuade yourselves that the doctrines of the cross are really irrational and absurd, and that you are doing right in opposing and deriding them ? Recollect, I pray you, with whose word you are contending ;—whose wisdom you are despising ! Let the chaff contend with the tempest, and the stubble with the devouring flame ; let the glow-worm despise all the lamps of heaven ;—but Oh, let not a worm contend with Omnipotence ; let not dim reason reject all the splendours of the Sun of righteousness. *The redemption of the soul is precious*—Its rescue from perdition, and elevation to God's right hand, are objects too momentous, to be sacrificed to the pride of intellect, or to the fashion of a world which passeth away. *Receive, then, with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.*