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SERMON LXIV.

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THE SINNER'S IMMINENT DANGER.

MATT. vii. 13.—*Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.*

It is a fact, plainly and frequently stated in the Bible, that all men are divided into two, and only two, classes. There is no third class recognised, consisting of neutral characters, too amiable for the bottomless pit, and yet too unholy for heaven. The one class embraces all who have never been *born of God*, who neither believe in Christ, nor repent of their sins. The other class embraces all whose hearts are regenerated by the Spirit and the truth of God. In perfect accordance with this fact, we have the assurance that there are two states, and only two, in the world of spirits: a state of happiness for the righteous, and a state of punishment for the wicked. As there are no neutral characters among men, so there is no middle state between the joys of heaven and the agonies of despair.

Leading to these two states, in the future world, there are two ways; the one, *broad*, with an easy, inviting entrance, through a *wide gate*; the other, *narrow*, entered only through a *strait gate*: the one, crowded with vast multitudes who are led on from pleasure to pleasure, from one pursuit to another, without a serious thought respecting the end of their progress; the other, travelled by a *few*, who are often beset with difficulties and trials; but strengthened by the Comforter, and animated by the blessed assurance, that the way in which they are struggling onward and upward *leadeth unto life*. While these, under the guidance of the truth and Spirit of God, are safe; what will become of those gay, and busy, and thoughtless multitudes who are in the *broad road*? Ardent

SERMON LXV.

By JOHN MATTHEWS, D.D.

THE SINNER'S IMMEDIATE DUTY.

MATT. vii. 13.—*Enter ye in at the strait gate : for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.*

THE duty of those who are in the *narrow way that leadeth unto life*, is clearly and kindly pointed out. With equal clearness and kindness is the duty of those pointed out who are in the *broad road that leadeth to destruction*. Your danger, who are now in the way to destruction, is great ; it is certain ; it is near ; it is hastening. What, then, is your duty ? If it were left to your own decision, what course ought you to pursue ? Ought you to wrap yourselves up in ignorance, or apply to the word of God for instruction ? to remain insensible, when there is so much claiming your serious thoughts ? to remain prayerless, when there is so much to be obtained by prayer ? to remain unbelieving, when without faith there is no salvation ?

I. It is your duty to SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES ; to read, with prayerful attention, the Bible, and to hear, with an humble and teachable heart, that word explained in the preaching of the gospel. This *ingrafted word, received with meekness, is able, or powerful, to save your souls* ; it can *make you wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus. But faith cometh by hearing ; and hearing by the word of God.* These are plain truths, which point it out as your duty to *let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom*. Can it be safe to neglect so plain and important a duty ? Is it not for such neglect that *God is angry with you every day* ? That which provokes his displeasure, never can be the means of procuring favor.

You are to read and hear the word so as to be instructed in the knowledge of spiritual things. *For this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.* A very vague idea of danger may be sufficient to excite your fear ; but a vague knowledge of the plan of life and safety, through a crucified Saviour, will not be sufficient for your salvation. Surrounded by midnight darkness, you may be much alarmed with apprehensions of danger ; but without light you would not know which way to fly. The efforts you make for safety, may carry you nearer to the danger ; the place to which you fly as a refuge, may be as much exposed as any other. Great fear, and even terror, may be the result of a mere conviction of

danger ; but to obtain solid peace, requires a distinct knowledge of the grounds on which sinners are pardoned and accepted of God. Confused and obscure notions of Christ and his salvation may give rise to spurious conversions, in which the mere workings of the imagination are mistaken for the exercise of faith. You may know that Christ has been crucified, and that sinners are saved by him ; while your knowledge of his character, and of the principles on which his death procures pardon, may be very indistinct. These obscure ideas, though not sufficient to constitute saving faith, may be fully sufficient for the imagination to work up into visions and voices, from which you may take comfort, and thus settle down in deep and perilous self-delusion. As it regards your future state, you might as well go to the bar of God an impenitent sinner, as one that is self-deceived.

If you are ever quickened, or begotten in a spiritual sense, it will be *with the word of truth*. If ever you are *born again*, it will be by *the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever*. If ever you are *sanctified*, it will be by *the truth*, and neither by error nor by the workings of the imagination. The Holy Spirit, in accomplishing the work of regeneration, does not, at the time, reveal any new truth to the mind ; but he employs the instrumentality of that revealed truth, which he finds already in the mind. If the truth is not found there, no work of grace will ever be accomplished. Therefore, read and hear the Word of God with patient application, that you may be saved from the paralyzing effects of ignorance, and from the feverish delusions of error. Do this under the conviction, that your eternal life depends on the knowledge and belief of the gospel.

2. **SERIOUS AND FREQUENT THOUGHTFULNESS, AND SELF-EXAMINATION** are also required of you. You must either reject the statements, respecting your danger, as groundless, or believe them to be true. If you think them groundless, then you believe that your present state is safe ; that though you have sinned, yet you *shall not die* ; though you do not repent, yet you *shall not perish*. And can you believe that God, whose law you have wantonly transgressed, will hold you guiltless, and bestow on you the rewards which he has promised to those who faithfully serve him ? that he will pass on you, who despise and reject his beloved Son, a sentence of approbation ? No, you cannot believe this ; for it contradicts the plain declarations of God himself. You admit, then, that these statements are true ; that your danger is great, certain, near, and approaching. And is there not enough in all this to engage your serious thoughts ? If it were but a light stroke that was about to fall ; but a gentle pang that was ready to seize you ; this thoughtless indifference would be less strange and criminal. But it is *destruction*, heavy and eternal destruction that awaits you ; the loss of every thing

but mere existence ; which will be sustained that you may suffer. If it were possible, of yourself, to escape this danger, then you might employ your thoughts in devising the means of escape ; but, continuing to reject the Saviour, escape is impossible : your future anguish is as certain as your present existence. Were your danger at a remote distance, you might, with more plausibility, waste a few more days without reflection ; but it is near, and is approaching nearer every moment. Nor can you tell the day nor the hour when it will come upon you. *This night thy soul may be required of thee.* Before another rising sun you may rush into the deep vortex of despair. And can you close your eyes in sleep when the *wrath of God abideth on you*, and the bottomless pit is opening, and moving to receive you ? Can you find any thing more fearfully important to think about ? Can any thing possibly drive these thoughts from the mind ?

Be assured that if ever you escape, that escape will commence with serious thoughtfulness. You will *think on your ways*, if ever you *turn your feet unto God's testimonies*. General, if not universal experience confirms this truth. The Spirit employs the serious reflections of the mind in carrying on his work. Meditating on the guilt and danger of sin, that danger increases to the view ; and the more it increases, the more does it arrest the attention, and impress the heart. This prompts to still further inquiries ; and these inquiries furnish materials for still more impressive and useful reflection. The work of grace in the heart is generally marked by intense application of the mind to spiritual subjects. No sinner, while thoughtless, was ever brought to Christ. While you refuse to meditate on these things ; while you exclude your danger from your thoughts, you only increase that danger. A thoughtless sinner is always unbelieving and impenitent. Were you to meditate frequently and solemnly on your perilous condition, you could not rest, you could not live, without the well-grounded hope of safety.

3. PRAYER is obviously and imperiously your duty. You are in the most imminent danger ; from which God alone can save you. Your own efforts can never effect your deliverance ; but perish you must, unless God is pleased to pluck you as brands from the fire. Nor is he under the slightest obligation to grant you this aid. If ever you obtain life, it will be a gracious gift ; not the payment of a debt, or the reward of merit : it will be an act of mercy, not of justice. If you could reform so perfectly, as never, from this moment, to commit another sin, this could not merit pardon for the sins *already* committed. Ceasing to do evil will never atone for the guilt already contracted. Your only hope of safety then is in the mercy of God ; for which it is your duty and your privilege to pray. Your prayers, indeed, cannot merit the help of God :

but, when sincere, as they ought always to be, they indicate a willingness, a fitness in you to receive this help. Spiritual life, it is true, is the gift of God ; but it is bestowed on those only who desire it. This desire, and this alone, is prayer in the sight of God ; mere words convey no meaning to Him who *searches the heart*. This desire of safety is necessarily connected with correct views of your danger. That, in your estimation, cannot be dangerous, from which you do not desire to escape. As it is God alone who can save you, to him should this desire, with deep penitence and earnestness, be directed. This was the desire of the publican ; *God be merciful to me a sinner !* This man went up to the temple conscious of his guilt and his danger ; the penitent desire of his heart is poured forth to God ; he *went down to his house justified*. *Go thou and do likewise* ; and the same will be the result.

And can you, indeed, *restrain prayer before God* ? Or if you do, can it be the way of safety ? On what evidence do you believe that your danger is so slight, so uncertain and remote, that you need feel at present no desire for deliverance ? Satan, no doubt, may suggest, *ye shall not surely die* : an evil heart of unbelief may whisper, *peace and safety*. But, according to the truth of God, destruction is at hand, and will soon come upon you. Is it so, that, in your opinion, the blessings procured by a Saviour's death, the favor of God, the joys and glories of heaven, are not worth asking for ? The Divine Redeemer has died for you ; and do you tell him, in the language of prayerless hearts, that he has died in vain ? that the blessings purchased by his death are worthless, not even desirable ? And is this the spirit with which you are to meet death, and appear before the judgment-seat of Christ ? Will the Judge, on this account, say, *well done* ? I died in agonies on the cross to procure pardon for you ; but you have well done in refusing to ask for this pardon ! If he will not say this,—and it is almost blasphemy even to suppose it,—what will he say ? In what language will your sentence be pronounced ? Nay, what will you yourselves say ? When you behold the dignity of the Son of God, the glories of heaven, the horrors of the bottomless pit ; what will you then think and say of a prayerless life ? Self-reproached, and self-condemned, will you not say to your Omnipotent Judge ; *strike*, for we deserve it ; to the glories of heaven, *adieu*, an eternal adieu, for we never prayed for you ; and to the gulf of perdition, *receive us to our own place* ?

And why not call upon God ? He is the *Hearer of prayer*, the *Father of mercies*. Acts of mercy are his delight. Have you ever prayed to him, with a right spirit, and been denied ? Search throughout the prison of despair, and you will find none who will say, that humble and earnest prayer for pardon through Christ was ever rejected. All the inhabitants of heaven, taken from this world, will testify, with one voice.

that God was more willing to give the Holy Spirit, with all his transforming influences, than a father is to give bread to his hungry child. All the redeemed of the Lord, now upon earth, will unite in this testimony. Ask your companions in the broad road, if their sincere prayer for pardon was ever rejected. All will reply, No ; we never offered such prayer to God. Consider, then, this fact ; all who have asked, have received ; all who have not received, have not asked. Does this fact encourage you to pray, or to neglect prayer ? Can you neglect it when your danger is so near, and so rapidly approaching ? This day, this hour may be all the time for prayer that is intended for you. Another day, another hour, and the *door may be shut* ; the door of mercy, never again to be opened !

4. Finally, it is your duty to **BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST** ; *for he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.* Your reading, your meditating, your praying, will never save you. These are but the workings and desires of your own minds ; they are not the Saviour. While you read, and meditate, and pray, you should remember that you are under condemnation, till you come to Christ. Until you are pardoned, your guilt and danger remain and increase. It is only for Christ's sake that God will forgive sin ; and it is by faith alone you can be united to Christ, and thus be interested in the merit of his death. The moment you believe in this Saviour, who died on the tree, your iniquities are blotted out ; you pass from death to life ; from a state of condemnation to a state of favor with God.

But, *take heed that ye be not deceived.* Mistake not the workings of imagination, however vivid and touching they may be, for the exercises of faith. Mistake not the mere excitement of your passions for the evidences of a new heart and a right spirit. Your imagination and your passions may be excited by other causes than truth. That faith which is the work of God, is the knowledge and hearty belief of the truth. The word, *believe*, implies this. *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.* That which you are to believe is the truth of the gospel ; the doctrines, promises, and invitations, relating to Christ, and revealed by his authority. By this truth, thus received, you are to be sanctified ; for *faith worketh by love, purifieth the heart, and overcometh the world.* Pardon and holiness are inseparably connected. The Saviour not only delivers from the guilt, but also from the love and the power of sin. By mistaking the workings of the imagination, or the mere movement of the passions, for the evidence of faith, you may adopt the dangerous and erroneous opinion that faith is something so vague and so mystical, so different from the common operations of the mind, and especially from the cordial belief of any other state-

ment, that it cannot be understood, or any definite idea be formed of it. But if you remember that faith is the knowledge and hearty belief of the truth, then, of this truth you will see the necessity of forming distinct ideas, otherwise you cannot receive it into your heart. This truth, thus received, will be *the seed of God which remaineth in you*; will be the root, the productive principle to which you may trace the rise and vigor of all those spiritual and devout affections which characterize the children of God, and which, through their influence, if not instantaneously, will yet gradually and certainly, weaken and destroy the sinful propensities of the heart.

Therefore, it is your duty to *believe in Christ*, and to believe *now*; this hour, this *moment*. Your danger is great, is increasing, and is approaching with the speed of thought. You need this Saviour; he is graciously offered to you; with kind solicitude he is urged on your acceptance. In proof of his willingness to save, he has died for you; in proof of his power, he declares that *he is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by him*. Why will you not, then, believe in this almighty Saviour? You can assign no reason, you can offer no excuse that is not sinful, for not believing this moment. And will you excuse one sin, by pleading another? If you should thus excuse and satisfy yourselves, will God, your Judge, sustain the excuse? You are not only invited, you are commanded to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. If you refuse, it will be a sin of the most aggravated guilt; of all sins, the most provoking to God. How interesting then is the crisis to which you have come! By believing in Christ, your safety is secured; by refusing, you disobey the command of God, greatly increase your danger, and perhaps provoke his injured Spirit to depart for ever from your soul.

REMARKS.

1. Nothing can be clearer than that the destruction of sinners will be charged to themselves; it will be because they would have it so. *The reward*, and nothing more than the reward, *of their own hands shall be given them*. Their ignorance is without excuse; for the Bible is constantly open and within reach, for their instruction. Their unbelief is without excuse; for they believe other statements far less interesting, and accompanied with far less evidence of truth, than the gospel. More numerous or more powerful motives cannot be presented to the human mind than those which press upon them the necessity of faith in Christ. These motives are derived from the greatness, the certainty, the nearness, and rapid approach of their danger; from the sufferings and death of a divine Saviour; from the rich and boundless mercy of God. But pow-

erful as these motives are in their nature, the love of sin counteracts their influence. Their unbelief is not accidental, but designed. *They will not come unto Christ that they might have life.* When, therefore, they are condemned by the Judge; when they *go away into everlasting punishment*; not a single look of compassion will follow them; not one emotion of sympathy will be felt for them! Wilfully they have sinned, and wilfully they have rejected the Saviour; and now, unpitied they perish! They have made themselves *vessels of wrath*; they have fitted themselves for destruction!

2. Christian brethren; among those now in the broad road, *you all had your conversation in times past.* Lately, you were as thoughtless and as prayerless as they now are. Why are you not still with them, *fulfilling the desires of the flesh, and of the mind?* Who has made you to differ? Your hearts reply; it was God who *apprehended* us, stopped us in our progress to destruction, led us to search the Scriptures, to serious reflection, to prayer, to Christ the Saviour. Gratitude and love, practical and fervent gratitude and love to God, is then your duty and your privilege, for this unmerited kindness, this work of grace, this astonishing exercise of sovereign mercy. You are laid under infinite obligations to Him who has *died for you and rose again.* Let your whole life then be spent in cheerful obedience to his will, in zealous and persevering efforts to promote his glory. Christ has died for you, that you might *live unto God.* *Delight yourselves therefore in the Lord, and he shall give you the desires of your hearts.* *Be not envious against the workers of iniquity*; but consider and *understand their end.* Think of the *slippery places*, in which they are eagerly chasing the pleasures of sin, *while the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that come upon them make haste!* Taught by the sanctuary of God, see them *brought into desolation, as in a moment, utterly consumed with terrors.* Connect their momentary joys with those consuming terrors; think how soon their *laughter will be turned into mourning, and their joy to heaviness*; and you cannot but feel for them the most deep and lively compassion. Look not back on their pleasures, which you have forsaken, with an eye of regret; but continually *set your affections on things above, and no longer on things on the earth.* The *narrow way*, into which you have been turned, may have its temptations, its conflicts, its sorrows; but it has also its quickening and purifying hopes, its animating joys, its triumphant victories. From time to time, that *city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God,* will appear, with all its glories, to the eye of faith, inviting you onward. There you will soon forget the labors of the way, or remember them only to increase your holy exultation, and to give louder and sweeter notes to your songs of everlasting praise. *Amen.*