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PASTORAL VISITING.*

BY REV. E. M. GREEN, D. D.

WHILE preaching is the chief work, it is by no means the only work of the ministerial office. In order to perform the duties of his calling with any measure of fidelity, the pastor must come near to his people—nearer than he can get in the pulpit. It is the “house-to-house” part of his work that brings him and his message into closest contact with them. Not only does pulpit work need to be supplemented by personal work, but his intercourse with his people in their varied and often striking experiences develops to the pastor’s view innumerable applications of divine truth, sometimes new and surprising; the experimental knowledge thus acquired he carries back with him to his study and his closet, and subjecting it to the crucible of his own thoughts, he seems to get a new message from on high; then carries that message into the pulpit, prepared to preach with unwonted appropriateness to their real necessities. The best sermons are not manufactured in the study; they are born amid the throes of pastoral sympathy.

The pastor must know his people—know them all, old and young; and there is no way in which this can be done so well as seeing them in their homes. He must cultivate their affections, drawing them to himself, that thereby he may draw them to Christ. He should feel, and lead them to feel, that he is one with them in heart, and in those great interests of the soul which bind men closest together—one with them not only in church

* Part of an address to the students of Union Theological Seminary, May 28, 1899.

“AND SO THEY WRAP IT UP.”

A SERMON.

BY REV. JOHN W. PRATT, D. D.

“That they may do evil with both hands earnestly, the prince asketh and the judge asketh for a reward, and the great man, he uttereth his mischievous desire; and so they wrap it up.”—MICAH vii. 3.

There are not many patterns of godly patriotism either in sacred history or profane which we ourselves might with more advantage observe and copy than the prophet Micah.

Neither could that patriotism be more beautifully and fervently expressed than you have it in the opening of the chapter that supplies the text.

“I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits, as the grape-gleanings of the vintage, there is no cluster to eat”—(and what was the reason?)—“The good man is perished out of the earth, and there is none upright among men.” There would nevertheless have been some hope for the people, some prophet of another state of things, when the righteous would come again as the grapes appear in their season, but for the melancholy facts that are recited after the lamentation.

You can readily imagine that however wicked a people might be, as long as there remained good laws, good judges, a sound upper class in society, none need despair of good reform sooner or later. A population can never be declared altogether ruined or sunk while good examples are offered by the rich and upper classes to the poor and lower classes, and reverence exists for the majesty of the law framed in wisdom and enforced with justice, for the punishment of the evil-doer and for the praise of them that do well.

But according to the prophet Micah, the consummation of ruin had come upon the land of Israel. The very fountains of virtue, equity and social order had everywhere been polluted.

The princes and the judges and the chief officers allowed themselves to be corrupted by the very men they ought to have governed and put right.

A good king was upon the throne, but he was powerless among so many bad subordinates.

Laws were passed for the benefit only of those who could pay for them.

Judgment was given from the bench to the party in the suit who could pay the largest bribe.

Virtue grovelled in the dust and vice fared sumptuously, and money, not character, made the man. Here lay the degradation of the social system.

Of course the rulers were the chief criminals for allowing a bribe to purchase what a bribe ought never to have touched.

Had the judge been incorruptible, the commonwealth might have been saved; but you are now to be interested mainly in the conduct of the masses in seeking to corrupt.

The people had had governors and they made use of them; and what I have to force upon your attention is that murderers, thieves and evil-doers had something to get rid of, something to put out of the way before they could transgress in peace and with all their might. Never mind now, I do not stop to consider the character of the rulers in Israel, I summon you to look at the conduct of the nation as the conduct in a certain sense of all nations and of all men.

Recollect we all have princes, judges, great powers set over us, *i. e.*, authorities to guide us and to govern us. It so happens, as you will see as soon as I name them, that we cannot corrupt them, cannot bribe them; but we would if we could; we very often try to do it; nay, we very often seem to have done it.

Now this is the proposition which I wish to establish to-night: that sinners have a good deal to do before they can sin as they do sin, that they have certain powers to propitiate; that naked transgression is what few men dare to commit; unbelief in its own apparel is too ugly even for unbelievers; and thus before the world of the ungodly (and some of you among the number to whom I have special reference in this discourse) can "do evil with both hands earnestly" they are obliged to cover that evil in certain garments of their own manufacture, as the Jews bribed their judges; "and so they wrap it up."

Now there is one prince, one judge, one great officer setting up authority in the heart of every man present, and that is conscience; the power of which it has been truly enough said, that

it is the "God in the man." You can hardly, perhaps, furnish a better account of the conscience than that you give of magistrates—"it is sent for the punishment of evil-doers and for the praise of them that do well."

It approves you when you do right, it accuses you when you do wrong.

Accordingly, the very first thing you must do if you resolve upon doing a certain act known to be forbidden and sure to be condemned by that judge is the trying to pacify him, the shutting of his mouth or the blinding of his eyes or the dressing up of what you are about to do in imitation of something better or not quite so bad.

And a very common covering for bad actions is the plea of "custom" or the "way" of the world.

Let a man only secure a long list of great names on the side of any sin, and he puts them before conscience with the air of one who should say, "Now punish me and you punish half the world. I have no time now to mention them, but assuredly this argument is all the covering you find upon multitudes of wrong actions tolerated in good society.

Men light upon a bad deed, know it for a bad deed, nevertheless love it and long for it; then to pass it uncondemned through the court of Conscience, they take away its proper garment, by which everybody knows it, carefully disguise it in that rich raiment woven with the words, "Everybody does it; nothing is more common"—"and so they wrap it up."

Or, again, there is a lust that calls for indulgence, an appetite that will not be sated without sin; but look you! men will talk to you about nature; ask you how it is that they are as they are, if they ought not to do as they do; and they fling around the drunkenness or the gluttony or the uncleanness the white excuse of the plea that "they are not their creators"—"and so they wrap it up."

A different class of men will work differently on conscience with a view to corrupt it and pervert it; and here, I have no doubt, I am including many of yourselves.

The boasting of many virtues and few vices, the challenging of a minister and even their own hearts to indicate the open transgression, the bad habit, the wicked word. The giving the go-by altogether of what is in the heart, and the turning of us and of

themselves dexterously and entirely on the outer life. Ah! this was the ancient Pharisee covering up the bones with very white sepulchres! doing good things to be seen of men, but having hearts that were corrupt as the grave. And, indeed, I never want to look within you as God looks, to be certain that there are many of you that thus impose upon conscience I admit that your cries are not published in the daily paper, they are not blazoned in the light of day, not inscribed upon the walls, not whispered by the town gossips, not even imagined by the evil thinkers of which every town has its full proportion; but what then? Is this because you love God any better or hate sin any worse? May it not be because public crimes cost you more than secret ones? because business and good reputation often come together and go together? And if not for this reason, because few men like to be hated? Ay! verily, these may account for the looking so fair and the being so foul.

And ever since the time when Cain brought the hard-wrung sacrifice to the God whom he disobeyed, dreaming that its costliness would cover the proud heart, and that the crime escape in the dress of an oblation, the more wicked a man's heart has been, the longer prayers has he said in public, the larger charities has he given in public, the more solemn and sanctimonious countenance has he worn in public; "and so they wrap it up."

Over and above these, I feel another disguise hung up for use in the wardrobe of sinners who corrupt the conscience; that which another prophet has put into words, "To-morrow will be as this day and far more abundant;" that which the men of Athens were using, "We will hear thee again of this matter;" that which Felix covered himself with, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a more convenient season, I will call for thee." Ah! this is indeed a well-worn, favorite garment for unbelief to borrow. You see, it looks like "proper caution," it looks like "doing nothing hastily," it looks like "counting the cost;" and although I have said that conscience cannot be corrupted or deceived finally, it certainly can be for many years by the bad man's procrastination.

The child is telling its mother, "I will serve God when I am a youth;" the youth is telling his father, "I will serve God when I become a man." The man is telling his minister, "I will serve God in hoary hairs." The patriarch is telling his grand-children

not to fear, that there is time enough on the death-bed to pray, Lord, remember me. "And so they wrap it up."

And the simple truth is, men and brethren, that you would find it difficult to mention a single wrong-doing among men, whether towards the gospel of Christ or towards the Ten Commandments which they do not dress up as something better than it is; and what makes the habit so alarming and so ruinous is that along with practicing on their own conscience, along with explaining away scripture and imposing on their fellow-men, the ungodly are every hour deceiving themselves.

The sinner first makes the lie and then loves it, exactly as the Jews in the time of the prophet would first bribe the judge to forget the law, and then forget it themselves.

This is the very worst form of iniquity, the fancying that right and wrong are really as we would have them to be; so that, as in the case of persecution, the very killing of a Christian is thought to be doing God service.

One of the murderers in the great St. Bartholomew massacre was heard to declare, "God was much obliged to me on that day."

Oh! I pray you, men and brethren, if you must break God's commandments, beware of the first approach to the falsehood that you are keeping them! Look at the text. The covering up of crime was the only thing that helped the Jew to be as bad as he longed to be.

This is a most extraordinary passage. To make them quite busy, quite earnest, quite at ease in their wickedness, that they might, in the forcible words of the prophet, use "both hands" at it, they were obliged to compound with the judges. Well then, if they had left the sins to themselves, seen them and allowed others to see them, there would have been less comfort in sinning with a hope of turning away from it. St. Paul has language to this very point, "Sin, that it might appear sin, wrought death in me, by that which is good, that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful." Whatever creates wickedness among us must be a curse; but whatever uncovers it when it is created must be a blessing; and yet all the world over it is not the wrong doing men care about, if they can but seem to others and to themselves to be doing right. Why, you might as well cover up a fire in your house instead of quenching it, or a disease in the body instead of curing it; but no, you dare not face the naked

transgressions of a single hour; you would loathe from your hearts both the deeds and the doer.

And yet one shudders at the fact which we are all along declaring only in other words, that sin in its true colors actually alarms and repels even the sinner himself.

I know not whether you have ever thought of this. If not, the text illustrates something well worth noticing. There are the very worshippers of evil, dressing it up in the garments of what is better. Not before others only, but to themselves, wicked men always make their wickedness look as well as they can. They give it smooth names, color it and fashion it after some model not so bad. What! is there no good word for sin even from the man who lives in it? Is the best friend of Satan has upon earth ashamed of the alliance, and though bound by it, disowning it? Was the very worst crime ever committed done by a good pretence under a good yet false name? If a despotic empire determines to rob, must it borrow the mild and gentle word and profess to adjust boundaries? If a tyrant schemes against the liberty of a subject, must he always call it the prevention of treason or the crushing of rebellion? If an illegitimate power wishes to perpetuate itself in its unholy supremacy, must it always veil its atrocious designs under the flimsy subterfuge of reconstructing disloyal states? If a persecutor of the faith would bring firebrands and bloodshed in defence of the church, must he evermore do it in God's name, lying, as he kindles the faggots, and about his "love for the truth?"

And if a libertine cannot run riot without pleading the force of nature, a thief cannot defraud without sheltering his sin behind "the way of business," and if a man with a bad heart thinks he has answered you when he boasts that you see nothing of it in his life, if the mean and covetous man hides his hateful idolatry of money behind the plea of thrift and economy and laying up for a rainy day, oh! I know not how you take it, but it seems to me that an apostle could publish nothing against human wickedness worse than this. It is given up, discarded, abandoned by the very lips that should, if they could, have spoken well of it. God is wringing from his enemies their eulogy upon his law—their condemnation of themselves. So that if you were to ask me for the testimony of the strongest in the universe that he will be justified when he speaks, and be clear when he judges the

sinner, I should not summon you to Mt. Sinai, when the Decalogue he broke was given, nor yet to other mountain where "milder words declared his will." No! But I should say, "Every mouth must be stopped and all the world appear guilty before God," for such is the sinner's own detestation of his own sins that he refuses to look at them as they are, and in order "that he may do evil with both hands earnestly," he "calls good evil and evil good;" "and so he wraps it up."

Now from all this it follows, that the first thing the gospel has to do with a man is to unwrap his sins and show them to him just as they are.

The regeneration of the Jewish people is to happen, when the prophecy comes to be fulfilled, "I will return thy judges as at the first and thy counsellors as at the beginning. Let the magistrate be incorruptible and the people will no more endeavor to corrupt."

Exactly answering to this must be the conversion of the sinner.

Nothing will be done till the conscience is made a pure conscience. What you want is the judgment-seat of the soul worthily occupied. A voice must be heard, the echo of scripture in the court of the man's mind saying of every word, thought, deed, "This is wrong, or that is right." We are no longer to find you dissembling or cloaking. Ye must learn the worst of yourselves, or you will never be taught the way of salvation.

This then is the very first object we have to gain as the preachers of the gospel; the summoning of you to the light, that your deeds may be made manifest, the pulling to pieces of every refuge of lies, the breaking down of every stronghold, be it what it may, the shutting of a man's mouth when he begins to tell us that he is not as other men are, aye, though he wraps it up in the prayer of the Pharisee and begins to tell God of it and thank him for it.

As if you ask us how we reckon upon this result, bid us give you the machinery that will undo what man's deceitful heart has done and stand him all unwrapped before God crying, "Be merciful unto me a sinner," then I tell you, no argument, no history will ever do it, no eloquence will ever do it. I have no need to be informed that such things have been tried and are trusted to for bringing men to self-knowledge and repentance. Nay, I am familiar with certain systems of theology which require us

to postpone the preaching of "Christ crucified" until you shall have passed the man along as through so many chambers from inquiry to conviction, and then from conviction to repentance, then from repentance to faith, then from faith to conversion. I see nothing of this in the Bible. I never saw it work in the practice of the ministry. If you mean to say that none will believe and repent until they are convicted of sin and helplessness and the need of a Saviour, of course that is all granted; but what I argue for is that the preaching of the cross is the proper preaching to bring men to faith and repentance.

I am rooted in the belief that the vilest sinner upon earth cannot be shown the sacrifice of Christ an hour too soon; that long before he understands it and welcomes it as a deliverance for himself he will be awed by it as a demonstration of God's justice, and then melted by it as a demonstration of God's love.

So that my simple and solitary answer to your question, "What will you do with the sinner who has wrapped up his sins that he may do evil with both hands earnestly, and thus, as we may fear, is going to ruin in the dark?" my only answer is, "I am determined not to know anything amongst you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified."

But what has this to do with a Pharisee or a self-deceiver? How can this tear off the borrowed raiment from his sins and show them in their rags for what they are? Well if this will not do it, nothing else can.

Do you not comprehend how any man looking at the cross would find himself asking, "How can my innocence be reconciled with all this outlay of suffering?" How could he help saying, "I may wrap up my wickedness, but there must be some one who sees through the wrapping;" and hence the marvels of crucifixion and the prodigies of Mount Calvary. The more you make of the remedy, the more you make of the disease. Offer a debtor a trifle and he may think he owes but a trifle. Spread out your riches for his acceptance, and he begins to compute his liabilities. Over and above which none of us can help seeing that sin itself looks more sinful side by side with such a sacrifice.

Little sins have no more place as soon as I know that God's Son died to save sinners.

All compounding, all compromise, all concealment is rebuked in a moment when I know the value of Christ's interference.

So that just as I would carry the gospel to a sinner in despair that I might comfort him, so would I carry it to a sinner in self-righteousness that I might arouse and rebuke him. Oh! yes, men and brethren, ye may indeed, if ye will wrap up your sins, we are no longer going to quarrel with you for that; but the question now is, How will ye wrap them up? I bring you this night a robe which you never could have fashioned, the spotless righteousness of him who never sinned.

Blessed is the man whose iniquity is wrapped up in it.

It reminds me how near to the very worst of men the gospel may be brought when in this very chapter I have first the chief of sinners in the text, and then a few verses forward sentences like these: "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of his heritage." "He retaineth not his anger forever," because he delighteth in mercy. "He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us." "He will subdue our iniquities, and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." Ah! you can never wrap up as Immanuel can wrap up. All things are naked and open till he covers them. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

"And so they wrap it up," fold after fold, year after year; and so they wrap it up.

Fitly does a great preacher call upon the Almighty: "Eternal God! on what are thine enemies intent? What are those enterprises of guilt and harm, that for the safety of their performers must be enveloped in a darkness which the eye of heaven must not pierce." Aye, but which the eye of Heaven does pierce and the hand of Heaven will soon tear away.

What a morning of discoveries will that morning be! Every dark deed, every whispered syllable, every secret thought be

"All exposed before the sun,
While men and angels hear."

Hark! a voice from the seat of judgment. The universe listens breathless while it sounds.

"These things has thou done and I kept silence." "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself, but I

will reprove thee and set them in order before thine eyes." "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder and perish." "What wilt thou say when he shall punish thee?" My brethren, look to it that when called to plead at the judgment-seat of Christ, you can face omniscience without fearing it, and when the sound reaches us from the great white throne, "I know thy works," God grant that each of us may have it to answer, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee."

Oh! let the dead now hear thy voice!
Bid, Lord, thy banished ones rejoice:
Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, the Lord, our righteousness.