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SERMON CCXLVIII.

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ALBANY.

**THE ABOUNDING GRACE OF THE GOSPEL.**

LUKE xiv. 22.—*And yet there is room.*

It will instantly occur to you that these words are connected with the parable of the great supper. A certain man who had made a feast, sent his servant, at the proper time, to invite the guests. But instead of accepting the invitation, they had both the incivility and the ingratitude to send back excuses which the master of the feast saw at once were occasioned by gross insincerity. He was angry at their conduct, and not without good reason; and straightway sent out his servant again, and directed him to bring in the poor and the maimed, the halt and the blind. The servant having complied with his lord's command, returns to report his obedience, and at the same time makes the declaration: "And yet there is room."—The children of want and wretchedness to whom thou didst send me, I have collected agreeably to thine orders; but there are seats yet unoccupied, there are accommodations for a still greater number of guests.

The explanation of this parable is easy. The great supper represents that provision which is made in the gospel to supply the spiritual wants of men. The man who made the supper represents the Lord Jesus Christ. The invitation to the supper by the servant, represents the offer of salvation to the Jews by the Apostles. The rejection of the invitation denotes the rejection of the gospel offer, especially by the Pharisees, and higher classes of the Jews. The poor, the halt, and the blind, to whom the second invitation is addressed, may represent publicans, and others who were despised for the meanness of their occupation or character. All this, however, has a more general meaning, and may very properly be considered as illustrating the free grace of the gospel, and the treatment which the gospel receives in every age. "And yet there is room." It is an encoura-

are dreaming of a future season for repentance, and if you should wake up amidst the woes of despair, how much more poignant will be the agonies of eternal death for the reflection that the blessings of eternal life were urged upon you ; how much more intolerable to be confined in the dungeon of despair for the thought that there was room for you, if you would have consented to occupy it, in the palace of the King of glory ?

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## SERMON CCXLIX.

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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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### DESTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SELF-FLATTERY.

PROVERBS xiv. 12.—*There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.*

ALL mankind desire to be saved ; but comparatively few are willing to be saved in the way which God has appointed. There is some how or other a repugnance in the human heart against the terms of salvation ; a repugnance which is never effectually overcome, but by the aid of the Spirit of God. In some, this opposition assumes a direct and palpable form ; in others, it winds itself up so dexterously in some fair garb, that it accomplishes an entire self-deception.

It is to the desire that men have to be saved on the one hand, and to the aversion they have to the humbling terms of the gospel on the other, that we are to attribute the fact that true religion has so many counterfeits ; that so many things are substituted for evangelical piety, which are either essentially opposed to it, or do not essentially belong to it. The invention of man has always been busy to find out some easier road to heaven than that which leads by the cross of Christ ; and various expedients have been tried ; and they have been a thousand times tested and shown to be vain, by affliction and death ; nevertheless men have not become tired of them, and they are willing still to stake their immortal interests upon them, though God himself has forewarned them that the end thereof will be destruction. This is the plain import of our text—"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."

The text naturally divides itself:

I. *There is a way that seemeth right unto a man :*

II. *The end of that way is death.*

By the way here spoken of we may legitimately understand all those devices which men substitute in place of genuine religion as a ground of their self-flattery. Particularly,

1st. There are many who rest easy on account of *the orthodoxy of their creed*. They are great defenders of the faith. It is by no means certain that they have gone to the Bible for their religious views, but not improbably have taken them altogether on human authority. But let them have come by them as they may, their whole conversation shows, not only that they are zealous advocates for sound doctrine as they ought to be, but that their views of christian character do not reach much beyond it. When the alarm is given that there is a heretic in the field, they are instantly on the alert, buckling on their armor, and going forth as if to encounter the only enemy of God's kingdom. They lay out all their strength here, as if this were the sum and substance of the christian's conflict. Whether their zeal is put forth in defending long received opinions against those which are new, or in endeavoring to give currency to something which they regard as the essence of orthodoxy, but which comes in the shape of an innovation, all that they do passes with themselves, at least, as the effect of an extraordinary zeal to maintain God's truth.

Now that there are men, and blessed be God very many of them too, whose zeal for the truth is associated with zeal for every part of practical religion, admits not of doubt ; but the persons to whom I refer, while they make every thing of orthodoxy, make little of any thing else. Only keep heresy off the ground, and they will not sigh if deep and earnest piety is kept off too. Speak to them of the love of Christ, of its depth, of its tenderness, of its constraining power, and there is no chord strung in their bosoms that vibrates to what you say. Speak to them of the importance of the revival of God's work, and the danger that threatens delaying sinners, and they will either say nothing, or will perhaps inquire whether the individuals to whom you refer have departed from the true faith. Endeavor to enlist them in the cause of christian benevolence, in doing something or giving something to promote the best interests of their fellow men, and not improbably you will find their ears as deaf as adders, and their hearts as hard as rocks. Nay, if you keep an eye upon them in their secular business, it would not be strange if you should discover that which would give you just cause to weep ; and if you should feel that you had not a word to say, when you should hear it come tauntingly from the world, that a little less zeal for orthodoxy, and a little more regard to honesty, would make them better men.

After all, they are going on with a good degree of self-satisfaction. The way which they have chosen, on account of the blindness of their heart, seemeth right unto them.

2d. Men flatter themselves that they are safe *in consequence of partial reformations*. The degree of reformation that will satisfy a man's conscience, will be different in different cases. If he has been given to gross immorality, he may not improbably satisfy himself with becoming a moral man; and especially with abandoning the particular vice which was most prominent in his character. If his moral character has been generally correct, but he has been accustomed to neglect the public institutions of God's house, he may make himself easy by becoming an attendant on these institutions. If he has neglected to read the Bible, or to maintain family worship, or to come to the communion table, he may satisfy himself with taking up either or all of these neglected duties. If he has been accustomed to keep his hand clenched against the calls of charity, he may think that in opening his hand, and distributing according to his ability, he does that which will entitle him to the character of a christian. In these several cases, there are various degrees of reformation; but in no one of them is the reformation entire. There are some sins, (secret sins it may be,) harder to be abandoned than those that he has abandoned, which are yet retained; some duties, to which there is a still stronger aversion than to those which have been taken up, which are yet neglected. The great duty, without which all others in the sight of God are of no importance—that of yielding up the whole heart to the divine command, has not been seriously attempted. Nevertheless there has been some partial and external reformation; and this is the pillow on which the soul lays itself down and slumbers on the side of the abyss. The sinner compares his present condition with his past, and perceiving that there is a difference, too hastily concludes that that difference is radical, when it is only circumstantial. The principle of depravity still reigns in his heart. That tree of death still flourishes with deadly luxuriance. He has hewn off some of the branches, but the trunk and the root remain entire. Still this is a way that seemeth right unto him.

3d. There are others who make themselves easy *by substituting enthusiasm for genuine religion*.

It has been so common for infidels and opposers of religion to stigmatize true piety by the name of enthusiasm, that many people seem almost to have forgotten that such an evil really exists; and it is often at some hazard that a minister ventures to attack this device of Satan, lest he should be charged with pleading the cause of a dull and heartless religion. And if I do not greatly mistake, the adversary has taken advantage of the silence of ministers on this subject, and has fatally deceived many a person, making him think that he had

risen well nigh to the perfection of holiness, when the principle of sin was in full and vigorous operation. True religion is earnest, deeply earnest—but it is intelligent; it does not act without reason; and even when it kindles into the warmest fervors, it is sustained by God's living truth. But enthusiasm is ignorant; it is wild; it is censorious; and sometimes instead of supplicating God's mercy, it challenges his wrath. It sets up false standards; and all who do not come up to them, it casts off as reprobates. It talks abundantly of the glory of God, but it sometimes clearly means the glory of self. If you reprove its wild and fanatic movements, it will denounce your coldness: if you expostulate with it, it will assume the office of judging you before the time. And yet, after all, it believes itself not only to be genuine piety, but exalted piety; and it is looking forward with undoubting assurance to an eternal residence in heaven.

4th. And this leads me to say, fourthly, that there are many who fall into an error, the opposite of that which I have just noticed; and *mistake a heartless formality for genuine religion.*

The time may have been when they were awakened, and thought they were converted; and under that impression perhaps they came and joined themselves to the number of God's people. And there they began what were to them a new set of duties, such as private and family devotion, the daily reading of God's word, and coming to the communion table. For a while they performed these duties with delight; but at length their interest in them began to decline, and at no distant period they would willingly have abandoned them altogether, were it not that with them they must not only relinquish their hope, but give up all pretensions to christian character; and this would seem to be more difficult from the fact that they have already confessed Christ before men. Hence they keep on performing these external duties, while the heart is not in them; and actually grow more and more hardened, and more and more blinded, from this habit of trifling (for it is nothing better than that) with sacred things. From what you see of them in the world or even in their retirement, you would perhaps have no right to say that they were not christians; because they perform at least, many of those external acts which are supposed to indicate piety; but there is a hollowness, a heartlessness about it all, which, in the eye of God, makes it pass for nothing. Nevertheless, in this habit of formality, they keep themselves at ease. Though they are conscious that they have no christian enjoyment, yet they are sure to account for it in some way which is consistent with their having a principle of religion. On the whole, they are walking in a way which to them seemeth right.

5th. Many persons make themselves easy in *a habit of self-righteousness*; putting this in the place of genuine religion. They have a great idea of human merit, and substitute it in place of the

merit of Christ ; or as the case may be, they will speak much *against* human merit, and after all, will practically place their supposed humility in leading them to do so, in the room of Christ's righteousness. This self-righteous spirit is extremely insidious ; it can live upon any thing ; and is sometimes found in its greatest strength, where the individual considers himself most free from it. More or less of it no doubt is consistent with true piety, and adheres to the christian till he reaches the gate of heaven ; but in the christian it is never, as in the unrenewed man, the ruling passion. No matter how regular you may be in the discharge of every external duty ; no matter how honest, and just, and charitable you may be ; no matter how often you may read your Bible, or fall upon your knees, or attend social religious services,—if after all, the secret feeling of your heart is, that you are hereby doing something to purchase heaven, it is only the working of a spirit of self-righteousness. In this way no doubt multitudes are walking with great self-security. They are doing so much in one way and another, to subserve the interests of their fellow men, and so much that seems like obedience to the command of God, that they venture to hope and to believe that their good deeds do even catch and please the eye of Omniscience, and that God will accept of them as the price of their salvation. This is the secret feeling of the heart, even while they talk of the merit of Christ, and imagine perhaps that they are resting upon it.

6th. I observe, once more, that many persons make themselves *easy in an improper reliance on God's mercy.*

They single out the attribute of mercy from all God's other perfections, and make it the theme of perpetual eulogy. They speak of it as if it constituted the whole of the divine character ; and as if his justice, and holiness, and truth, were completely absorbed by it. And without halting a moment at the fact that the Bible is entirely against them, they eagerly hasten to the conclusion, that under the administration of such a Being as God, they have little to fear. Perhaps they utterly annihilate the distinction between virtue and vice, and deny that the wicked will receive any punishment hereafter ; or perhaps they flatter themselves that it will be of limited duration, and that the good and the bad will at last be equally happy. This conviction some of them will avow in the face of the world ; and others will take the comfort of holding it without incurring the odium of confessing it. Perhaps they sometimes read in the Bible respecting the wrath of God, and the punishment which he will inflict upon his enemies ; but it is so unlike any thing they here experience, and withal they read so much about God's mercy and love, that they conclude that these threatenings can have little or no meaning. And thus they go on from day to day, and from year to year, walking after the ways of their own heart, and in the sight of their own eyes, on the

presumption that God's mercy will cover all their guilt, and prepare them for the purity and glory of the heavens.

Such are some of the devices which men substitute for real religion. Each of them is a way which seemeth right unto many.

II. Let me now proceed, secondly, to show that *the end thereof is death*. In other words, if these devices are not seasonably abandoned, they will bring in their train everlasting destruction.

God has been pleased to offer salvation to men, but he has also been pleased to do it in his own way. The conditions are, repentance of sin, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and a life of holy obedience.

Now a moment's reflection will show you that all the various devices which we have been considering, are utterly inconsistent with a compliance with these conditions ; nay, that they are intended as a substitute for such compliance. If God requires the faith of the heart, surely a mere frozen orthodoxy does not meet that requisition. If he requires a surrender of the whole soul to himself, a consecration of all the faculties and affections, he will never accept a mere partial reformation. If he demands that the affections should be brought into exercise through an intelligent belief of his own truth, he will never accept in place of that the mere glow of animal feeling, much less the crude and irreverent workings of self-confidence and fanaticism. If he requires that men should be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, it cannot be enough that they should go through a round of external duties, when the heart has no part nor lot in the matter. If he requires that they should abandon their own righteousness as a ground of justification, he will not be satisfied that they should substitute their own works in the place of the merit of Christ. If he has denounced tribulation and anguish upon every impenitent sinner, he requires that his threatenings should be believed ; and he will never be flattered into lenity by hearing his goodness praised, at the expense of his other attributes. You see, then, that, in every instance, God's terms of salvation are set aside, and the sinner ventures to make terms of his own. He may walk in either of these ways of which I have spoken, and he will not be walking in the straight and narrow way which the gospel marks out. Inasmuch, then, as he turns his back upon God's requisitions, nothing remains but that he must take the consequence in the loss of his soul.

Do you not perceive, my friends, that this self-flattery must contribute, at the last, greatly to heighten the sinner's surprise ; that his consternation on finding himself irrecoverably lost will be great, just in proportion as the way in which he had been walking had seemed right to him ? You had been counting all your life upon your orthodoxy, but death comes and discloses to you the fact that you were an orthodox rebel against God, and that though you could even contend manfully for the truth, yet you had never felt its sanctifying

power. You had broken off from some of your sins, and had undergone some change of feeling, which you had called regeneration ; but in death you discover the appalling secret that the heart was left under the dominion of sin. You had talked much about religion, and had condemned others for their coldness, and had even dealt out denunciations against the real children of God, and had felt confident that you should be admitted to a high seat in glory ; but oh ! the surprise to find that you had mistaken animal feeling for christian affection, and zeal to advance the interests of a party for zeal to advance the honor of the Lord of hosts. You thought you were complying rigidly with God's requirements in diligently discharging all external duties, but it turns out that yours was the hollow homage of a formalist, or else that your efforts were made in the spirit of self-righteousness, and thus actually poured contempt upon the atonement of Christ. You thought that God would not be strict to mark iniquity ; you even thought he was so merciful that you had nothing to fear from continuing in sin ; but at the moment of your entering eternity the awful truth flashes upon you with overwhelming conviction, that God is terribly faithful to his threatenings, and that it is too late for you to avert the consequence of your disbelieving them. You had gone smoothly along, until you reached the verge of the precipice, making all your calculations for being in heaven as soon as you were dead ; but, just at the last moment, your eyes are open upon your mistake. The heavens blacken, the lightnings flash, the tempest roars and rages, down plunges the immortal soul into the everlasting abyss, and there it sinks and tosses amid the waves of Jehovah's wrath, at the very time when it expected to be transformed into a seraph, and to be mingling in the songs of the redeemed. Oh ! must not this be disappointment and wo unutterable ? How will that way appear to the sinner, then, which seems so right to him now ?

With two or three reflections, we shall conclude.

1. Our subject *exposes the folly of those who maintain, that it is no matter what we believe, provided only we are sincere.* There are those who maintain the most dangerous and fatal errors, who, if you attempt to reason with them, will instantly repel your arguments, and justify themselves on the ground, that they are as sincere in their belief as you are in yours ; and that sincerity, even in error, will be sufficient to justify it. And there are some who even profess to be christians, who seem partly to fall in with the same sentiment, who speak of the abominations of the heathen, as if the fact of their being heathen completely annihilated their guilt. But, my friends, yield not, I pray you, to this delusion. You see the doctrine of our text is, that a man may be sincere, very sincere, in a course which will terminate in everlasting death. God has not left it at your option what to believe in respect to religion. He has revealed to you his truth ; and that truth is something fixed, and definite, and unchange-

able ; and he requires you to believe it ; and you refuse to do so at your peril. You may hold as many false notions on the subject of religion as you will ; you may flatter yourself that a mere moral life, or a mere round of attendance on the means of grace, will save you, or even that you shall be saved, let your character be what it may,—but God's declarations that “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God ;” and that the wicked “shall go away into everlasting punishment,” remain just as true, and will have as terrible a fulfilment, as if you believed them ever so fully. Your believing, or not believing, does not at all affect God's truth, though it may affect unspeakably and eternally your own condition. It matters little what may *seem* right with you ; the great question is, what *is* right, and, in practically deciding this, you decide your own everlasting destiny.

2. Learn from our subject *how much danger there is that the soul will be lost*. There are many sacrificing themselves to profligacy, and infidelity, and open impiety ; and there are many others who become victims to a habit of good-natured carelessness ; who, without being grossly vicious, are satisfied to let religion alone, and to have no part or lot in the matter. But beside these, there are a multitude who are travelling the downward road with a lie in their right hand ; who have taken for their religious principles, not the declarations of God's word, but the dictates of their own corrupt inclinations ; and by living at ease in sin, they are preparing ere long to wake from their dreams in surprise and horror. Beware, then, lest you get into some other path than that straight and narrow way which leads to heaven. Beware lest the peace which you experience, instead of being that peace which passeth understanding, should prove to be that deceitful calm which tells that there is a storm gathering, which will discharge itself in everlasting torrents of wrath.

Finally : *Let it be the commanding object of every individual to secure the salvation of his soul*. To sacrifice your soul is the easiest thing in the world. Only stay where you are, and the work is done. But if you will secure salvation, you must make a vigorous effort. You must not only break up this habit of carelessness, but you must resist every temptation to self-flattery. You must come out from false refuges, and come into the refuge which the gospel provides. You must resolve on a life of vigilance, and activity, and persevering exertion. You must resolve, and seek grace to enable you to execute the purpose that, in humble reliance on the merits of Christ for acceptance, you will live a sober, righteous, and godly life. Such a course, both in its progress and in its end, will be peace ; but any other course, though it may be attended with that false tranquillity which delusion inspires, will terminate in the pangs of the second death. Oh, count every thing as less than nothing when weighed in the balance against your immortal soul !