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MATTER OF HOMILETIC INTEREST.

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## SERMONIC.

### SWEARING AND CURSING.

By CHAS. H. HALL, D.D., IN HOLY  
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*Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing  
and cursing. My brethren, these things  
ought not so to be.*—Jas. iii: 10.

THE American rough man indulges in profane swearing to an unexampled degree with as little of the real art of cursing as he can have. The Oriental, who never swears in our sense of the word, has perfected the art of cursing to a point little less than sublime. Of all mean and silly habits, the American has devoted the most time and pains to that which is meanest and least advantageous to him. The Turk has at least the claim to a superior position—that he can on occasion be really eloquent in denunciation; can express, with terrific force of word, sound, and gesture, the darkest passions of anger, rage, and malice; and in giving expression to his enmity can leave Satan himself at a disadvantage for lack of a body by which to point his hatred.

There is a wide distinction to be drawn between cursing and profane swearing. They are by no means the same thing. The curse is the direct

wish and worded expression of desired injury. It rises to the dignity of earnestness, has in it elements of consistent wrath, and reaches a place of bad eminence among the evil arts. It is, so to say, inverted religiousness, or elaborate diabolism; a sort of worship of the spirits of evil; a mode of prayer to Satan that good may be turned into evil; that the elements may be reversed for an enemy, and all things changed to destructive forces to blast and ruin him, body and soul. I am sorry to find a striking example of what I mean in the Psalms of David, but the 109th of the Psalter certainly leaves common minds far in the rear in concentrated rage. The writer reveled in a plenitude of wordy wrath against his enemy. Listen to his well-timed numbers: "Set a wicked man over him, and let Satan stand at his right hand. Let him be condemned, and his prayer become sin. Let his days be few, and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow; his children be vagabonds, and seek bread out of desolate places. As he loved cursing, so let it come unto him; as he delighted not in blessing, so let it be far from him. As he clothed himself

[The first several sermons are reported in full; the remainder are given in condensed form. Every care is taken to make these reports correct; yet our readers must not forget that it would be unfair to hold a speaker responsible for what may appear in a condensation, made by another, of his discourse.]

Christ? He is waiting to receive you. He has waited long. He has used all manner of means in order to lead you to Him. The joy and sorrow, loss and gain, sickness and health, life and death, providence and grace, have all been at work to lead you. Have you been to Him? Has He pardoned you? If not, why not now? As surely as He was at that well He is here waiting to hear your cry, waiting to pardon your sin, waiting to save your soul. Oh, why not now say, "I will arise and go to my Father"? If you have found Him, are you bringing others to Him? He who loves all, who died for all, has sent you to *all*. His last commandment was, "Go to every creature:" and how can you meet the Savior who went that weary journey through Samaria to save this one lost soul, unless you rise and go and do likewise?

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### SANCTITY OF VOWS.

BY B. M. PALMER, D.D., IN THE FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, NEW ORLEANS,  
LA., FEB. 25, 1883.

*I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all His people.*—Psalms cxvi: 14.

A vow is a solemn engagement or promise made to Almighty God, either positively of things which are known to be agreeable to His will, or negatively to abstain from things which are believed to be offensive. Vows may be displeasing to God for several reasons. For example, a vow may promise that which is in itself sinful, as when the conspirators among the Jews "bound themselves under a curse, that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul." Such a vow is both an injury and an insult to God. It is an insolent attempt, by counter legislation, to cancel the eternal law of right. Or a vow may undertake that which is impossible: as when a man engages that henceforth he will never have an evil thought—whereby he converts what is an infirmity into a positive sin. Or a vow may be frivolous, undertaking to do that

which is useless, or something entirely outside of the sphere of obligation and duty; in which case it becomes an act of will-worship, and is an impertinent trifling with God. Or without entering into these minute specifications, I may say, in general, that the disposition out of which a vow springs may itself be displeasing to God: as when we engage to do something by way of compensating God for a lack of service in the past; or when we offer a consideration to Him for blessings He shall confer. In all these cases we betray an unworthy conception of God, pointedly rebuked by Him in the fiftieth Psalm—"Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself; but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes."

Vows of this description are to be discountenanced as constituting a system of mere will-worship, and as being filled with the spirit of self-righteousness. And it is a curious fact well worthy of our remembrance that every form of self-righteousness, though it wear upon its front such an air of goodness, is nothing under the heavens but a bribe to induce God to enter into a compromise of His own solemn and eternal claims. We can afford on this ground to take our self-righteousness and trample it in the dust, and make it our glory that, if we rejoice, it will be in the imputed righteousness of our Redeemer.

You perceive from these instances that vows incautiously made may prove a snare to the soul; and therefore it is that the Hebrew ritual—which, as a grand collection of symbols, descended into the details of religious life—undertook so carefully to regulate this matter of vows. There were statutes determining when the vows of a minor were lawful, and under what circumstances he might be discharged from the same; and there were statutes concerning the redemption of vows, exhibiting a complete tariff of valuation. All which was designed to be restrictive and cautionary; showing even under that imperfect dispensation how careful we must

be as to our vows in the presence of Almighty God.

On the other hand, there are vows which are right vows, and which ought to be made—vows that engage us to do things that were originally binding upon us; vows made under a sense of the divine presence and the divine authority. Hence, in the book of Deuteronomy it is written: "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it; for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee." And so in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for He hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay." And so the Psalmist, under inspiration of the Holy Ghost, again and again declares his purpose to pay unto the Lord the vows which he has made—to pay them in the sanctuary, and in the presence of all the people. You will find it in the 22d Psalm, in the 66th, in the 76th, and in the 116th Psalm, twice repeated: "I will pay my vows unto the Lord in the presence of all His people."

LET US, THEN, INQUIRE SOMEWHAT MINUTELY INTO THIS OBLIGATORINESS OF THE VOWS WHICH ARE VOLUNTARILY MADE.

I. *They are distinct and conscious assertions of our religious nature.* This religiousness of nature forms the characteristic feature by which man is distinguished from the brute creation. The higher forms of instinct and the lower processes of reason shade into each other until it requires the microscope of a subtle dialectic to discriminate between the two. Undoubtedly there is in the brute a natural affection founded upon blood relationship, which is wonderfully similar to that class of affections in man founded upon the same tie of kindred. The brute has passions which marvelously resemble the passions of the human heart, such as anger, resentment, and even gratitude. So that when you seek to put your finger upon the

exact line of demarkation between the man and the brute, you find it only in the principle of worship. Man is religious, the beast is not. Man has a conscience—recognizes right, and its opposite, wrong—feels the obligation to practice the one and abstain from the other; while none of these utterances of conscience, none of these exercises of a purely religious nature, can be detected in the brute.

It is true, this religious element in man oftentimes exhibits itself in a dim, inarticulate way: for instance, in the dissatisfaction with the very blessings and joys of our earthly life. A strange restlessness often mars the happiness of those most favored by fortune; for it is a singular fact, open to daily observation, that the prosperous, even more than the unfortunate, exhibit the peevish fretfulness which springs out of this chronic discontentment with life. Yet, how few analyze this discontent and trace it to its source! How few recognize in it the spiritual hunger of the soul, the divine principle in man, which craves an angel's food and cannot be satisfied with the serpent's dust! It has riches—riches that it cannot count—yet it is restless and unhappy. Flowers, wreathed in garlands around the brow, wither at last into crowns of thorn to pierce with pain and shame. All this is of the earth, earthy: whilst man needs the divine, to feed the divine—the spiritual, to feed the spiritual—that which is soul-like, to feed the soul. In all this longing for the spiritual, the immortal, and the divine, we trace the outworking of that religious element which makes a man akin to his Creator.

This religious nature exhibits itself in another form, in the dim sense of sin and guilt. Man falls below his own ideal. He looks into the chambers of his soul, and finds its walls covered with inscriptions of evil. Execrable thoughts, which have never been embodied in act, or formulated in speech, disclose the vileness of his spirit, and he turns away with unutterable disgust from himself. In this deep humilia-

tion, however, there is no humility. No penitential sorrow bows the soul before the Throne of Grace with sincere and honest confession of sin. This self-loathing is nothing more than the shame which is felt when one discovers his spiritual nakedness in the presence of a holy God.

So, too, in the apprehension of the beautiful and the sublime, as man wanders through the earth and feeds upon the types of beauty and of grandeur which exist in nature. What are these apprehensions of taste but the reflection, in the material or intellectual sphere, of the higher forms of beauty and glory which reside in the moral? Though but the shadow of the true, it proves the substance to exist by which the shadow is confessedly cast. If man had not a soul, there would be no taste for the beautiful upon earth—a taste which ought to rise to a higher plane, and see the beautiful in God. The highest conception of beauty is only reached when we can look upon the face of Him who is "glorious in holiness," and "fearful in praises;" and all the forms of loveliness on earth, which gratify the sense of taste, are but faint types of the spiritual glory in which a spiritual taste is to find its joy forever.

But, far above all these indistinct betrayals of a religious sentiment in man, is that deep confession of obligation which is recorded in the vow. It is made with the most perfect consciousness of personal responsibility, in the presence and under the authority of that august Being to whom all obedience and worship are due. And it is void of all significance and solemnity if the whole religiousness of man's nature does not find expression in it. To this the solemnity of the vow is due, which must be felt by him who does not wish to become guilty before God. It cannot be violated or ignored without crucifying the better instincts of our nature, and without sponging out God's image impressed upon the human soul. Such, then, is the obligation of the vow taken before God, as founded

in the conscious exercise of the religious principle planted within us by the Creator Himself.

II. *A vow is the acknowledgment of moral responsibility, and a confession of guilt before God.* There is a vast deal of shuffling amongst men as to this matter of responsibility before God. You approach a sinner, and, in order to make him rely upon the power and grace of God, you remind him of his helplessness. He takes issue with you at once, and resents it as a personal insult. Because you seek to convince him of his dependence upon divine grace, he asks, with scorn, if you desire to convert him into a senseless machine. You approach the same man a second time, and press upon him the obligations of duty—the things which he ought to do, and the things which he ought to abstain from—the virtues he should practice, and the vices he should forsake. He turns upon you with the plea of inability, and confesses that very helplessness which, when charged upon him before, was considered a personal indignity. I am not presenting to you a metaphysical abstraction, but that which practically meets us in daily life. I call to mind, in the early years of my ministry, a young man who came into my study one Monday morning with flushed face, and burst into the following invective: "You preachers seem privileged to utter palpable contradictions in the pulpit. You, yesterday, declared the inability of the sinner, and then turned right around and urged him to repent and believe, under the peril of final perdition." I had been over that ground too much myself not to know every foot of it. I understood the case. I did not raise my pen from the paper upon which I was writing, but said quietly to him: "If you can repent of sin without any help from God, all I have to say is, go and do it." Instantly the confession burst from his lips: "I have been trying to do it all the morning, but I cannot." Then said I, "Let us go to Him who can;" and we knelt down together in that study, and laid

the case before Him who is able to take away the heart of stone and to give the heart of flesh. That young man, now gray with age, has been for thirty years preaching the gospel of gracious help to sinners perishing in their helplessness.

I give this instance, for the simple reason that I do not intend this morning to argue the case at all. I am willing to carry it by appeal to the bar of your own conscience and await its reply. That reply will be given; and it is always given with greatest emphasis, whenever a vow is made. In this vow it is confessed that God holds man responsible for what he does. There is no significance in the vow if it is not based upon the recognition of his individual responsibility before the law. And as this springs from a conscience under the pressure of guilt, it is a confession of judgment identical in character with that which will be made by the sinner at the bar of God in the last day. On this ground, also, I base the solemnity and obligation of the vow: that it is a distinct acknowledgment of individual responsibility under the law, and is therefore a confession of guilt.

III. *The vow is a voluntary act of the will, and is, therefore, of the nature of a covenant with Almighty God.* When I first came to this city to live, a prominent banker said to me: "I have transacted business in large cities before, but never in a place where the sense of commercial honor was as strong as it is here. A man comes into my bank, throws upon the counter a roll of money, and says, 'Count it and put it to my credit.' There is not present a witness to the transaction; he takes not a stroke of my pen in acknowledgment of that roll of money, but turns upon his heel, walks into the street, and engages in his business."

You gentlemen who are engaged in commercial business, can better say than I whether the same sense of honor obtains to-day which obtained twenty-five years ago. "It is not," said this banker, "because men are more honest

here than they are elsewhere, but because the unwritten law is more stringent than the law that is written; and the man who is unprincipled cannot afford to be dishonest, because he will lose more by the fall of his credit than he can hope to gain by the most successful fraud." But for all that, an agreement that is written upon parchment, and signed with the names of the parties, and attested by witnesses, is beyond question a more binding and reliable instrument than any engagement purely oral can possibly be. For this, two reasons can be assigned: one is, that the engagement, when written, is in a form to be issued before a court of justice, and carries the proof along with it; another is, that the transaction itself is more deliberate, entered into between the parties with a greater degree of circumspection, and is, therefore, acknowledged by them as more binding upon the conscience.

So a vow, when made with due deliberation, whether written or unwritten, is recognized before the bar of conscience as having the force of a written contract. It is an agreement between the soul and the Maker of the soul. It bears the signature of the parties to the contract, and is, therefore, of the nature of a covenant. The man who violates his vow has broken this covenant with God, and has falsified his word in the form which was most impressive and most solemnly given. Upon this ground, then, is based the solemnity of the vow. Being a solemn covenant between the soul and God, it cannot be broken, if you will not think the word too severe, without the guilt of perjury.

IV. *Every proper vow is in the direction of original duty, as well as in the direction of offered grace.* A vow is, therefore, doubly binding. It has absorbed into itself an obligation that existed before. It has embodied a duty which was in itself binding, and by its form ratifies, indorses, and strengthens that obligation under the sanction of an oath. A voluntary pledge to perform that which is in itself a duty, rivets the obligation

upon the conscience, and leaves no loophole for escape. But the vow is also in the direction of offered grace. Being made to Almighty God, with entire reliance upon divine aid in its fulfilment, it is clearly in the line of the grace which is offered to man.

From this aspect of the case, all the difficulties which threaten to arrest the fulfilment of this vow instantly disappear. No plea of inability can avail where a man has promised to do that which he ought to do, and where the promise is conditioned upon the strength which invariably accompanies a hearty reliance upon the divine covenant. Almighty God never issued a command which did not contain within itself a draft upon the power which shall enable the creature to do all that it is his duty to do. In all cases, therefore, the inability is taken out of the way whenever we attempt what God plainly commands, and with reliance upon the divine strength and proffered grace.

Here, for example, is the man with the withered hand, standing before the Savior. The command goes forth, "Stretch forth thy hand." The paralytic can, of himself, as soon create a world as control that lifeless limb. But the command from Him who has the power to enable, is the sufficient pledge that life will issue from the Giver of life to that withered arm. It is stretched forth, and becomes whole as the other, simply because, between the lines of the commandment, was contained a check upon the bank of divine strength for all the ability which the man had not in himself, but which grace would communicate. Do you desire a stronger instance even than this? There is Lazarus, four days in his tomb; and there is the Almighty voice, which says, "Lazarus, come forth." How absurd this call upon a corpse, except that it issues from the lips of Him who is the author of all life! It was the life going out with the command that animated the sleeping form, brought back the soul which had escaped, bound together the constituent parts of the

human being, and the reunited soul and body came forth from the prison of the grave. No plea of inability avails where Jehovah commands. To him who undertakes, in the divine strength, to do that which is enjoined by divine authority, there comes a grant of power by which to fulfill the obligation. For the reason, then, that the vow lies in the line of original duty and of offered grace, it is doubly binding upon the conscience.

V. *The vow is made under the sanction of the eternal world.* I suppose it is wrong; but I have not been able to help wishing that I could have, just for two minutes, a view of the realities of eternity, and then come back to my work, under the pressure of this knowledge. It is probably a wrong thought, for the simple reason that it contravenes the fundamental law of this dispensation, which is, unquestionably, the law of faith. Now, when a vow is rightly made, the soul must feel, to some extent, the powers of the world to come. For a moment the spiritual eye has been opened to catch a partial glimpse of all that is blessed in heaven, of all that is dreadful in hell, of all that is awful in the judgment-day, of all that is sublime in the vastness of the silent eternity to which we are hastening. How solemn the obligation becomes under the pressure of such a sanction as this!

My hearers, there are few men who have not vowed more than once in their lifetime. There are few in this audience to-day who have not, once and again—in times of serious illness, in times when death was threatening to invade their home—entered into solemn engagements with God. Do all these vows bind us? The question must be asked at the bar of conscience, as it must be answered at the bar of final judgment.

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SPIRITUAL GROWTH GRADUAL.—It is not with a rush and a spring that we are to reach Christ's character; but step by step we are to mount the ladder that rests on earth and rises to heaven.—GUTHRIE.