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SERMON XLVI.

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OF ALBANY.

THE CONDUCT OF SINNERS TESTED BY THE RULES OF WORLDLY WISDOM.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:15. *I speak as to wise men: judge ye what I say.*

MOST men are ready to claim a considerable share of worldly wisdom, and not a few, it must be acknowledged, possess it in an eminent degree. There are those who know how to make the most of their means of becoming rich; who are always on the alert to take advantage of every turn of circumstances; and whose sagacity in a single commercial speculation may bring into their possession a large fortune. There are those who understand well how to secure and advance their own fame; who, by simple management, attain some of the highest posts of worldly honor. And there are those who are sharp sighted to discern both good and evil as it respects the political relations of a community—men who will see a cloud in the distant horizon, and know that it is charged with lightning and tempest, when it is no bigger than a man's hand; men whose counsels in dark times are considered a safeguard to the public interests. In every department of human action there are indeed *pretenders* to wisdom; but there are also truly wise men;—men whose opinion on any subject which relates exclusively to this world is justly entitled to consideration and respect.

But while these men are sagacious to understand and secure the interests of the present life, in many instances at least, their wisdom utterly fails them in respect to the life that is to come. In the one case, they show themselves giants in wisdom; in the other, the merest dwarfs. In the one case, you may listen to what they say as if it were oracular; in the other, you may witness what they do, (for they generally *say* little,) and it will leave you wondering at their infatuation. My design, in this discourse, is to reason a little with this class—with all, indeed, who have a common degree of worldly wisdom, in respect to those great interests which they are prone to regard so lightly. I am going to speak to you as wise men; and ask you to judge of the course you are pursuing in respect to religion, by those common and acknowledged principles of wisdom which you are accustomed every day to apply, in your various professions and employments.

1. There is a large class who do not come to any definite and intelligent decision of the question whether the Bible is really a revelation from God; though they have all the means at hand for forming such a decision. I ask them, as wise men, honestly to pass judgment on their own conduct.

I can suppose there may be some danger here, that some of the class to which I refer, will not recognize this description as applicable to themselves.

SERMON XXVII.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

OF ALBANY.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTIONS AGAINST COMING TO THE LORD'S TABLE, ANSWERED.

ZECHARIAH 4:10. *Who hath despised the day of small things?*

This interrogation makes part of a prophecy which was designed to encourage the Jews in respect to the success of their enterprise in rebuilding the temple. There were many things at the commencement of it which seemed discouraging: it was emphatically a day of small things; but the prophet intimates that such a day is not to be despised; and that that which had a feeble beginning, would issue in a glorious result. The head stone should be brought forth with shoutings, of "Grace, grace unto it."

There is something analogous to this in the common course of divine operation. A seed is cast into the earth, and it germinates; and begins to shoot upward; and perhaps, in your walk you tread it under foot without observation; but ere long a tree rises and stretcheth forth its boughs toward heaven, and takes its place among the majestic oaks of the forest. The first dawning of the day-star is but feeble—like one solitary ray falling on thick darkness; nevertheless this almost imperceptible glimmering is a sure precursor of the brightness of noon-day. When the little company of pilgrims who originally settled in New-England, were collected on the shores of their native country to embark for a wilderness, which to them lay beyond the ocean, doubtless it seemed to many who looked on, a desperate enterprise; and certainly it was the day of small things; but long since has that enterprise proved itself to have contained the elements of national greatness and glory; and at this hour it reflects back light and joy upon the country in which it originated; and I may add, is carrying a healing influence to all the nations. The cause of temperance, as it exists in this country, took its origin in an accidental conversation between two individuals; and had you listened to that conversation, not improbably it might have seemed to you an unimportant one; but there grew up out of it a great moral institution, which in these few years, has wrought the greatest change which any country, perhaps, has, in the same period, ever experienced. And you may look through all the great works which have been accomplished

in the providence of God, and you will find, in respect to each of them, that there has been a day of small things; that each has been like the shining light, shining more and more unto the perfect day.

Now, as it is with other things, so it is with the experience of the Christian: it has a small beginning. I know, indeed, that when the principle of religion is first implanted in the heart, there is often a more intense rapture than is felt at a more advanced stage of religious experience; but this by no means indicates that the principle of piety exists in a higher degree of strength. Every Christian is born a babe in Christ, and it not uncommonly happens that the functions of spiritual life are, for a while, so feeble, that after the soul has parted with its first joys, it begins to doubt whether it has not been yielding to delusion. There is often in these circumstances a melancholy vibration from burning rapture to deep despondency; and while faith is extremely weak, hope trembles, and sometimes well nigh expires.

There is one circumstance in particular which renders this, to the young Christian, a moment of the deepest interest. There is a question of great moment pressing upon him, in relation to which he has to decide, and in the decision of which the state of feeling of which I have spoken, often subjects him to great embarrassment. It is the question, whether or not he shall make a public profession of religion. The obligation of this duty he clearly perceives; but either from looking too much on the dark side, as it respects himself, or from some mistaken views of the nature of the duty, he is often painfully in doubt whether he has a right to come to the table of the Lord. To a person in this state of feeling the text comes in the way of encouragement:—"Despise not the day of small things." And this is the use which I purpose to make of it in this discourse. More particularly, I will endeavor to meet some of the most common objections which occur to a young Christian, under the influence of a tender conscience, against making a profession of religion.

Before proceeding to this, however, let me offer a single remark to guard you against misapprehension. Far be it from me to say a word to diminish the solemnity of the act of taking upon you the vows of God. Far be it from me to detract aught from the scriptural qualifications of coming to the Lord's table; or to lift a hand to open the door of the church to those who have no reason to believe that they have been taught by the Spirit how to appreciate its privileges, or to wish to see the borders of the visible church enlarged, at the expense of its internal purity. And I will add that I have no intention in any thing I shall say, to induce any individual to come into the church, who is not, or who does not become, persuaded in his own mind that it is his duty to do so; nor would I, in any case, have him come otherwise than with deliberation and reflection. My purpose is to relieve from needless anxiety; and if I can, to clear away the darkness which, in some cases, may hang over the path of duty. There are those who turn their back on a christian profession, because they practically disregard their own salvation as well as the command of Christ.

With such I have at present nothing to do. My business now is exclusively with the sincere and the conscientious; who have a desire to confess Christ before men, but are kept back by honest, though mistaken considerations.

1. It is sometimes objected by an individual, against making a profession of religion, that he has never been the subject of peculiarly deep and pungent conviction.

But you cannot, my friend, have made any observation on this subject, without having noticed that some persons who are brought into the kingdom, are the subjects of a much more powerful divine operation than others, according to the original constitution and previous habits of mind, as well as various other circumstances. This variety is what always has existed, and what always must exist, from the very laws of human nature; and it is abundantly proved by experience, that where the work of conviction is comparatively silent and gradual, it may result in as genuine a conversion as where it is more rapid and overwhelming. If there are those who are now adorning the doctrine of God their Savior, whose conversion was preceded by awful forebodings of wrath, and even by absolute despair; so, also, there are those of an equally spiritual and heavenly mind, who can scarcely say when their conviction began, and what was the occasion of it. If you take the result of your own observation, then, you cannot but perceive that the objection at which you are halting amounts to nothing.

Besides, the bible has no where declared that a particular amount of conviction is necessary as a preparative to conversion. It has decided that conviction is necessary; that a sinner must understand and feel his guilt and ruin, before he will ever accept the gospel offer; but it has no where declared, that unless the sinner is awfully alarmed, and visibly agitated, and even convulsed with terror, as some are, he is not prepared to accept an offered Savior. The bible, in this respect, as well as every other, is exactly accordant with the laws of man's intellectual and moral nature; and in every thing that it prescribes or declares, in respect to the regeneration of the soul, it takes man just as he is; and recognizes the variety that exists in the human constitution.

The only question, then, which you have to settle in respect to your conviction, is, whether it has been such as to bring you to feel your need of a Savior? Have you realized that you are a sinner, guilty, polluted, liable to eternal death? Have you *felt* that God's condemning sentence against you is just, and that you can be saved in no other way than through the mediation of Christ? If this has been your experience, then, be assured, if you are not a Christian, it is not for lack of the necessary conviction; nor has there been any thing in your case, so far as conviction is concerned, which ought now to minister to your despondency. Whether you have laid hold on the hope of the gospel, is, indeed, another question, and to be de-

cided partly on different grounds; but so far as the preparatory work is concerned, you have no reason to write bitter things against yourself.

2. There are those who object against making a profession of religion, that they cannot point to any particular time when they were converted. But where do you find any such standard of Christian character as this in the bible? Where do you find it written, that in order to have evidence of being a Christian, a man must know when he became one? I admit that there is a moment when the regenerating act passes upon the sinner; when his relations to God, and his character in the sight of God, are radically and eternally changed; but I do not believe that the man lives who has a right to say, with undoubting confidence, of any particular moment, that then the Spirit of God certainly performed the regenerating work upon his heart; for though he may point to the time when he observed a great change in his feelings, yet he can never decide that he took cognizance of the very first operations of the principle of grace in his soul: he knows too little of the manner of God's operations to decide this: and how can he know but that the principle may have been implanted a considerable time before it began to operate, at least to his perceptions; just as it sometimes seems to lie well nigh dormant in a subsequent state of the Christian's experience? Remember that the existence of religion in the heart is one thing: the evidence of its existence quite another. I repeat, then, though there may be those who are able to refer to a particular moment when they experienced a great change in their views and feelings, there are none who can say, without presumption, that that was the very time of their regeneration.

There is another consideration on this subject: those who profess with the most confidence to refer to the very moment when they were renewed, are often obliged subsequently to acknowledge their mistakes; and in many instances, where they do not acknowledge it, it is palpable to every body else; that is, it is manifest that there has been no conversion at all. And on the other hand, many who have not dared to point to the month, or even the year of their conversion, have, by a godly and devoted life, given every evidence that could be desired, that they have been born of the Spirit.

The result of all these considerations is, that there is nothing in your ignorance of the period of your conversion, which ought to embarrass you for a moment. The great question you have to decide is, not, when you became a Christian, but whether you really *are* one. If the Savior is precious to you; if you find the graces of the Spirit actually in your heart, and if it is your deliberate purpose, in the strength of God's grace, to live a humble, self-denied, devoted life; then it admits not of question, that it is your duty to confess Christ before the world; even though you can say nothing more of yourself than "whereas I was once blind, now I see."

3. There are others who shrink from making a profession of religion, on the ground that they have never felt the rapture which they have heard described by some as making part of *their* experience. There is, in this respect, the same variety of religious experience, as in the cases already mentioned. Some, no doubt, who are renewed, experience much more joy than others; while the conversion in the latter case is not less sound than in the former. This variety is usually attributable, not so much to the different degrees of grace that exist in the heart, as to the different susceptibilities of the physical constitution, and the different external influences to which the individual is subject. The amount of joy which exists in the heart at any given time, is, by no means, the measure of christian attainment. And I hardly need add, that mere joy, even when it mounts up to rapture, does not of itself constitute any evidence of a spiritual renovation; for we are all familiar with the fact, that many who profess and actually feel the most burning raptures, come, in a little while, to regard the whole subject with absolute indifference. It is only when joy is accompanied with humility, and love to God, and confidence in Christ, and the spirit of christian obedience, that we can regard it as one of the fruits of the Holy Ghost.

If, then, there is, and always has been, a great variety in this respect, in the experience of Christians, and if many who claim the most on this ground, give no evidence of christian character, you surely are in the wrong to erect this into a standard by which to form a judgment of yourself. If God gives you joy, intense joy, be thankful for it; but if the state of your mind is only peaceful, without any thing that even borders upon ecstasy, be thankful for that too; nor need you regard the latter as furnishing less evidence that you have been renewed than the former. If you grow in grace, and are faithful in the discharge of duty, you may reasonably expect that your joy will increase; but if you decline obedience to Christ's dying command, because you have nothing above tranquillity of mind, be not disappointed if even that tranquillity should desert you, and should give place to the most distressing doubts, and ultimately to spiritual torpor closely resembling death.

4. There are some who hesitate to make a profession on the ground that the ordinance of the Supper, to which it introduces them, is invested with so much solemnity that they fear to approach it. But you surely will not venture to carry this principle through your whole conduct, unless you have renounced every pretension to christian character. You certainly will not suffer it to keep you from a throne of grace: And let me ask, whether even the communion service brings you more directly in contact with the omniscience and holiness of God, than does this common duty of prayer? When you kneel down in your closet, or when you rise in the sanctuary to engage in this duty, you, who are but dust and ashes, take it upon you to speak to Him in whose sight the heavens are not clean: You an-

dertake to hold direct communion with the Being before whom angels veil their faces—with the God of the whole creation. And though I would fain hope that the solemnity of this duty always impresses your spirits, and makes you reverent and humble, I venture to say that it never deters you from engaging in it, or even makes you approach it with hesitation.

Why then, I ask, should you make this a reason for staying away from the table of the Lord. True the sacramental service is one of deep solemnity—But what then? Will you dare practically to tell Jehovah that you cannot or will not obey his direct command, merely because it requires you to engage in a solemn duty? What you have to do is, not to turn your back upon the duty because it is solemn, but to approach it with a corresponding frame of feeling. This indeed constitutes a reason why you should come with reverence and self-abasement; but not the shadow of a reason why you should not come at all.

5. Another common objection against making a profession of religion is, that the individual feels himself unworthy. So you are unworthy, my friend; and so you always will be. And this is not the only thing of which you are unworthy—You are unworthy to pray; you are unworthy to read God's word; yes, you are unworthy even to live. Because by your sins you have forfeited every claim upon God; and for all you experience that is better than the sufferings of the pit, you are indebted to sovereign mercy; of course you are unworthy of it. But happily for you, you are permitted to plead, in your approaches to God, whether at the communion table or in the common duties of devotion, the infinite worthiness of the Redeemer; and let your attainments in holiness be as great as they may, and let your hope of heaven be as bright as it may, you must, after all, plead this as the ground of your acceptance, or you can have no reasonable hope of being accepted. You cannot but perceive that this objection will keep you away from the communion table forever; for whenever the question is to be decided whether you shall approach it or not, you will have to settle the question whether an unworthy sinner shall come or not. And let me say, that while your unworthiness ought never to keep you back, a deep sense of your unworthiness constitutes one important qualification of your coming with acceptance. If, when you think of approaching this ordinance, you feel abased before God in view of the greatness of the privilege, and of your unworthiness to enjoy it, you are in the very state of mind in which the Savior bids you come.

6. It is urged as an objection by some against coming to the Lord's table, that they have no assurance that they have been renewed; and they fear to come, lest, being unregenerate, they should be guilty of an awful sin; should bring upon them the curse of eating and drinking damnation to themselves.

This objection is removed partly by a correct understanding of the apostle's declaration, in connection with the particular circumstances to which it referred. The truth is, that the Christians to whom he was writing, had shockingly profaned the Lord's supper by turning it into a luxurious meal; and in consequence of this, God seems, in judgment, to have sent certain diseases among them. Hence the apostle, in reference to this, declares that "he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh *judgment*" (for that is the true rendering of the word, and not *damnation*, as we have it in our version) "unto himself;"—such judgments as the Corinthians were, at that moment, experiencing. So that this passage, which has given so much trouble to persons of a tender conscience, has in it, after all, nothing that ought to alarm them. It refers primarily to a case which we have no reason to believe has existed since the days of the apostles; and in no sense can it be legitimately understood to imply any thing that ought to give alarm to one who is conscientiously desirous to know and do his duty.

But you will say, perhaps, that if coming to the communion while you are unrenewed, does not necessarily involve eternal perdition, still it must be a great sin, and you dare not run the hazard of committing it. But how dare you run the hazard of disobeying a plain command of Christ, in turning your back upon this ordinance? He has instituted it as a memorial of his death; and he has not left it at your option whether to celebrate it or not, but has laid his command upon you; and do you believe that he will regard you guiltless, in practically refusing to submit to his authority? The true state of the case then is this: having a hope, however feeble, that you have been born of the Spirit, you have also reason to hope that you will be in the way of your duty in coming to the Lord's table; but if you stay away, you *know* that you do wrong; because you violate the Savior's direct command. Is it not best, at least, to look well to both sides of the alternative, before you make up your mind in favor of what you *know* involves disobedience to Christ?

7. Some persons object to making a profession, on the ground that they want more time to think of it. This, I acknowledge, is sometimes an objection that ought to be sustained; for instance, I would always have a person, after a hopeful conversion, take proper time to examine himself, and test his feelings, and gain some evidence that the new set of feelings he has acquired, are not to be as the morning cloud that quickly passeth away. But beyond this, I confess I can find no warrant in God's word for delaying a profession. You think you shall be better prepared to come at a future time than at present; but most probably you are in a mistake; for in the greater number of cases of this kind—at least of those which have fallen under my observation—the individuals have receded rather than advanced, in their evidences and comforts; and sometimes have reaped the reward of their neglect in a long night of spiritual apathy. Take care that

you do not quiet your conscience in a deliberate neglect of this duty, by thinking that you will keep it in mind, and that in due season you will be the better prepared for it. Remember that thinking of a duty is a very different thing from performing it; and that the one can never be substituted for the other. You may think of this duty till you die, and if you do nothing more, you will die chargeable with having refused to commemorate the death of Him who hung on the cross that sinners might live.

8. It is objected by some against making a profession, that they have so little confidence in themselves that they fear they shall dishonor the cause. Perhaps you are naturally inclined to levity, and you fear that this passion will sometimes break out in an unguarded moment, to the discredit of your profession. Or perhaps your besetting sin is the love of the world; and you apprehend it may sometimes bring you into captivity, and cause the world to say of you, "What do they more than others?" But is the fact that you are weak, or only partially sanctified, or that you have your lot in a world of temptation, any reason for disobeying Christ? He knew that these would be your circumstances when he laid this injunction upon you; and rely on it, he requires nothing of you but what he will give you grace and strength to perform. The true use to be made of the fact urged in this objection is, not to carry you away from your duty, but to bring you to rely entirely on his strength in the discharge of it. No doubt you will have enemies to encounter, duties to perform, in the christian life, that may put your fortitude and your faith to a severe test; but these duties and conflicts you have no right to decline; and there is not the semblance of a reason why you should shrink from them: because Christ commands you to meet them on the one hand, and promises you grace adequate to their performance on the other. The fact, then, that you distrust yourself is nothing against making a profession: it is only a reason for trusting Christ altogether.

But there is another thing in connection with this which you must not lose sight of. Suppose you stay away from the Lord's table, do you thereby free yourself from the obligation of the other various duties included in the christian life? By not coming to the communion, do you purchase the privilege of being more indulgent to your evil passions, or in any respect more lax in your deportment. Far from it: You are just as truly under obligation to keep your heart with all diligence, to set a watch at the door of your lips, to be scrupulously correct in all your intercourse with the world, to deny ungodliness and every worldly lust, if you stay away from the Lord's table as if you come to it: the difference is, that in the one case, you avail yourself of an important means of gaining strength for these various duties and conflicts; in the other case, you refuse to avail yourself of it, and either shrink away from duty, or else meet it at a comparative disadvantage. Every Christian who has been accustomed to wait upon

God faithfully in this ordinance, will testify that it has served to increase his spiritual strength; and that in consequence of it, he has discharged all his other duties with more success and delight. Every Christian who has voluntarily neglected this ordinance, from whatever cause, has found himself comparatively weak amidst difficult duties; miserably equipped for severe conflicts.

9. I observe, once more, that some object to making a profession, on the ground that it will bring them out more before the world; and will render all their imperfections more conspicuous. And what then? Do you not desire to be delivered from your imperfections—to be holy as God is holy? Then surely you ought to rejoice to place yourself in a condition where the motives to a holy life will bear upon you with the greatest weight. And it is part of the design of God in bringing you into the church—in placing you on this elevated ground, where the world are looking at you, and even watching for your halting, to increase your motives to circumspection, and self-denial, and holy living. I say, instead of shrinking from this, I am sure you ought to rejoice in it. And you ought thankfully to avail yourself of it as one of the means by which God designs to train you up for himself.

Recollect, moreover, that one reason why God requires you should make a profession is, that you may thereby benefit the world. "Let your light shine before men, that they seeing your good works, may glorify your Father who is in heaven." Yes, he requires you to come into the church for the very purpose of exemplifying his religion to the best advantage before the world; and it is your privilege to hope that if you do thus exemplify it, you may be instrumental of saving souls from death and hiding a multitude of sins.

Now then, my friends, shall not these meditations lead you not to despise the day of small things? Your faith is now feeble; and ought this to be considered strange, when you remember that it is the operation of a newly implanted principle of spiritual life? But the bruised reed Christ will not break. If you have faith only as a grain of mustard seed, if you realize your own weakness and unworthiness, and desire to have your place at the foot of the cross; if you feel that you would regard it a blessed privilege to commemorate your Redeemer's death, and show forth his love, then, I say unhesitatingly, come; the Savior himself says, Come; the Spirit and the Bride say, Come; and you have good reason to expect, that in a compliance with the invitation, you will experience such manifestations of the Redeemer's love as are never made to the world. Stay not away because you are not all that you ought to be—all that you desire to be; but in the faithful discharge of this duty, look for grace for the more faithful discharge of all other duties to which you shall be called. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." "Wait upon the Lord, and be of good courage: Wait, I say, upon the Lord."

I have been addressing those who are conscientiously doubtful in respect to their duty: but how many are there before me who never trouble themselves with this subject; and who habitually act, not only in this respect but in all others, as if they were independent of God's authority! My friends, I cannot stop without reminding you that you are miserably—there is reason to fear—fatally deceived. This very subject of making a profession of religion, concerns no mortals more deeply than yourselves; and the spirit with which you regard it shows, that you may be well nigh ripe for the world of despair. Oh! trifle not thus with God's authority. Trifle not thus with your own salvation. I cannot ask you to come into the church as you are, but I entreat you to yield yourselves to the renewing influences of the Holy Spirit, and come as you ought to be. No doubt there will be those at the marriage supper of the Lamb, who never sat down at the communion table on earth; but rely on it, they will not be such as you are: they will not be those who have kept away from this ordinance through indifference or neglect. God grant that you may all have the spirit of disciples, and thus be prepared to enjoy the privilege of disciples, in coming humbly, and affectionately, and reverently, to commemorate your Redeemer's death.