

Frances S. Cooke.

Taunton, Feb. 12, 18.

DOCTOR SPRAGUE'S SERMON,

OCCASIONED BY THE

LATE TRAGICAL DEED AT WASHINGTON.

A
SERMON

ADDRESSED TO THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION IN ALBANY,

MARCH 4, 1838,

THE SABBATH AFTER INTELLIGENCE WAS RECEIVED THAT THE

HON. JONATHAN CILLEY,

MEMBER OF CONGRESS FROM MAINE,

HAD BEEN SHOT IN A DUEL

WITH THE

HON. WILLIAM J. GRAVES,

MEMBER FROM KENTUCKY.

By WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

MINISTER OF SAID CONGREGATION.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF MANY WHO HEARD IT.

ALBANY:

PRINTED BY JOEL MUNSELL,

.....
1838.

SERMON.

I. TIMOTHY II. 1, 2.

I exhort therefore that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

The religion of the gospel is pre-eminently a religion of benevolence. As it has its origin in the benevolence of God, so its tendency is to form a benevolent spirit in man; to prompt us to do good to our fellow-creatures, as we have opportunity. And one of the most important means of doing them good which it places within our reach is intercession in their behalf at the throne of the heavenly grace.— One great advantage of this, above other means of usefulness is, that it is less subject to the control of circumstances; for though there are circumstances in which I cannot be *actively* engaged to promote the welfare of my fellow-men, there are none in which I may not lift my heart to Heaven in their behalf. And then the spirit of intercession takes for granted that we put forth our best efforts for the benefit of those in whose behalf it is exercised; for if we ask God to do them good, while yet we ourselves neglect to do that for them which is within our ability, what better is our asking than mockery?

As it is obligatory upon all to offer intercession, so there are none who are not legitimately subjects of it. Hence

the exhortation of the Apostle in the text that "intercession be made for *all* men," for men of every nation, every character, every condition. We are to intercede for all, because all have a common origin, a common nature, a common relation to God and eternity. We are to intercede for all, because there are none so good as not to need our intercession, and none so bad that we have a right to withhold it from them. We are to intercede for all, because this is one of the means in the economy of God's grace by which all are to be blessed.

But while the Apostle enjoins the general duty of intercession for all men, he designates a particular class as having a special claim to be remembered in our supplications. This class consists of **CIVIL RULERS**—"Kings and all that are in authority." And while there are general reasons why we should intercede for all, there are particular reasons why we should intercede for these. **TO EXHIBIT BEFORE YOU SOME OF THESE REASONS** is the object of the present discourse. I observe then,

I. We owe it to *our rulers* that we make intercession for them.

We owe it to them, inasmuch, as they occupy places of peculiar *responsibility*. They are the constituted guardians of the publick welfare. It is for them to decide upon measures in which the interests of the state or the nation may be involved; the influence of which will tell upon every part of the body politick, and will either render its pulsations more vigorous and healthful, or create the elements of disease and decay. Very often is the legislator placed in circumstances in which the giving of his vote, or even the expression of his opinion, is felt for good or evil to the extremities of the nation. Civil rulers then have a mighty responsibility resting upon them. They are responsible to the community with whose interests they are entrusted. They are responsible to God whose ministers they are.

Have they not a claim upon us that we should assist them by our prayers to sustain this burden ?

But they occupy places of peculiar *delicacy* and *difficulty* also. They may have the most honest intentions and the most earnest desires to do right, and yet there may seem to be so much that is right or so much that is wrong on both sides of the question that is presented for their decision, that they may find themselves utterly at loss what course to adopt ; and yet the question may be one which involves the most important publick interests, and one upon which they are compelled to act without the opportunity of much previous reflection. It often happens that matters of legislation are so deeply involved, and the results of different courses depend so much on the remote relations of things, that any man may reasonably pause long before he comes to a conclusion, and may review his conclusion with some degree of doubt after he has formed it ; and where the subject is one of deep interest, it cannot be but that a conscientious legislator must find in it a source of severe trial. On *this* ground then, are not our rulers entitled to the benefit of our intercessions.

Still farther : They occupy a place of peculiar *temptation*. They may be tempted to violate their own honest convictions, for the sake of being true to the party which they represent, or of avoiding a forfeiture of the place to which they have been elevated. They may be tempted to forget the publick good in a regard to their own interest ; asking rather what will advance their own temporary popularity, than what will subserve the benefit of the nation.— And they are especially liable to the temptation to neglect their own immortal interests. In the whirl of publick business and the collisions of party feeling, there is danger, even if they are true christians, that they will grow negligent of the great duties of keeping the heart, of communing with God, of growing in grace ; and if they are strangers to the power of religion, there is reason to fear that conscience in these circumstances will become more and more powerless,

the heart more estranged from God, and the prospect of ever reaching Heaven more fearfully dubious. I say not that there is any thing in civil office that is at all incompatible with the most elevated tone of piety:—Wilberforce was in the British parliament, and was most deeply involved in the concerns of the nation during a great portion of his life; and yet I know not where to look in modern times for a higher tone of spiritual feeling than he exhibited. But while his experience and that of a few others shows that civil office is not incompatible with a deep and glowing piety, the experience of the multitude proves that it is exceedingly unfavorable to it. Shall not then this class of our fellow-men have our prayers that they may be kept from yielding to the temptations which their station involves;—especially from making shipwreck of a good conscience, and neglecting their own salvation?

And finally under this head, our rulers occupy a place *to which they have been elevated by ourselves*. There are indeed nations whose rulers are imposed upon them by an hereditary succession; but *we* have no rulers which, we have not ourselves made. Whatever difficulties in the way of doing right or whatever temptations to do wrong their station may involve, to those difficulties and temptations we have subjected them; and hence surely they have a claim upon our intercessions that they may be enabled to hold fast their integrity and discharge with fidelity the duties to which we have called them.

II. We owe it to *ourselves* also that we faithfully discharge this duty—to *ourselves* both as a *nation* and as *individuals*.

It is a law of the divine administration that the prosperity of nations should depend in a great measure upon the character of their rulers; that in proportion as those who exercise authority over them are enlightened or ignorant, virtuous or vicious, the nations themselves should be degraded and miserable, or elevated and happy. If we recur to the

history of the Jews, we shall find a perpetual illustration of this remark : when they were governed by wise and good men, we are told that things went well in Israel ; the nation was prosperous and happy : but when the high places of publick authority were occupied by the wicked, the effects of wild misrule were felt in every thing, and the nation groaned under the most signal manifestations of the divine displeasure. And so it has been in respect to every other nation. No community was ever prosperous for a long time, which was prevailingly under the controul of bad rulers.

Nor are the *reasons* of this fact less obvious than the fact itself ; for civil rulers have a hand upon the very springs of publick prosperity. Their influence is both direct and indirect. It is direct, inasmuch as it is for them to frame and execute the laws on which the publick weal essentially depends. Suppose then that the laws which they enact are adapted to the promotion of intelligence and virtue, this renders them benefactors to the whole community ; whereas, on the other hand, if they adopt measures which are fitted to encourage licentiousness under the name of liberty, or if they leave any of the dearest interests of man unprotected, do they not infuse poison into the very fountains of publick happiness ? And the influence of rulers is felt, to say the least, not less in the execution of the laws than in the enactment of them ; for be the law ever so salutary in its tendency, if it is suffered to remain a dead letter, its beneficent provisions can never be realized : no evil doer will ever be terrified by the sword of the magistrate, if the magistrate himself is always asleep. And then there is an *indirect* influence exerted by rulers scarcely less important than that to which I have already adverted—I refer to the influence of their example. What is said of the church may be applied to them—they are “a city set upon an hill.” From the commanding elevation which they occupy, they are rendered conspicuous objects to the whole community, and as their example is good or evil, they become either like the

pole-star to guide the mariner safely on his way, or like the ignis-fatuus, to bewilder the traveller away from his path. Let a man of exemplary virtue and lofty aspirations be elevated to a post of high authority, and his benign influence will diffuse itself far and wide ; there will be an attractive energy in his example which will be felt by a multitude of hearts ; not only those who witness, but many who hear of, his truly honourable and exemplary deportment, will find in it a most persuasive argument for their own well doing : whereas, on the other hand, if such a place be occupied by a man who disregards the obligations of morality, or scoffs at the gospel as a fable, or surrenders himself to the loathsomeness of sensuality, or, as the case may be, stands ready to plunge a dagger into the heart of his fellow-man—I say if the chair of authority be occupied by such a man, every profligate and villain in the community will feel strengthened in his desperate purposes as often as he lifts his eye to the powers that be ; and the bands of moral obligation, the strongest that bind society together, will soon come under a dissolving process from being subjected to such an influence.

Now what has happened to other nations, must inevitably happen to us :—wisdom and fidelity on the part of our rulers will bring upon us the smiles of Heaven ; while their neglect of their appropriate duties, and especially their open wickedness and impiety, will as certainly bring upon us God's avenging frown. Do we then value our national prosperity, and desire to see it increase more and more ?—Do we shrink from the thought that these precious privileges which our fathers have bequeathed to us to be transmitted to posterity, should be lost in our hands ? Do our bosoms burn with the lofty desire that our nation may become a praise in the whole earth ? Then surely it becomes us not to forget the duty of interceding for our rulers before God ; for on them, under God, our weal or woe especially depends.

But while it is due to ourselves as a nation, it is not less due to ourselves as *individuals*, that we faithfully discharge this duty. As individuals we are component parts of the nation ; and whatever affects the whole body of course affects all the parts of which it is composed. Inasmuch, then, as the influence of rulers pervades the nation at large, it reaches, either directly or indirectly, to every class, nay, to every individual, within its bounds. Yes, hearers, it depends in no small degree on our rulers whether those institutions which are the nurseries of some of your dearest interests—the fountains of some of your richest blessings, shall flourish under the influence of a liberal economy, or languish under the influence of a withering parsimony. It depends upon them to decide whether your property shall be made as secure to you as is consistent with the mutability of the world, or shall be borne away from you by the desolating current of publick convulsions and conflicts. It is for them also to say whether you shall walk abroad in the confidence of perfect safety, or in the apprehension of appalling danger ; whether you shall sit quiet and unmolested under your own vine and fig tree, or be liable to be awaked at midnight, by the footsteps of the robber or the assassin. In short, the rulers of the country are, to a great extent, the guardians of your individual and personal interests ; and the influence which they exert reaches even to the innermost part of the sanctuary of domestic life. Unless then we are indifferent to our most important interests—interests which belong not only to the life that now is, but to that which is to come, can we forbear to ask of God that he will grant wisdom and grace to our rulers according to their needs ?

III. We owe it to *posterity*, also, that we faithfully discharge this duty.

It is a most contracted view of things which those persons take who, in their estimate of the influence of actions upon earth, look not beyond the period of their own mortal

existence. The truth is, each generation is acting, not for itself only, but for all succeeding generations. The opinions that we form, the habits that we cherish, whatever constitutes the character of our age, will be transmitted, in a great degree, to the beings who shall occupy the stage after we have left it. A few more years, and the grave will have taken every one of us into its keeping; but those who shall occupy our places will know that we have been even if every written record of the age should be blotted out; they will read it in their own character and condition—in the habits and opinions we shall have entailed upon them. If then the present generation is acting not for itself only, but for posterity, and if the legacy which it is to bequeath depends in a great measure on the influence of its rulers, then how important is it that that should be a well directed influence; that we may not be chargeable with having left in the path of those who are to come after us the elements of destruction.

Men of this generation, I hear a voice speaking from the depths of the future, in an imploring and monitory tone. It is the voice of an unborn posterity, reminding you that you have other interests than your own committed to your keeping—that you are living, in an important sense, for those who are to live after you are dead. They implore of you not to entail upon them ignorance, insubordination and crime. And that you may be faithful to your trust in respect to *them*, they admonish you to be faithful in your duty toward those in authority, and especially to commend them to the God of all counsel and wisdom. Men of this generation, listen to the monitory voice. Pray for the rulers of the nation, as you would shudder at the thought that those in whose grateful remembrance you would desire to live should pronounce curses over your sepulchres.

IV. We owe it, also, to *God*, that we forget not to intercede for our rulers.

We owe it as a debt of obedience to his authority, and of

gratitude for his goodness. Civil government is God's own ordinance; and hence the Apostle, speaking of the magistrate, calls him "the minister of God to thee for good." I do not mean that any particular *form* of civil government is authoritatively prescribed to us in the scriptures; but that the ordinance *itself* is of divine origin admits not of question. And it is easy to see that the purposes to be accomplished by it are worthy of its divine original: it is the channel through which God communicates a large part of the blessings which he bestows upon men; nay, it is essential to the very existence of human society.—And to no nation on earth we may safely say, does this ordinance of Heaven secure a larger amount of blessing than to our own. Hence, then, we are under a double obligation to co-operate with God for the accomplishment of the great ends of this institution; and as intercession for our rulers is one important means of this, we are bound to employ it to the extent of our ability. Do you recognize the supremacy of God's authority? Then pray for our rulers, because civil government is from God; and more than this—God has explicitly required this at your hands. Do you cherish a grateful sense of the divine goodness? Then surely you will manifest your gratitude by falling in with his own gracious designs; and especially in strengthening the hands and encouraging the hearts of our rulers for all well doing by your fervent intercessions. Contemplate not only the beneficent tendencies of civil government in general, but the rich and varied blessings which it secures to *you*; think of the domestick quietude, the general security, the equal rights, the means of intellectual and moral culture which you enjoy, and contrast with all this the miserable degradation, the besotting ignorance, the deep and cruel oppression, under which many other nations are groaning at this hour, on whom has been entailed some wretchedly perverted form of civil government; and then say whether every feeling of gratitude to the Being who

hath made you to differ, does not demand that you should obey the exhortation of the Apostle to make intercession for those who are in authority.

V. Once more : We owe it especially to *the present crisis* that we are faithful in the discharge of this duty.

I will not dwell here upon the fact that the tide of our national prosperity has recently been setting back ; that our publick concerns have undergone a melancholy derangement ; that our commercial interests have been depressed, and the fortune of many a rich man has been blown from him, just as a feather rides off upon the wind : no, I will not speak here of national calamities ; but I *may* speak of national crimes—the polluted and deadly fountain, in which have originated all these dark streams that are rolling through our land. I may speak of the desecration of God's holy day ; of the multitude of boats of every description that are abroad upon all our waters ; of the multitude of public and private vehicles that are moving wherever there is a road to admit them ; of the multitude of hands that are kept busy in sustaining these unhallowed operations ; of the multitude of professing christians who calmly look on without saying a word, or else lend a direct influence in aid of the desecrating process. I may speak of infidelity, that monster of brazen front and fiery tongue, and poisonous breath, who goes round with curses hanging upon her footsteps. I may speak of a spirit of insubordination and defiance of the powers that be ; of the mob forcing its way up into the judgment seat, and setting at nought all legal authority, and trampling on the dearest rights of man. And I may speak, I *must* speak of the shedding of human blood,—not by the executioner whom God has constituted the avenger of publick crime, but by the legislator whom God has ordained the guardian of the public interests ; not by the uncivilized Indian, whose education renders him at home in scenes of barbarity, but by the man of cultivated intellect, and polished manners ; the man who has been nurtured under the influence of christian institutions, and whose mother taught

him as one of his earliest lessons, "Thou shalt not kill." I need not tell you why I speak thus—the explanation has been anticipated in every newspaper which, within the last few days, has fallen into your hands. The simple truth divested of all technical phraseology is, that there has been a murder of the most atrocious kind at the capitol of the nation. An individual in the heat of public debate dropped a word that fell harshly upon the ear of some who heard it; and that provoked the resentment of some who read it. And the strange result is, that a man who has received no injury goes to a man who has inflicted none upon him, and makes the foolish and desperate proposal, that they go out into a bye place, and stand up and face each other with the weapons of death, and each do his best to send the other, stained with the guilt of murder, into eternity. And the arrangement for the bloody transaction is quickly completed; and with a single night intervening, they are on their way to the spot where one of them is to die; and lest the privilege of blood-shedding should be denied them, they move in such profound silence that those who would have arrested the procedure, are unable to track them to their deadly retreat. They reach the spot and adjust everything according to the code of honourable murder. Each lifts his instrument of death, and points it at the other's heart, and discharges it without effect. And then there is a grave discussion among the accomplices whether, inasmuch as there is no personal hostility between the parties, they may not now let each other live; but the law of honor still cries out for vengeance. And then the preparation for another trial is made, and the trial is over; and yet another succeeds and there is no blood flowing yet; but at length the weapon of one falls from his hand, and the hand that held it moves no more. Honour looks upon that bleeding corpse and cries out, "It is enough." The body of the eloquent statesman rendered lifeless by the man whom he had never injured, and in a combat to which he had madly consented, is borne back to the place from whence he came; and then a sensation of

horror beginning at the heart continues to circulate till it has gone through every pore of the nation. The story as it goes abroad is, that a man has fallen in a duel ; but the truth as it is written in God's book is, that a man has been deliberately and wantonly murdered. And the murderer—I know not where he is, but I pray he may not be sitting among the legislators of my country. Let him flee into some dark place, with all who were concerned in the horrid transaction, and seek forgiveness through the blood of Jesus, which availed to purge away the guilt even of his own murderers.

I have recited the aggravating circumstances of this foul deed, not because I do not suppose you are familiar with them, but because I would impress most deeply upon your hearts the lesson which they so loudly inculcate. Is there not reason to fear that, because the practice of duelling has disappeared almost entirely from the part of the country in which our lot is cast, we have ceased in some measure to feel our responsibility in respect to it as a national sin ? But surely, my friends, if this be so, the recent tragedy administers a rebuke to our apathy to which we shall be constrained to give heed. The man who has fallen had his birth and education not in the South but in the North ; and all the individuals immediately concerned were men whom we had sent to the capitol to make laws for the protection of our rights. I say then, here is a voice that echoes through all the North as well as the South, charging every man to exert his personal influence for the suppression of duelling. Let the laws, wherever there *are* laws on this subject, be promptly executed ;—yes, executed even to the hanging of the duelist up between the heavens and the earth ; or if he escape the hand of justice, let public opinion, mighty to punish, imprint Cain's mark upon him, that wherever he wanders in the earth, the evidence of his blood-guiltiness shall meet every eye. Let all the conductors of our public journals, as many have done already, give us the his-

tory of duels under the head of murder, and accompany it with corresponding comments. Let all political considerations be lost sight of in the estimate which is formed of these events; and let no man stop to enquire whether a duelist belongs to one party or to another, before he expresses an opinion of his guilt. Let our great men and our wise men at the capitol who reverence the authority of God and regard the interests of society, dare to speak out their convictions; though every blood-stained disciple of honor whom they meet should lift his voice to remonstrate, or even draw his dagger to terrify. Let every citizen when he goes to the ballot-box, inquire whether it will be safe to put his dearest interests into the keeping of a murderer; and let him resolve, as he would keep a conscience void of offence, that no man who gives or accepts a challenge shall ever have his vote. Let every one labour according to his ability to purify the land from blood. Never was there a more auspicious moment than the present for a sustained and vigorous effort on this subject; and if all classes are faithful now—if the pulpit speaks, and the bar speaks, and the press speaks, so that the note of remonstrance shall be heard, loud and long, in every city and every village, in the palaces of the great and the hamlets of the poor, rely on it, a change in public opinion will ensue which will cause this bloody event to mark the era of a blessed national reformation.

I hear one voice that seems used only to sobs—a voice coming up from a bosom that anguish hath ceased and monopolized as its dwelling. I enter the habitation whence it comes, and every thing around me tells that I am in the dominion of wo. *There* sits a widow half paralyzed by the power of grief. Her babes cluster around her; and she takes them one by one, and presses them to her throbbing bosom, and calls them fatherless. I say to myself, 'I am accustomed to find mourning wherever the destroyer hath been; but in such deep lines of agony as *this* countenance exhibits, I think I see the *murderer's* hand.' Ah yes, it is that which surcharges this widow's cup with wo. It is not

that her husband is dead, nor yet that she has not been privileged to minister to his latest wants, but it is the *manner* of his death, that creates the untold pang. And now ye wretched men, who have been partners in this horrible transaction, come hither and see if you can survey with a steady eye the work of your own hands. If there was nothing to move you in the bleeding and breathless body of the husband, come and see if you are equally proof against the sobs and wailings of the wife. Come, every one whose principles allow you thus to sport with human happiness, and see if there is not something here that will put horror into your very dreams. Come, ye who profess to hate the practice, and yet do nothing to oppose it, and see if the time has not arrived for vigorous and determined resistance. And yet this is only one of an extended class of crimes that blacken the annals of my country! Oh could there be assembled in one mournful group at the capitol of our nation, all who have been rendered widows and orphans by this murderous practice; could the tears which it has drawn forth be gathered into one mighty reservoir of woe; could the sobs which it hath produced be condensed into one convulsive and doleful lamentation; I cannot doubt that in that same hour this monster vice would have his death warrant written, and that even the men of honour themselves, lion hearted though they be, would not dare refuse to sign it.

And now in the close, I come back to the Apostle's exhortation, that you should pray sincerely, earnestly, perseveringly, for our rulers. The present crisis especially demands it. The prevalence of open transgression, the boldness of iniquity in high places, the air of defiance with which public sentiment is met, loudly demand it. Pray for them that they may be indeed the ministers of God to us for good. Pray for them that they may possess the spirit, and discharge the duties, of their station. Pray for them—and yet tell it not in Gath that there should be occasion for such a prayer—that they may be kept from shedding each other's blood!