

A S E R M O N

ON

NUMBERS XXXII. 23,

"AND BE SURE YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT."

BY

WILLIAM E. MOORE,

PASTOR OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, WESTCHESTER, PA.

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This Sermon was preached in the ordinary course of pulpit ministration, September 28, 1856. A highly esteemed member of the congregation requested it for publication. In yielding to his request, I have thought it best to give it, as nearly as possible, as it was delivered, with the earnest prayer, that it may be an instrument of good to those who may vainly hope, that *their sins will not find them out*.

WESTCHESTER, PA., OCTOBER 16, 1856.

A SERMON.

Numbers xxxii. 23.

“AND BE SURE YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT.”

PERHAPS every man, not wholly lost to shame, who allows himself in the commission of known sin, and especially of such sins as are counted disgraceful, hopes and expects that it will never come to light. Few men would do a shameful deed in the very presence of those they honor and respect, or, when they are sure of detection and disgrace. Even those, who have so far lost their sense of virtue and honor, as to be willing to do wrong in secret, are at great pains to conceal their evil deeds from the sight of virtuous and honorable men. They will plot and plan unhesitatingly, to accomplish the deed, and feel no remorse of conscience, no blush of shame, no self-contempt, as they go about to wrong a fellow man, or as they gather around the gaming table, or pass the cup in the midnight revel, or follow the steps of her “whose house is the way to hell, going down to the chamber of death.” And yet the fear of discovery, will fill them with dread, and cause them to start at every rustling leaf. There is no stronger proof of the desperate depravity of the human heart, than the fact, that men, not having the fear of God before their eyes, if but assured of secrecy, will do what they themselves would despise in others, and what they know that others will despise in them. They will consent to be guilty and vile, and hold a head erect among men, so long as the fearful secret slumbers in their own bosom—or is known only to the sharers of their guilt. When the secret is out, and they see scorn and contempt on the brow of those about them, then indeed are they overwhelmed with

shame and confusion of face; not because they are vile, but because others know it. They will hide the face in shame, and weep tears of bitterness, not because they have been guilty of deeds of shame, but because they have been discovered.

It is a melancholy fact, proven by the experience of every day, that the corrupt heart of man has far more fear of the bad opinion of others, than respect for self. It is a fact demonstrated every time the dishonest man preys in secret upon his neighbor's goods, whether by actual theft, or the meaner artifices of fraudulent trade, or by taking advantage of his confidence. It is demonstrated, every time the gambler seeks the midnight covert; every time the dram-drinker slips in by some back way, to take his secret glass; every time the libertine hides himself in the shades of night. It is demonstrated every time any man deliberately does in secret, what he would be ashamed to do openly. He shows by such a course indeed, a commendable respect for public decency, but he shows also far more anxiety *to be thought decent*, than *to be decent*; far more respect for the appearance than for the reality—more regard for others' good opinion than his own. He shows, too, that were the restraints which law and public opinion throws around him removed, and so all fear of detection and disgrace, he would, without restraint, act out every evil passion of his heart, and, so far as he is concerned, would make earth a hell of violence and lust, and crime.

And yet, the hope of secrecy is the most delusive of all the cheats with which men deceive their own hearts. Sin never is hidden, even in the moment of its commission. It may be committed in darkness or in the desert, but it is not hid. There is an omniscient God, whose eye sees every act of sin and shame, and whose ever rolling Providence is charged with the task of bringing it to light. It may slumber long in secrecy, but when the time appointed rolls round, it will be blazoned forth to the eyes of men, some sins here, all at the day of judgment. "Some men's sins are open before hand," i. e., conspicuous, well known, "going before to judgment," i. e., demanding condemnation, before the judgment-day, "and some men then follow after," are made known only then. 1 Tim. v. 24. But sin "will out." No human eye may have witnessed its com-

mission, no footstep may betray the guilty one; yet God can give to nature's self an eye and ear, and living voice, so that circumstances unthought of, and unprovided for, will tell the whole story of the crime. Rarely, indeed, does it happen, that the great crimes which mar the peace, and break up the foundations of society pass undetected. Justice may limp, while the criminal flies: but Justice, though lame, will overtake and punish.

Just as rarely does it happen, that the social vices of men, which go to sap the foundations of morality, and to disgrace them in the eyes of the world, or to bring them to poverty, disease and death, escape the notice and contempt of men. The sinner will be found out. Sin begets sin, destroys caution, blinds the eyes, until what is obvious to every one else, is hid from him alone, whose chief concern, is to conceal it from others.

Our text asserts a truth which is of universal application. Of every sin against God or man—against society, or his own soul or body, it says to every man, "*Be sure your sin will find you out.*" But we propose in this discourse to confine ourselves chiefly to sensual sins, and to the illustration of the fact, that in this world, as well as in that which is to come, his sin will find every man out.

Notice the assertion of the text. It is not "*Be sure your sin will be found out.*" This is, indeed, a fearful truth. But the language of the text is, "*Be sure your sin will find you out,*" as though sin were a personal enemy of exquisite cunning, laying its plans skilfully to entrap its victim, and then using him for its own purposes. The expression denotes more than exposure. It implies also a dominion assumed; a possession entered upon by a conqueror who will so rule his thrall as to insure increasing guilt and deepening punishment. Every sinner hopes that his act of sin, is an isolated thing, and has no links binding it to other acts, and so leading inexorably to its final consequences. But just here lies his deepest deception. Sin is not an isolated thing. Like any individual in the chain of human life, it has its parents, and it will have its offspring. The evil of indulgence, lies not in the act itself so much as in the consequences, nor so much in its consequences

on the body, as its consequences on the soul, not only in adding to its guilt, but in deepening its depravity. The sin of to-day is a parent; its offspring of to-morrow will be like itself, but only more prolific.

The sin of to-day, may be committed with many doubts and much uncertainty and caution, and in the early stages of a career of sin, always with the full purpose that it shall be "only this once." But when once a man has broken over the barrier of conscience to do a deed of sin, he is emboldened by the very deed. Sin grows familiar, and less hateful. It does not bring the exposure which he dreaded, and so when the morrow comes, there will be less unwillingness to commit the same sin, and less caution in guarding against the detection, and thus evermore the casual sin is in danger of growing into a habitual sin. As every seed that falls ripe from its capsule, contains the germ of millions more, so does every sin that comes forth mature from the sinful heart, contain the germ of many. And, to take another illustration from the same source; as the tendency of high cultivation, is to produce new varieties from the same parent plant, so the indulgence of sensual passion, in any given form, tends ever to new developments of vice.

Acts of sin, are but the fruit of sinful habits; but their fearful significance is seen in the fact, that every act of indulgence of a sinful habit, strengthens the habit itself, and that in a two-fold ratio; for it adds to the power of a clamoring appetite, and takes away from the power, and the disposition too, to resist.

And so sin, any sin—but here we are speaking chiefly of man's fleshly lusts, which war against the soul—will find its victim out at length. Whatever pains he may be at to conceal it, because it is daily shaping him more and more into its own frightful image, and is tracing upon his very frame, the unmistakable marks of its dominion. He may seek to shun detection, and, for a time, may be successful, but his deep misery is, that like the Spartan youth, beneath the cloak that hides his crime, he hugs a fox which is eating out his vitals. At the first it was he who sought the sin; but now, it is the sin that drives him under the lash. He cannot resist its oft repeated importunities, nor can he escape the fearful consequences it is bring-

ing on him—slavery to its power, and eternal subjection to its penalty.

We all acknowledge a "special Providence" in the detection of great crimes, however carefully concealed, by which the very trees and stones are made to cry out against the criminal—a straggling footstep—a torn fragment of paper, a hasty expression, an officious zeal in clearing himself, is made to give the clue by which the mystery in which the criminal has enveloped himself, is dissipated, and the guilty brought to justice. But we ought ever to remember, that this same "special Providence" is so guiding the course of every man's life, that every secret sin of his shall be revealed, at God's own pleasure, either in this life, amid the moral judgments of men, or in the day when God shall judge all nations at His bar; is so working that with unerring certainty, "*Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap*;" is so leading him that, in the day of God's appointment, every man's sins shall find him out, and fasten on him their fearful and eternal consequences, unless he can point to Jesus, his Surety and his Friend.

Everything is open, and naked to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do, and by the very conditions of our being, every thing we do, whether good or bad, must be brought into judgment; for every voluntary act is a part of our character—a part of ourselves. It is a most solemn and awful thought, that every action of our lives—every word of our lips—every purpose of our minds—every emotion of our hearts, is written on a book of remembrance that can never be closed. But it is a more fearful thought that they, like the threads of the weaver, form the very warp and woof of our souls. But so it is. Every deed of shame, long since forgotten by us; every evil thought cherished for a moment in our bosom; every emotion of evil, shall come up in that day of judgment, and claim each its home in the heart that gave it birth.

We are prone, as already said, to look upon our own acts, good or bad, as isolated things, with which we shall have nothing further to do, but meet their consequences, so much penalty, or so much reward for each deed, and so are prone to hope that in the pardon of our sins, all memorial of their existence will be erased. But this idea is not true. The acts of

men form parts of their character, and while men's sins spring, ever more, from an evil heart, they in turn add intensity to the evil that is already there. The man who has just done a wicked deed, has not simply incurred the guilt of that deed, but by it has also made himself a wickeder man.

And it is for this very reason that the sins of men are sure to find them out—to become their imperious masters—because the sins cherished soon become resistless, and the sinner becomes known among men by the appropriate name of his sin. Passion indulged will soon show forth its slave as a violent and outrageous man. Falsehood, loud and uttered, will brand him a liar. Strong drink indulged in, though in secret, will write its autograph, in the blood-shot eye, the foolish speech, the fetid breath, the palsied frame. Licentiousness will make its mark in the hollow eye, the downcast look, the trembling knee. And just so will every vice which seeks its indulgence through the medium of the senses. It may come so gradually as to be unperceived by its victim. But others see it, and God sees it.

It is utterly vain to hope for the concealment of any vice, whose indulgence is persisted in. It will most surely find you out, and when fairly seated on the throne, will even write upon your very brow, the name you so much dread: "He that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved." The very shunning of the sanctuary, and of the company of the virtuous, the averted eye, the downward look, the effort to look bold and unconcerned, the sneering at religion and religious things, that always mark a young man's first declension from the paths of virtue, are themselves the all-sufficient proof, full often, that his sin has already found him out, and spread the crimson blush of guilt, on cheeks that a little while ago glowed with the rosy hue of health.

But the mere exposure of social sins, does not satisfy the full language of the text. "Be sure your sins will find you out." Sin brings with it indeed a moral punishment often in this life, a shame and confusion of face, by reason of its detection. But it brings also a physical retribution upon the men who devote the senses, which God gave them as the medium of innocent enjoyment, to purposes of lust and vice. It is true of almost every social sin that it is, or leads to, a sin against a

man's own life. In all sensual indulgence there is an appeal to man's most imperious and degrading appetites. There is a drifting ever more in one direction. Whatever direction the special vice may take, whether toward theft, or gambling, or lewdness, or dram-drinking; they all pave the way for, if they do not necessitate, a physical intemperance, that draws upon the very powers of life, and brings in its train debility, disease, and death. It needs not, of necessity, be the intemperance of the wine-cup. The giving loose rein to human passion in any of its courses, is an intemperance, which brings at the last the prostration of vigor, and sows broadcast the seeds of death.

The sins of which we now speak: Drunkenness, gambling, debauchery, and all their allied vices, always injure the health, and shorten the life of their votary. They sap the very foundations of the body, and make it an easy prey to pestilence, disease, and death. *His sin*, is sure to find out the man who gives himself up to the control of his appetite, and to come upon him in the shape of horrible disease, filling his very bones with rottenness, and making life a weary burden. The laws which God has given for the guidance of man's physical life, assert their majesty by the fearful penalty they lay upon the transgressor. They also reiterate the awful threatening of the Moral Law: "The soul that sinneth it shall die." They bring upon him the natural consequences of his own folly. "His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins." There is no escape from the consequences, so long as he cherishes the cause. "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?" Sensual sin is always most deceptive, and man fears danger least when he is in the midst of the net. "He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life." Such sins follow their victim step by step in his career. They blunt the sensibilities by indulgence; but the less they satisfy, the more they clamor. What was a pastime becomes a passion, and when the wretched votary has filled up the measure of his iniquity, the fountain of his pleasure is turned into bitterness. Appetite cries, "Give, give!" and the

gift becomes the executioner of its own vengeance: "At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder."

The same wine cup that brought mirth to the heart and fire to the eye, comes again to bring anguish to the heart and madness to the brain. The delirium of joy, becomes the delirium of mania. The nerves which ere while thrilled with pleasure, now shake with palsy. The pleasing dreams of fancy give way to horrid shapes of fiends, and despair sits, like a nightmare, upon the heart which but a little while before, reveled in the proud consciousness of its manhood, and its freedom. Ah, fatal freedom! to sin, but not to escape. The source of pleasure meanwhile is all unchanged. The wine flashes just as brightly in the cup. It has just the same power to make glad the heart of man. God has mingled in it no new death potion. The cup which brings the mania to the drunkard, is just the same which brings brightness to the eye, and wit to the tongue of beauty. The whole change is wrought in the man himself, wrought in him by the slow, but sure results of breaking the laws which God gave for his happiness and well-being.

And what is thus true of this one vice, is equally true of all the sensual indulgences of men. Each in its own way and its own time finds out its victim, as it hunts him with its death-bearing minions, and lays him low in ignominy or in death. "Be sure *your* sin will find *you* out." Whatever of disgrace is attached to those who do such things, will be yours, if you persist. Whatever consequences such sins bring in the life to come, if you persist, they will bring to you.

But there is still another aspect in which his sin will find its votary out—will bring him great harm, in this life. It will harden his heart, and sear his conscience. We have before spoken of the deceitfulness of sin, blinding the eyes of its victim to his own true character; so that what all men know of him, he knows not of himself. "A deceived heart hath turned him aside, so that he cannot deliver his soul nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?" But sin does more than this. It makes a man reckless to the fate that awaits him. Even when his eyes are opened, and the gulf of ruin yawns before him, sin long indulged, will drive him headlong over the precipice.

It is the sure result of *all sin*, but in an eminent degree, of

those which are known as sensual sins, to harden the heart and sear the conscience. Each act of fresh indulgence not only adds to the power of the evil habit, and weakens the power to resist; but what is more alarming still, diminishes the disposition to attempt reform, and makes its subject more and more unwilling to listen to the voice of remonstrance. It may come from the word of God, or from the lips of friendship, or from the striving of conscience; but it is all unheeded. When once sin has gained full dominion over a man, it keeps him from the light; his Bible is unopened, the House of God is unfrequented, Religion is avoided, or if the truth will still find him, it rouses his hostility, and he turns in bitterness from that which must fill his heart with pain, because of conscious guilt and coming punishment. But even if he should be compelled to look the truth in the face, to feel that he is truly a guilty man, and bound to temporal and eternal ruin: it has so deadened his sensibilities, so destroyed the better aspirations of his heart, that the offer of mercy, and the full messages of the Gospel awake no responsive feeling in his bosom. The love of God, as it shines forth in the cross of Christ, kindles no flame of love in his heart. The offer of free pardon, of a new heart, of eternal bliss fall upon deaf ears. When the Redeemer of the world is set before him, his eyes blinded by sinful indulgence, will see no beauty in Him to desire. Sin has found him out, and he is led captive by it at its will. He is joined to his idols, and let alone.

We purpose to say little of the sure retribution of eternity. Sin will find its perpetrator out at the bar of God: "For God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and the solemn warning of God's word, to all transgressors of His Law is: "Be not deceived! neither fornicators, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God." 1 Cor. vi. 9, 10. And again: "The fearful and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake that burneth with fire

and brimstone; which is the second death." Rev. xxi. 8. To these fearful words of God, we need add nothing. They are awfully plain. Read them again, and ask, "Lord, is it I?"

But, is there no remedy? Is there no saving answer to the question of the aching heart,—“O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” Must these hateful passions reign for ever? Yes—“Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” There is a remedy. Sin may be conquered. The captive may be set free. There is a plan of mercy for blotting out the guilt of sin, and for setting the sinner free from its power. The drunkard may become a sober man; the thief, honest; the impure, chaste; the unclean, pure. The sinner may be saved from hell, and more than this, be saved from sin. It is not by covering up the sin. It must be exposed. It must be confessed and forsaken. It must find the sinner out, and if it find him a heart-broken penitent at the foot of the cross of Christ—it will lose its power there. He that confesseth, and forsaketh his sin, shall find mercy. He shall find, in the gift of God's Holy Spirit, freely given to the penitent asker, the power to crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts, to break off his sins by righteousness, to cease to do evil, and learn to do well.

If any man is truly willing to repent, not merely to be sorry for his sins, but to forsake them, and henceforth to live a life of godliness and purity; the Gospel was devised for him. Christ died for him. The Holy Spirit was sent into the world for him; and to him the word of God is: “Believe, and thou shalt be saved.” “Ask and thou shalt receive.” “Seek and thou shalt find.” “Knock and it shall be opened unto thee.” Blessed Gospel! that not only offers Heaven hereafter, but secures Heaven's character here. That frees me by its mighty power from the cruel bondage of my own long cherished sins, and restores me to myself, to society, and to God. Let me hasten to embrace it. Let my sins find me out; not in the scorn of men; not in disease of body or mind; not in hardness of heart; not in “shame and everlasting contempt,” but in humble penitence at the foot of Jesus' cross; in a broken and a contrite heart; in honest, manly confession; in the full purpose of heart, and endeavor after a new obedience!