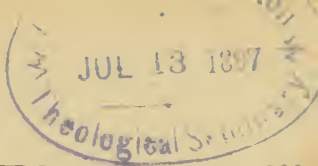


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XI.

SEEKING THE LORD SO AS TO FIND HIM.

BY JOEL PARKER, D.D.

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“Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you ; And ye shall seek me and find me when ye shall search for me with all your heart.”—JER. xxix. 12, 13.

GENEROSITY ought always to be exercised with discretion. The bestowment of gifts without a proper discrimination becomes a wasteful prodigality, and an indiscriminate munificence to the *poor* will do more harm by encouraging indolence and pampering vice, than it will do good by relieving want. Hence, those who would bless the needy, are called upon to see to it that they incite to industry and encourage virtue, as well as relieve want, by their benefactions.

The economy of divine grace, in this respect, affords us a perfect example. Nothing can be more absolutely a gift than the favor of God, as vouchsafed to sinful men. And yet nothing is made to depend more clearly and certainly on human endeavor. Indeed, the divine favor makes a demand for effort of the most strenuous sort, just because it is a benefit of such immense moment. They that enter the difficult gate must strive, must agonize, to attain their end. An entrance into the heavenly city can be gained only by an effort, the earnestness of which is represented by the vigorous action of an army, when they take by storm a fortified town.

“The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.”

Our text is a prediction of the return of the visible people of God to a spiritual and happy state, after a captivity of seventy years. In the preceding context it is said, “Thus saith the Lord, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon, I will visit you, and perform my good word towards you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.” In the Hebrew it is, as in the margin of your large Bibles, to give you an end and an expectation. That is, to give them an end of their captivity and troubles, and to create an expectation of a more happy state. Then the process is described, by which they shall be brought back to the enjoyment of spiritual blessings. “Then shall ye call upon me.” But this is not all; you shall do it very earnestly: “And ye shall go and pray unto me.” Even this is not all; you shall seek for the blessing in that diligent and persevering manner which is represented by searching for a lost article. “And ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.”

There are two very distinct views of seeking, as applied to endeavors after spiritual good. They are characterized by the *objects* placed before the mind. You are sometimes exhorted to seek *religion*. And what is religion, in the sense in which the term is employed in this exhortation? It is a state of mind in which are exercised a sincere repentance towards God, and a cordial faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He that exercises these dispositions of heart, possesses religion. If these sentiments are in lively exercise, and exert a powerful influence over the subject of them, he possesses

much religion; if they are feeble, and exert little influence, he has little religion. If he has *not* yet repented of sin, and embraced Christ by faith, he is said to have no religion. Observe, then, that this mode of exhortation is addressed only to those who are destitute of true piety. The object placed before them is a certain state of mind, and this state of mind they are urged to seek for. Of course, they are asked to seek it because they have it not. They are called upon while continuing in a state of alienation from God, to do something, as a means of attaining to repentance and faith.

The other view of seeking, to which I adverted, places a totally different object before the mind, as the thing to be sought. That object is God; or, which is the same thing, a manifestation of the divine favor. Instead of making a right state of mind the object, and seeking for that right mental and spiritual state, by an endeavor in which there are no holy desires, you are called on to place God's favor before you as the object, and to seek it by the exercise of a sincere repentance and a genuine faith. Do you understand clearly this distinction? Let me state it briefly again. In the one case you are asked to seek repentance and faith by an endeavor in which there is, of course, no element of either repentance or faith. If you possessed these dispositions you would not need to seek them. In the other case you are to seek God, or the divine favor, by repenting of sin, and believing in Christ. I need scarcely say, that the latter is the view of the subject which prevails in the Scriptures. In our text, God says, "Then shall ye seek *me* and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

To draw your attention to the prevalent mode of representing this subject, in the sacred Scriptures, let me cite, briefly, several passages. David says, in his last advice to Solomon, "If thou seek the Lord he will be

found of thee." Of Hezekiah it is said, "That in every work that he began, and in the commandments to seek *his God*, he did it with all his heart. The Psalmist says, "Thou art my God, early will I seek *thee*," and, in the Proverbs, God says, "They that seek *me* early shall find me." And Paul, in his epistle to the Hebrews, makes the following representation of God: "He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek *him*."

It is delightful to reflect, in this connection, that the favor of God is an object that may be obtained with more certainty than any other desirable end. Men may seek victory over their enemies, and prosecute their warfare with bravery and skill, and yet some slight incident, beyond their control, may turn the fortune of the day against them. They may enter the lists of fame, and, as few can obtain the distinction sought, they see the prize borne away from them by another. They may compete with their fellows for popular favor, and the caprice of the multitude may baffle their utmost skill. They may seek wealth with severe toil, and shrewd calculations, and cautious frugality, and yet the very elements may conspire against them to keep them in the vale of poverty.

In short, every temporal good is uncertain and transitory. But the favor of God is sure. "The battle is not (always) to the strong, nor the race to the swift, nor favor to men of skill, nor riches to men of understanding, but time and chance happeneth to them all." How cheering to look away from the uncertainty that rests upon all earthly good, to "The city that hath foundations whose builder and maker is God!" And, how delightful to know that the favor of the Lord is given, with infallible certainty, to all who properly seek it. "Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." "Seek (says our Saviour)

and ye shall find, ask and ye shall receive, knock and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that seeketh findeth, and he that asketh receiveth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

While, therefore, God has purposely clothed every other human interest with uncertainty, he has taken this highest possible benefit, his eternal favor, and placed it beyond the reach of time and chance. He has encouraged us to seek other objects, by a *probability* of success, proportioned to their value. To this, because it is of infinite value, he has given a positive certainty. "Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

But is it practicable to seek for this object? It is certainly possible to conceive that God's eternal favor may be secure to those that seek, and yet a man might be in such a state, as would render it perfectly unreasonable to ask him to seek it.

If you were to go to an untutored Hottentot, and exhort him to seek the favor of his Maker, without imparting to him any knowledge of the Gospel, it would be unreasonable for you to expect him to seek the divine favor. He would not understand the process, nor even comprehend the meaning of your exhortation.

But, have not men to whom the Gospel has come, any more power than such a one to seek effectually the Lord? I think they have. They understand what the object to be sought is. The promise of finding, you will observe, does not rest upon a peculiarly skillful mode of seeking. Nothing is required, except that you *really* seek. "Seek, and ye *shall find*."

What is it to seek an object? It is trying sincerely to find it. Can you not then seek the divine favor? Can you not, at least, *try* to find it?

It is equally obvious that you may seek it with all

your heart. You can scarcely mistake the meaning of this language. When you render a favor to one, with genuine good will, you do it with all your heart. You invite a friend to participate in your hospitality, and cordially urge him to spend a season in your family. You do it with all your heart.

It is a practicable thing to seek God with the same sincerity. You may make all your arrangements for securing the time for giving a needful and uninterrupted attention to this great interest. It may be inconvenient to do so. But if your physician should satisfy you that a fatal disease was bearing you on rapidly to the grave, and that a total suspension of attention to secular affairs, and a voluntary confinement in your chamber for ninety days, were indispensable to your recovery, you would be able to make your arrangements to pursue such a course. So, you have it obviously in your power to arrest, as far as it may be desirable, your attention to secular affairs, and thus to secure the time for an unembarrassed and thorough consideration of this great interest—the attainment of the favor of God.

Equally obvious is it, that it is in your power to secure your attention to this one interest. You may command the proper books, obtain the proper counselors, and cut off from yourself all diverting objects, and chain your mind up to this one great work, the securing of the divine favor.

This done, you may abandon, in purpose and in fact, every thing which you yourself judge to be wrong. In other words, you can listen to and obey the voice of conscience, and cordially, with all your heart, implore the mercy of God; and you may find abundant encouragement to such an effort in the saying of Christ, "Seek and ye shall find."

To confirm this view of the practicability of finding

the divine favor, let me call your attention, for one moment, to the history of such endeavors as found in the sacred Scriptures. The popular influence of the Bible depends very much upon the historical facts, and the real and supposed instances, by which every important principle is elucidated. Thus the uncertainty of worldly blessings, even to the best men, is set forth by the history of Job. The danger attending the highest and most desirable stations is portrayed in the career of Solomon. The deceitfulness of riches, and the danger of being satisfied with worldly possessions, are exhibited in the instance of the rich man, who said to his soul: "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry; thou hast much goods laid up for many years." But we have no historical facts, no instances, no supposed cases, to show that a man may seek after God with a sincere earnestness and fail to find him.

If we resort to observation and ~~experience~~, the same view is confirmed. We have never seen a man seeking the favor of God as a paramount object of regard, and failing to find it. There are, it is true, not a few, who, under the influence of nervous depression, or extravagant expectations in respect to the manner in which God manifests his favor, are oppressed with gloomy apprehensions, and treading on the confines of religious despair or delirium. But I have never met with a case in which a man in good bodily health, with an equable flow of spirits, and a calm and settled purpose, gave the first place to the work of securing the favor of God, who did not within a reasonable time find grounds of comfortable assurance that his end was secured. Indeed, it would operate on my mind as a most fatal discouragement, if it were not so. It would have more power than all infidel objections put together, if it could be shown that men might become entirely teachable and

willing to do their best to find the divine favor, and yet that their success would, even then, be uncertain. If I could know that one poor sinner had listened to divine instruction for the express purpose of learning what he should do to be saved, and had aimed, with a cordial good will, to comply with those instructions, and his efforts were unavailing, I never could stand up again with courage and call men to come to their Saviour. I must be permitted to pledge his veracity, that however poor, and heavy-laden, and guilty they may be, if they will but come to him he will give them rest. I must be allowed to say, in the name of God, "Ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

But, if it be so manifestly practicable for men to find the divine favor, why do not men, in greater numbers, attain an end so desirable? It is certain that multitudes give their habitual attention to spiritual things without becoming devout Christians. They appear in the sanctuary. They treat with respect the things of God. They do more. They seem to seek spiritual benefits by a regular attention to the means of grace. Why do they not obtain them? There are two reasons, one or the other of which applies to the greater part of our more serious hearers. First, many do not seek the right object. Instead of seeking God directly; instead of coming to him with humble importunity, begging his favor, and casting themselves on his mercy, they seek self-purification as a preparative for coming to God. Now, as this self-purification never can be attained, nor commenced even, without the divine favor, no amount of earnestness can avail anything while thus misdirected.

I have represented to my mind this case, by supposing a person afflicted with an issue of blood, like the

poor woman who touched the hem of our Saviour's garment, and was healed. Suppose yourself in such a case. Bloody discharges are issuing from the fatal wound, and defiling your person, and causing your life silently to ebb away. There stands by your side a friend who has power to heal you by a touch. He makes it an indispensable condition, however, that you shall take hold of his garment, in token of confidence. You wish to be healed. You make earnest effort, but it is improperly directed. You are not gazing at the physician, and pressing through difficulty, striving with outstretched hand to touch the hem of his garment. On the contrary, you are gazing upon the fatal wound, and, by various ablutions and changes of apparel, endeavoring to give yourself the decent appearance of a person who is not thus afflicted with a loathsome disease. You are not seeking the favor of your physician, but endeavoring to purify yourself, while the source of defilement still exists, in all its power.

So, many a sinner is occupied with the work of self-purification, and labors in vain. "The leprosy lies deep within," and he never will find spiritual health and peace till he listens, with an obedient temper, to the call, "Come unto me all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Others, again, who admit that they cannot purify themselves, have placed a wrong object before their minds by seeking another kind of preparation for seeking God. They confess that they entertain not the least hope of purifying their own hearts, but they fancy that they must attain to a certain degree of seriousness, and reach a state in which they shall secure clear and consistent views, as a preparative to seeking God. I have represented to myself this species of endeavor, by fancying that one of these little children has been walking

upon the upper side of the ceiling of this house. He has stept upon the ventilator, in the centre, and it has broken with his weight. He hangs suspended by clinging, with one hand, to a frail lath. To ascend, and recover himself, is impossible. To fall, by his own weight, would be fatal. His father provides for receiving him safely, if he will cast himself off at his word. But he is afraid, and distrusts his father. He is shown that he cannot recover himself. He admits it. He has placed himself in that position by his own folly. He admits this, and allows that he has nothing to depend on but his father's kindness. We all urge him to relax his hold, and to fall, at once, into his father's arms. He is not ready. He endeavors to place himself in a position in which he may fall gracefully, or in which it will be less mortifying to have it appear that he voluntarily yields to such a call, and that, too, after he had once, openly and boastingly, declared that he would carry himself safely through with his exploit.

Now, it is true, that as long as he cherishes this self-will he cannot relax his grasp, and fall into the arms of safety. But will you say that he cannot let go, while he employs much greater efforts to maintain his position?

Such is the condition of many a sinner, who admits that he cannot render himself deserving of the divine favor. He is endeavoring gradually to prepare himself. He tries to place himself in a position from which he may, with less mortification, and difficulty, yield himself to his Saviour. Yet the outstretched hands of mercy are beneath him. His Saviour calls him to relax his grasp, and sink into his arms. Instead, however, of looking to *him*, and seeking repose, with the beloved disciple, on the bosom of Christ, he still persists in looking to *himself*, and in endeavoring to change his own position. He does not find the divine favor, for the

obvious reason that *that* is not the object which he seeks.

If such fail, can there be any doubt as to the reason why those who are neglectful of the whole subject do not find God?

We may, it is true, raise the inquiry why so many of those who attend upon the public worship of God, and listen to the gospel, neglect to seek and obtain the divine favor.

This question may be answered in one word. They do not attend to the subject. That is to say, they do not fully consider those great, and solemn truths which so deeply concern them.

No one can think of the law of God, and of himself, as being a subject of the government of God, and remain unaffected. If he dwells upon it, he will perceive that the precept of the law is exceeding broad; that it demands of him that he shall be constantly governed by a supreme love to his Maker, and a disinterested and impartial regard to the interests of all mankind. He will perceive that the penalty of the law dooms the transgressor to eternal death, and that he, himself, is exposed to this awful curse. He will view himself as every moment exposed to be cut down, and placed forever beyond the reach of mercy. Looking down into the pit of the lost, and thinking of their companionship, their guilt, their extreme torment, and their despair, and of the greatness, and the instant character of his jeopardy of all this evil, he cannot avoid looking about, with anxious eyes, for a place of refuge.

So, if he will reflect on the mediation and sacrifice of Christ, and see at what a price his pardon was bought, he cannot but be moved by it. Why, you could not witness the scourging of the most inconsiderable of your fellow citizens, and see the blood trickling from beneath

the lash, and hear his groans, and know that he endured it from a voluntary connection with you, and through your fault, while he himself was innocent; you could not witness such a spectacle without the deepest, and most effective impressions being made upon your heart.

How then can you dwell upon the condescension, the suffering, the dying agonies of the innocent Jesus, and consider the scene till you appreciate it as a reality without being moved by it? You cannot do it. I know human nature is stubborn, and obdurate. That men have a wonderful power of steeling their hearts against the appeals of truth. But the gospel is stronger than man, and the only way to avoid the influence of that gospel, and to prevent himself from being subdued by it, is by casting it out of the mind by grieving the Holy Spirit, and refusing to look up to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.

The subject suggests the most urgent motives both of encouragement and alarm, to induce you to seek the favor of God.

There is great danger, my unconverted friend, that you never will be savingly affected by the gospel. You can easily mistake your object. Instead of seeking God you may seek self-purification. The attainment looks like something so praiseworthy, that you are extremely liable to continue in a fatal delusion.

By a perversion of the conscience, you may say I am trying to be good. Certainly, you may say, no one can object to that. To confess your sins, to acknowledge your helplessness, and beg for mercy, is humiliating. You are reluctant. You ask, how can you object to my endeavoring to be good? I will tell you how. God requires you first of all to come to him and implore his mercy through Christ. The purification of your nature can commence in no other way. While you esteem

that Saviour "as a root out of a dry ground," you reject God's appointed method of restoration to his favor. No pretext of seeking to be good can justify your resisting the very first claim of the gospel.

You may wash yourself with the utmost assiduity, and you will be filthy still. The leprosy and defilement are too deep to be touched except by him who can say, "be thou clean," and that nature which he created shall hear his voice and obey.

You may endeavor to place yourself in a more favorable position for falling into the arms of divine mercy.

It cannot be done. Guilt, deep ill desert, and imminent danger are the preparatives. You have these. You may as well confess it first as last. You are a poor, miserable, helpless, guilty sinner. Your efforts to prepare yourself for relaxing your grasp upon the world, upon self-will, are nothing but a tenacious clinging to them. You need no preparation to let go, and sink into the embrace of a merciful Redeemer. On the contrary, you need to do that as a preparation for every acceptable attempt to obey and please God.

And what other encouragement can you need than the declaration of our text, "Ye shall seek me and find me when ye shall search for me with all your heart?"

Yes, you may find God; you may secure his eternal favor. You may do it, not merely after seeking him long and unsuccessfully. You may find him now, if you will now search for him with all your heart.

Fix it in your mind, then, that this is your first object. Go from this sanctuary to your retirement, and kneeling before the Lord, say to him: "Thou knowest all things. Thou art the searcher of hearts, and thou knowest, O Lord, that laying aside every other interest as inferior, I now come to thee, searching for thee with all my heart.

“I have tried self-purification and failed. The outward cleansing does not touch the deep fountain of my personal vileness. I have waited to become ready, and have only departed farther from thee. My preparations for seeking thee have only been a form of resisting thy claims. Thou hast called me first of all to seek thee. To thee, then, I come—to thee, who hast never spurned a sincere soul from thy throne of grace.

“Thy word and thy instituted means of grace have taught me. Thy Holy Spirit has convinced me of sin. The uplifted bleeding Lamb of God has appealed to my sensibilities. That bruised and dying Redeemer has presented me the true and only remedy. Help me by thy grace to gaze upon him as the bitten Israelite turned his glazed eye (while the deadly poison was raging within) to the symbol of thy mercy. Arrest, by thy power, the work of death in this ruined, helpless nature. Hast thou not bidden me thus to seek thee? Help me, O God, help me by thy grace, for I search for thee with all my heart.”

Go thus to God, and you shall find his eternal favor. His promise cannot fail. “Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.”