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THE PITILESSNESS OF SIN.

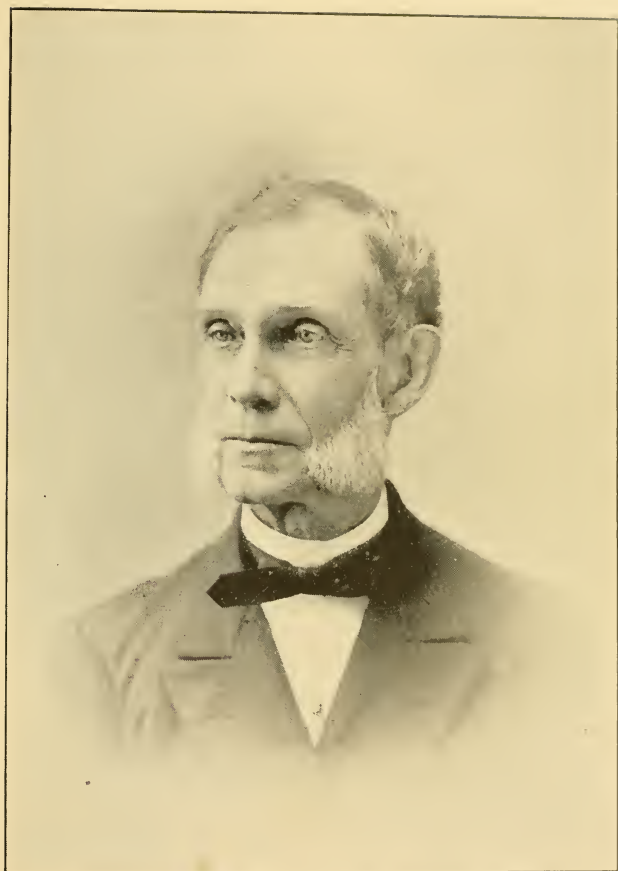
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“Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.”—MATT. xxvii. 3, 4, 5.

THERE is a use to be made of this incident, lying outside of its direct bearings, which it may be well to glance at as we approach the study of it. That Judas spoke rationally and truly, in the confession which he here makes, cannot be questioned. According to the judgment of that arbiter which presides in the breast of every man, he took the right view of his conduct; he had an adequate ground for his self-condemnation and despair. He *had* sinned. He had not been *made* to sin. He had done freely, voluntarily, what he had done in betraying the innocent blood. It does not occur to him to say that he had been unfortunate; that he had been the victim of fate, or the irresponsible tool of a higher power. “I, I only, have sinned” is his confession; and any unbiassed mind which looks at his crime will endorse the confession. He stands guilty at the bar of every unprejudiced observer from the day that he appeared before the Jewish court, till now.

And yet, what Peter said, on the day of Pentecost, in



regard to the crucifixion of Christ, "Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain," he might have said of Judas' part in the transaction. "The determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God," which made the Redeemer's death certain, included in them all the steps which led to the event. And yet, no one doubts that it was with "*wicked hands*" the Jewish rulers did their work; and no one doubts that Judas "*sinned*" in the aid which he rendered them in the doing of it.

You have here the problem of the coincidence of God's sovereignty and man's freedom in his acts and his responsibility for them, solved by the spectacle of the fact. The two agencies are seen, in this instance, actually coinciding—forming like two separate cords—the unity of a knot. Speculative science, formal logic may say the knot cannot be tied. In spite of all their affirmations, it appears here, visibly tied. The philosopher's theories or arguments do not make facts. Facts do not wait for these, in order to command the acceptance of men. A well-established fact, in the face of the dissent of science and logic, may say the *difficulty is with you*. A fact, inexplicable by your methods, is simply a truth standing on an altitude above the reach of your ladders.

The fact, revealed to us here, in the case of Judas, is a collateral light thrown upon a subject upon which the minds of most of us are probably, often painfully, and yet unnecessarily exercised.

There is still another direction in which this incident may be used to lift from the religion of Christ a reproach which is sometimes thrown upon it. The existence of spurious members in the church is no impeachment of the claim of the gospel to be a regenerating and sancti-

fyng power amongst men. That there should have been a traitor in the original body of twelve disciples, and by the permission of an omniscient Master, may surprise us. But the fact meets us. It was so. The great Husbandman allowed tares to grow up with the wheat, but the seeming anomaly does not prove that the wheat was tares; but, on the other hand, makes it more evident that the wheat was wheat. A wise foresight on the part of its Head, of the condition of the material out of which his church was to be formed, may be discovered in this arrangement. A Judas—a counterfeit disciple—may have been admitted into the family of his followers, in order that all the other members might be led to the watchfulness which asks perpetually, “Is it I?” and to the self-distrust which keeps them constantly mindful of the Master’s counsel: “Follow me!” Occasional instances of perfidy on the part of professed Christians is no more a proof that Christianity is a pretence or a failure than persecution is; and the Saviour may have allowed a traitor to appear thus early in the history of the church, as he did the persecutor, in order that his servants in all ages might be forewarned of the perils which lay in their path and of their need of divine grace to uphold them in their steadfastness.

Passing now to the more direct teachings of the text, I remark, first, that the case of Judas gives us a striking illustration of the *power of a sinful lust, cherished in the heart, to blind the mind to the character of the passion and to the consequences which issue from it.* It is a matter of common consciousness (though men seem very generally to overlook it) that the impressions we get of things are due very largely to the condition of the organs through which we deal with them. A diseased eye will give you a wrong idea of the color, form, or size of an

object. There is more foundation than most people are aware of for the apparently extravagant proposition that every man makes his own world. Certain it is that the aspect under which the world presents itself to him will be determined very much by his own subjective state. Before your view of a thing can be accepted as right, you must be sure that the instrument through which you are looking at it is true, and that your medium is a clear one. Carry with you in your heart a vicious lust, and it will be in you like a smoking furnace, the fumes of which will becloud your intellect and immerse you in an atmosphere of illusions. It has in it a wizard's power, and can, to your eyes, change darkness into light, bitter into sweet, and evil into good. What a terrible disenchantment there was to Judas when he saw his Master actually condemned to death! His overwhelming distress shows that the possibility of such an issue had never been distinctly realized by him; or if so, that he had persuaded himself that Jesus, by some exertion of his power, could extricate himself from the hands of his enemies. But look at him now, when sign after sign of humiliation is revealing the sufferer's weakness, and forboding the fact that his innocent blood, through his agency, was to be shed! The spell which had benumbed his reason, is broken. His silver has lost its lustre. His eyes have been open to the enormity of his crime. Do you wonder that he cast down his treasure in the temple, and departed and hanged himself?

My friends, this is no poetic fiction—no dramatic picture of avenging justice. It is a record of every day's experience. It is a fair exposition of the blinding and stupifying effect of corrupt passion. It is a representation of what I may call, the *pitilessness of sin*. From the first, its work is one of moral mutilation. It steals

into the heart, and then puts out the eyes of the soul. It is repeating, in a thousand instances, the same cruel torture which Nebuchadnezzar inflicted upon Zedekiah, the captive king of Judah. Intent upon the gratification of his desires, the victim of lust loses his capacity to estimate the true nature of what he covets, or the ability to look on to the end of his pursuit of it. The forbidden fruit seems fair to his sight and inviting to his appetite, and in his eagerness to enjoy it, he ceases to regard the deadly consequences which may lie behind indulgence. "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die," may be written by the finger of God full in view, but he does not see the threat, or he does not understand the meaning of it. If you have ever watched the operations of your own minds when under the influence of some strong inclination, you will have observed how completely they have been warped and biassed in favor of everything which encouraged your wishes, and against everything which opposed them. The point of gratification has been the point of attraction. Everything in the way of disaster or suffering lying in the rear of gratification has been reduced in magnitude, or has been attenuated into a filmy indistinctness, till it has hardly been seen at all.

Now, just this species of hallucination attends the practice of sin in all forms. How strong the passion which engenders it is, may be inferred from the difficulty there is in persuading men to give it up. It is paralyzing as the frost of winter and freezes the faculties of the soul into motionless ice. Thought, sensibility, sympathy, are congealed by it. It encrusts the nature of its subject with the hardness of the nether millstone. It pays its wages, "death," to its votary in advance—before his soul leaves his body, because it extinguishes within him every instinct and element of a true and

generous manhood. Judas, under the influence of it, could see more worth in a few pieces of coin than in his divine Lord. The drunkard, under the infatuation of his appetite, grows blind to the fact that his intemperate courses are bringing his family to beggary and himself to shame and the grave. And this moral enfeeblement, let me add, is just as real in the case of the decent, respectable transgressor as in that of these more flagrant offenders. It is the *love* of sin which makes the sinner, whatever be the form in which that love expresses itself. And love, in the nature of it, is devotion, servitude. It takes captive its subjects. St. Paul calls all godless men, "servants," or, as the word means, *slaves* "of sin." They *are* slaves. They are fettered bondsmen, whether their chains be the iron ones of the tenants of the slum, or the golden ones of the worshipper of Mammon, or the silken ones of the devotee of pleasure. The love of sin ensures the result that the man does not *want* to be separated from the thing he loves, and has no capacity to appreciate the reasons which would urge him to separate from it. In the misty way in which the admonitions and warnings of God's word appear to him, he sees nothing in them to alarm him, or nothing which a little ready sophistry cannot strip of its force. He can relieve himself of all uneasiness by saying, that his form of indulgence is a harmless thing, a light effervescence of exuberant vitality which means no wrong; or he can argue that God is too good and merciful to notice or punish the petty frailties of his creatures; or he can construe the threatenings of Scripture into poetical extravagances, designed to intimidate the vulgar multitude; and so he encourages himself in the pursuit of the things he loves by dreams of security as false as those by which Judas was beguiled.

But Judas, as we see in our text, awoke from his dreams, and in the light which fell upon his opened eyes, illusions vanished, and things stood before him in their naked reality. You know the result of the revelation. I have no heart, no power to analyze its contents. But does ~~not~~ the question press itself upon us: may not the sinner, in every case, awake from his dreams? Dreams cannot last always. The honest waking hour must come sometime. Oh, surely the fate of the traitor in that awful moment when he saw what he had been doing, ought to startle every man loving sin and living in the service of it, like a thunder-peal. The enchantments which evil lust throw around the soul must be dissipated sooner or later, for truth must win in its conflict with error. There *are* consequences to follow a life of ungodliness. The Bible says so, and its testimony is infinitely more worthy of the credit of a reasonable man than can be the biassed utterances of a heart debauched by the love of sin. The spectacle of Judas' anguish and despair at the close of his experimenting should settle that point forever.

A second fact, suggested by the text, is that *sinful affections, cherished in connection with favorable opportunities, for knowing and doing one's duty, may be expected to grow with rapidity and to attain to an extraordinary intensity*. We shall probably be safe in supposing that when Judas first began to follow Christ, the thought of betraying him to death for a sum of money would have filled him with horror. But after the lapse of three years he could do this atrocious deed. For during those three years, in spite of all the counsels of Jesus and the attractions of his holy example, leading him to self-denial and a low esteem for worldly possessions, we find him retaining unimpaired, what we may assume to have been his original

greed for wealth. His opportunities for cultivating pious sentiments and principles were peculiar. But his ruling passion withstood them all, and in the course of time became strong enough to induce him to make the base proposal to the Jewish priests, "What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you?" And such a result was entirely natural. His propensity to avarice gained strength, his conscience became blunted every time he refused to give up his besetting lust under the admonitions and reproofs of his Master. He became a worse man rapidly by opposing the influences which were striving to make him a good man; and, finally, no extreme was too great for him to reach in the indulgence of his propensity. This tallies with common experience. Do you not know that you are adding to the strength of your limbs every time that you lift from the ground or throw down to the ground the bearrier that obstructs your way? Men who will hold on to their sinful passions and persist in leading a sinful life, in the face of the opportunities and facilities for repentance and amendment which the gospel affords, rapidly lose their moral sensibility and succumb to the mastery of their love of sin. They have resisted so much in prosecuting their evil courses, that the impulse acquired will carry them onward to the last point of indulgence. The gospel, thus, which they would not allow to be a savor of life unto life, becomes a savor of death unto death. The love of money, inordinately cherished, I doubt not, has operated in the case of many another man, just as it did in Judas'. It has led him, at first, to blind his mind to, and steel his heart against, the claims of religion, till he has gone a certain length, perhaps a moderate one, in the gratification of his desire to be rich. Then he has repeated the process, and again and again repeated it.

He has held on to his guilty purpose though the whole enginery of gospel motives has been laboring at his heart, to force it towards God and heaven. At the outset, probably, his feelings were tender on the subject of religion, and nothing would have shocked him more than to be told that he could ever sacrifice his Saviour for gold. But years pass on, in the heated pursuit of wealth and in obstinate resistance to Christ's warnings and counsels, and what is the result? His position is fixed. He has become petrified as Lot's wife. The last kindly thought of Jesus is gone. The last inclination towards religion has ceased to throb in his soul; and though he does not say it, and though he has never deliberately formed the purpose, yet the purpose *is* formed as positively and as inflexibly as though it were signed and sealed, to part with Christ for the golden equivalent for which his heart has lusted. And what is true of this craving for riches is true in regard to every sinful appetite which men have persisted in indulging, in defiance of the remonstrances and threatenings of the gospel. The result it is always preparing to bring them to is such an infatuated devotion, such an abject bondage, to the thing craved, that the abandonment of the Saviour, and the loss of the soul do not seem too great a sacrifice to secure the object. O ye, who are sitting to-day under the ministry of the blessed Jesus as he speaks to you in his word, and are yet putting off attending to the duties he urges upon you, through the solicitations of some sinful passion, will you not remember Judas? Your passion will master you before you are aware, as the traitor's did him; and may present you before the judgment-seat, as guilty of selling your Lord, as he was!

And now I ask you in the third place to reflect *how miserably poor and mean all these objects of corrupt desire,*

supposing them to be possessed, must appear, when contemplated intelligently, in connection with the consequences to which the pursuit of them must lead you. Let Judas again become your teacher here ! Look at him as he throws his bribe, with loathing upon the temple floor ! Was it not the very thing, the very sum, all told, in genuine coin, for which, a little while ago, he was so eagerly clutching, and for which he promised so eagerly to deliver up his Master ? Why has that which seemed so precious then become so worthless now ? Ah ! Judas has got what he bargained for, but he has got something more. He has got his mind open to a distinct perception of the guilt and ruin which his prize has cost him. And hence the glitter of his silver has become dim, and its value has departed.

And so it must, sooner or later, be with all who consent, for any earthly gratification, to surrender the benefits of Christ and his great salvation. When the wrong they have done to the Saviour, and the utter bankruptcy they have inflicted upon their own souls by such conduct, become distinctly revealed to them, as they may be at a dying hour, and as they certainly will be at the judgment day, how will they, too, fling to the dust the accursed baubles which have beguiled them into such fatal madness !

And still further let us ask, *what comfort will the wicked draw in the hour of their distress from the objects which they have served in sacrificing Christ ?* Judas, when remorse had seized him, came to the chief priests and elders, hoping, probably, that the sight of his contrition and agony might appeal, at least, to their humanity and secure some change in their treatment of Christ. But he was dealing with monsters. They had gained their purpose through his agency, and what cared they for

him? Vainly he made the hall ring with his protestations, "It is innocent blood which I have betrayed." "What is that to us?" was the reply. "See thou to that!" Your guilt is your own concern; bear it as you can! And is this all the solace which the servant of sin can expect from the master whom he has been so sedulously serving? A multitude of Judases, whom no man can number, answer, Yes. I can conceive of the slave of drink personifying the vicious appetite to which he has subjected himself, and in some moment of remorse, appealing to it for pity, for release from its grasp, for his wife's sake, for his children's sake, for the sake of the innocent blood which it is causing him to shed; and I can conceive of the cruel response which he would receive, "What is that to me? see thou to that. Your position is of your own choosing. Make the best of it that you can!" And there is no other reply which the devil, or the world, or the flesh, or wicked men, or anything that the sinner may be said to have served by his lusts, will ever give him. What response can the man who has taken a viper into his bosom, and who is writhing under the torture of its fangs, expect to his cries for compassion but a hiss of derision? Oh! these passions which lead the soul to deliver up its Saviour are pitiless things! They first seduce their victim, and then mock at his woes. They answer all his complaints and entreaties with the taunt, "What is that to us? See thou to that!" And this will be all the comfort they will ever offer him, either on earth or in eternity.

There is one truth more included in our text which I must not overlook. It is this: that *there may be a repentance, consisting of a conviction of sin and of remorse on account of it, which fails to bring to the subject of it any relief from his distress, or deliverance from his despair.*

Judas, it is said, "repented himself." He had conviction and remorse; but he did not repent with that repentance which is "unto life." This is the gift of God by his Spirit; and Judas, in parting with Christ, had parted with the ground upon which, and the channel through which, all God's saving gifts are bestowed. And he had quenched that Holy Spirit by whose aid alone men can be renewed unto repentance.

My friends, we make a great mistake when we suppose that any uneasiness which we may feel at a retrospect of our sins, will bring us the boon offered to repentance in the gospel, or that repentance is such a thing of the will and the lip that it can be practiced whenever we choose. There is a sorrow for sin, the Bible tells us, which is "of the world," and "worketh death." It is the sorrow of nature, entertained under the coercion of shame, and suffering, and terror. The sorrow which leads to life is a "godly sorrow"—a sorrow born of a recognition of God in Christ, producing in the soul a sense of the intrinsic evil of sin, and a loathing of it as an offence done to God and his holy law, and a desire to be delivered from its vileness and guiltiness, and a dependence upon the grace purchased for sinful men through Christ's mediation and propitiation. Mere remorse, mere terror, do not produce such a sorrow. Judas had these, and yet Judas perished. It is not easy to get it, as it would be if it were merely the cancelling of a bargain when one finds it about to involve him in loss. It is gotten through a resort to the interposition of Christ and the Holy Spirit. And just as any man continues to separate himself from Christ by obeying his evil lusts, and continues to resist the Holy Spirit by asking a little and a little longer indulgence in his evil courses, he is making it more and more probable that the repen-

tance which is associated with pardon and reconciliation to God he will never get. This solemn lesson Judas is teaching us to-day. "Beware," we may hear him saying "of trifling with the patience and mercy of God till there is no other repentance possible for you than that of unassisted nature—the deadly sorrow of a soul that has gained a sight of the guilt and the consequences of its sin, and has lost the sight of its Saviour."

Here we must take leave of this painful theme. It spreads before us a volume rather than a text. We have drawn enough from its dark pages to know that their contents are infinitely important. My dear friends, if you will ponder them seriously as you ought, that lurid beacon-light which the apostate's perfidy and doom have kindled in the far gloom of the past will be for you a salutary vision, a signal to point you to holiness and heaven. May God help us all to be so startled and admonished by it, that the torturing convictions, the unavailing regrets, the despairing lamentations, which gathered around the suicide of Judas, may never be repeated at our dying hour!