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SERMON LIX.

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WHAT WILL NOT AVAIL IN A SINNER'S SALVATION.

GAL. 6:15.—*For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.*

It is a question of some interest, whether the millenium will entirely destroy all differences of religious opinion. From the nature and extent of certain promises some infer that all shall think alike on those points, which now are matters of frequent discussion. But when we duly consider the great weakness of the human mind and the unfathomable depth in the great things of God, we will be apt to conclude differently. The improvements of the millenium will consist not so much in any advancements in cold speculative theology, as in preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, in more earnest attention to the plain, fundamental, and practical parts of religion, and in a great increase of holiness of heart, purity of manners, and ardent zeal. That a most wonderful and unexampled change must take place to bring about entire unity of opinion, is manifest from all church history. Even good men in every age have frequently differed in opinion. It was so in the days of the apostles. Men of corrupt minds too have as yet always existed, who have loved and propagated error. Such in Paul's time were certain Judaizing teachers, who troubled the Christians of Galatia. To oppose the doctrines of such men and bring back a falling church, seems to have been the chief object of this epistle. In prosecuting this object he states, among other things, that "in Christ Jesus"—in the formation and subsistence of a spiritual union with Christ—"neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature:" or, as it might be translated, a new creation.

In treating this subject it is proposed,

- I. To NOTICE SOME THINGS WHICH WILL BE OF NO AVAIL IN A SINNER'S SALVATION.
- II. To SHOW WHAT A NEW CREATION IS, OR WHAT WILL AVAIL IN A SINNER'S SALVATION.

I. We proceed to notice some things that will not avail in a Sinner's Salvation.

No one, well acquainted with Scripture, can deny that it is our duty to dedicate ourselves to God in the ordinances of his house; among which baptism and the Lord's Supper are prominent. The Scriptures most clearly teach that those who, through fear of man, or shame of the Gospel, or contempt of God's ordinances, decline yielding submission to divine appointments, cannot enter the kingdom of God. For, says Christ, "Whosoever shall be ashamed of me, and of my words, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he shall come in his glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels"—And "whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of Man also confess before the angels of God. But he that denieth me before men, shall be denied before the angels of God."* While these passages make it abundantly evident that it is our duty to observe all the external duties of religion, and to witness a good confession of Christ before men in all suitable and divinely appointed methods; they do not teach that all who are baptized and partake of the Lord's Supper shall surely be saved. Simon Magus was baptized—Judas Iscariot probably partook of the Lord's Supper. And at this day multitudes both of those who have been baptized in infancy and in adult age, manifest such a spirit and temper as clearly proves them under the dominion of sin. And in many cases, persons having communed at the Lord's table, have gone back to the world and become the most bitter and malignant enemies of the cross of Christ. The advocates of baptismal regeneration, and of the invariable efficacy of sacramental observance, are certainly called upon to remove these difficulties or renounce their theory. But they never can remove them. In determining the acceptableness of any observance in religion, we must first ascertain whether knowledge, faith, repentance, love, hope, joy, and thankfulness, moved to the observance. If all of these are wanting the observance is sin.

The same remarks may apply with full force to any religious observance, even though not sacramental—such as tithing mint, and anise, and cummin—formal fastings and prayers—which were never intended to take the place of hearty piety. Such things could not save the Pharisees. Though they abounded in them, they still remained "a generation of vipers," and the recipients of wo. The truth is all men are naturally disposed to "rend their garments, rather than their hearts"†—to make religion consist in show, and forms, and names, and modes, and ceremonies, rather than in substantial acts of piety towards God and love towards men. Behold the superstitious Catholic, elevated on some point of observation, near some pass in the mountains of the south of Europe, busily engaged in counting his beads and chanting his prayers, and every few moments raising his eyes to observe the approach of some unsuspecting traveller, whom he has marked as the victim of his covetousness and robbery.

* Luke 9:26, and 12:8,9.

† Joel, 2:13.

Many of the most hardened, bloody pirates, are even punctilious in their superstitious observances. Even in Protestant countries, more importance is often attached to the shape of a bonnet, or the cut of a coat, or the mode of administering an ordinance, or the name of a party, than to acts of "faith, justice, and mercy." Need men be told these things cannot avail?

In like manner, acts of *voluntary humility*, which dishonor the body and are of the nature of penance, have no tendency to fit us for the kingdom of God. "Men have sought out solitary places, exposed themselves to the inclemencies of the weather, spent weeks and months in the most miserable hovels, deprived themselves of human society, sustained nature with a very small pittance of food, treated their bodies in the most rigid manner, taken long and wearisome pilgrimages, and done even more than all this,"* while the heart was becoming more and more lofty, proud, sullen, revengeful, misanthropic, and hardened. How long shall it be, before men shall learn that "the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

There can be no reason given, why men may not as well find fuel for their pride in religion as in any thing else. Present to them some object or plan, where selfish feelings can be gratified, or selfish interests promoted, and they will forego almost any thing else to obtain that one object, or execute that one plan. This remark leads to another of vast importance, which is, that it will be of no avail to have changed one sin for another; one passion or lust for another. In this way many of those reformations are produced, on which so many rely for salvation. "I am not so wicked as I have been, therefore I will be saved," is too common a way of reasoning. Some, who in youth were given up to habits of dissipation, or frivolity, or carnal pleasure, have at a later period of life laid aside those habits; and thence concluded that they are better prepared to meet their Judge than formerly. But could you search their hearts, you would soon see that they were still lovers of themselves more than lovers of God, and that instead of having forsaken their passions, their passions, or the means of gratifying their passions, had forsaken them. Besides, there are many sins, the dominion of which will exclude the dominion of other sins. A great desire to be popular will exclude the indulgence of haughtiness. Avarice excludes pomp, and riot, and dissipation. There are innumerable ways in which persons of every class, and age, and sex, may change their habits of life, their trains of thinking, and the objects of their affection and dislike, and yet never have any exercise of Christian graces, nor any desires after conformity to the will of God. Often the sinner is, according to the warnings of his conscience, so closely pursued by the avenger of blood, that he will lay aside many sinful practices, and thus attempt to compromise the matter with God. He may, like Ahab and others, seem very much humbled. He may, like Saul, send for the ministers of religion; and

* Life of Xavier,

like them grow worse continually. External reformation, proceeding from no gracious principle within, will be totally unavailing. "The kingdom of God is *in* you."

In every age, but, perhaps, especially in this age, are men in danger of acquiring the belief that acts of *pecuniary donation* will of themselves, and without very strict regard to the motive of the giver, secure salvation. Actuated by such a belief, how many have been led to found hospitals, and lazarettos, and monasteries, and asylums, and churches. Who but God can tell how far such a belief operates on many, who are the largest contributors to our missionary, Bible, tract, Sabbath school, and similar institutions? Many a dollar does this principle procure for the poor and needy. Now it is right to support good institutions and relieve the poor, but if done with a self-righteous heart, God will not be pleased. The most costly sacrifices, thousands of rams and ten thousands of rivers of oil might be given to charitable purposes, and God would say, "the earth is mine and the cattle upon a thousand hills." Paul held that a man might give all his goods to feed the poor, and yet fail of divine acceptance.

Neither will *gifts* avail. Gifts are not graces—nor do they always accompany graces—nor are they the least evidence of graces. Some of the most fraudulent, impious, and licentious men, now upon earth, once sang, and prayed, and spake, with a propriety, a tenderness, and a fervor, almost passing description. They had an ease and earnestness of manner, a force and copiousness of expression, which won the favorable judgment of the most judicious Christians. But time and further trial brought to light their true characters, and showed that they were the enemies of all righteousness, and the workers of iniquity. Beware of any belief of so dangerous a nature, as that gifts are graces, or even signs of graces.

Neither are those wise who rely for salvation upon convictions for sin, awful apprehensions of the wrath to come, tears, and groans, and sighs, and spiritual illuminations, which beget security and ease, or end not in holiness. The lost spirits, who are reserved in everlasting chains under darkness until the judgment of the great day, believe that there is a God, and they tremble. The devils have far more of religious terror, than any soul of man on earth. They feel the gnawings of the undying worm—they have fearful apprehensions of the judgment to come—they utter not only groans but howlings; yet they are continually getting further and further from God. And it cannot be shown that the same may not be experienced by men. Indeed the Scriptures do furnish us with cases of this very kind. Felix trembled under the influence of his convictions. Judas, under conviction of the sin of selling Christ, was so oppressed that he was driven to self-murder. "Fearful looking for of judgment" is one sign of final rejection from God. Fears of this kind, and sorrow, and remorse, and such like feelings, never make the heart better, and of course fit no one for heaven.

Nor will a removal from one church to another, or a change of religious opinions, secure heaven. Some fickle people will join a church,

and remain in it for a while, and then leave that and join another, and so on. Or they obtain some sort of system of religious belief and soon become dissatisfied with that, and change again and again, vainly imagining that they are making great discoveries in religious matters. Beza says of Bolezius, that he changed his religion every time the moon changed. Such are "ever learning, but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." Besides, what good can it do a man to change his religion, if his religion do not change him? If he remain the same, it matters not what church he joins, or what system of doctrine he professes; for "without holiness no man shall see the Lord."

Many suppose themselves in a fair way for glory, because they find themselves completely disgusted at the deceit, and emptiness, and vanity, and folly, and honors, and riches, and pleasures of the world. Such have sipped at the fountain of earthly enjoyment, until through restlessness, or satiety, or love of change, they take up the subject of religion, merely for its novelty, or the pungency of its truths. But this disgust is no better than that which suicides have. Let us take the case of Ahithophel.* He was a counsellor at the court of David, and esteemed very wise. His counsels were generally, if not invariably, followed. When Absalom raised the rebellion against his father, Ahithophel was among the conspirators. Soon after the rebellion broke out, a council was called, in which the advice of Ahithophel was overruled. "When he saw his counsel was not followed, he went home and hanged himself." Here is disgust with the world and the perfection of it; but there is no holiness. Disgust with the world is not a Christian virtue. A full conviction that this world is unsatisfying in its nature, and a correct judgment of its proper use and just value, belong to souls enlightened from above; but disgust is a different thing.

Mere zeal, however ardent and durable, is not decisive proof of piety. There may be a zeal for Christianity of precisely the same character with the zeal of a Mohammedan for the imposture of his prophet. There is a vast amount of this sort of zeal now in the world. Men are compassing sea and land to make proselytes to Popery, and other systems of destructive error. "I bare you record," says Paul, "that ye have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge." Zeal is often nothing more than constitutional ardor directed towards religion. Or perhaps it may be a mixture of pride and vanity, of malice and turbulence, of severity and sanctimoniousness. Zeal often degenerates into impatience and restlessness. True zeal is not heat without light, but has a due proportion of heavenly light and holy love.

Again: An increase of *speculative notions* on religious subjects is not religion, even though these notions be correct. A man may be sound in faith, but rotten in heart. Many men's minds become so overloaded with queries, and theories and thoughts about religion, that there is room for nothing else. And they show the state of their minds by their conversation; and when they have talked much on the subject, appear well pleased with themselves. But "the kingdom of

* 2 Sam. 17:23.

God is not in word, but in power"* Nor is there any value in that religion which occupies the head, but warms not the heart.

It ought not to be necessary to say that religion consists not in strange sights, and sounds, and dreams, and presentiments, and unaccountable impressions. The whole of many religious experiences consists in some such imaginations and delusions. Many, who thus obtain religion when asleep, will when they awake in eternity not awake in God's likeness. Many tell about what voices said to them, who do not obey the voice of God in his word. Indeed, such people generally have an utter contempt for all religion obtained through the instrumentality of the word, yet God has no where in the Bible mentioned even the possibility of obtaining true religion in any other manner. One apostle declares expressly that God's people are "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever."† Another apostle says, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth."‡ A contempt for Bible truth is one of the worst evidences respecting piety. It is of the very essence of fanaticism; than which nothing is more contrary to God and genuine religion.

It is proper to add, that religion is not obtained by *birth* or *inheritance*. Believers are expressly declared to be born "not of blood." The Jews gloried in it, that they had Abraham to their father, but showed by their rejection of Christ, that they were not fit for the society of Abraham in heaven; for when he was on earth and by the visions of prophecy saw Christ's day, he rejoiced in it; but they who lived in that day were sore displeased at Christ, at his doctrines, and at his miracles. Let not us then deceive ourselves with idle reflections on the piety of our ancestors, supposing that their relation to us will secure us from righteous judgment. Every one of us shall give account of himself to God. Even the piety of Eli and of David could not screen their ungodly children from the just punishment of their sins. No more can the piety of our parents be transferred to us in any possible manner, so as to save us from an everlasting overthrow, if we continue unregenerate and unholy.

* 1 Cor. 4:20.

† 1 Pet. 1:23.

‡ James 1:18.