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SERMON CLXV.

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THE MURDER OF A FAITHFUL MINISTER; OR THE
DOWNWARD COURSE OF SIN.

MARK VI. 26—28. *And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes who sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought; and he went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother.*

THUS ended the life, labors and sufferings of John the Baptist. He was born six months before our blessed Lord, and, according to the common computation, was executed about a year before him. He was eminently distinguished for his piety, his talents and his office. "Filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb," he drank neither wine nor strong drink, but spent his life in the most ardent and exemplary discharge of duty. Raised up of God to be a great public reformer, in an age of pride and profligacy, he was furnished with the most bold and commanding talents. Appointed from heaven to be the harbinger of the Messiah, and to call the attention of the nation to his advent, he sustained an office superior to that of all preceding prophets. "For this is he of whom it is written, Behold I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women, there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist."

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He lived an example of humble boldness in the ministry of the truth, and died a martyr to his unflinching fidelity. He fell a victim to a merciless resentment which his official duty had excited.

It appears from the text, that John was in *prison*, when he was beheaded. In a preceding verse we learn how he came there: "For Herod himself had laid hold upon John and bound him in prison."

Prisons, though designed for the confinement of malefactors and the prevention of crime, have often been made, by perversion, the abode of the excellent of the earth—the dwelling place of those of whom the world was not worthy.

It is not certain how long John had been in prison; but it is generally supposed to have been about a year and a half. His confinement closed his public labors and his extensive usefulness, in the prime of life; and thus a burning and shining light was extinguished in the moral heavens, by a despot, who loved darkness rather than light, because his deeds were evil.

But what was the cause of John's imprisonment? Did Herod find in him any crime, worthy of this punishment? The exercise of the civil arm is always a public benefit, when, according to the ordinance of God, it is made a terror to evil doers. But in the case before us it was far otherwise. Herod "knew that John was a just man and an holy." He had witnessed his unexceptionable life; his unimpeachable sanctity. He knew that he was engaged in a righteous cause, and had reformed the manners and lives of many. Nay, he himself had heard him preach, and was for a season affected favorably, and in a manner reformed, by his ministry. His own experience was a remarkable testimony in John's favor. "When he heard him," says the sacred historian, "he did many things, and heard him gladly."

These were Herod's best days. There was then hope in his case. However bad a man may be, we cannot wholly give him up for lost, so long as he attends on the preaching of the word, and especially if the word preached has any effect on his conscience, and holds any restraints on his life. Had Herod continued to hear John, and to regard the doctrines that he taught, he might, humanly speaking, have been led to "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world," and become a happy follower of the Redeemer. But ah! his attention was diverted;

and his serious impressions—a thing by no means uncommon—were soon effaced. The love of sinful indulgence gained the ascendancy in his heart. His sentiments were changed. And, on pretence of being insulted by an instance of the Baptist's fidelity in telling him the truth, he is now ready to persecute with imprisonment and death the man of God, whom he formerly heard with reverence and pleasure.

It is an old remark, often confirmed by observation, that when a sinner becomes attentive to the word preached, he must soon quarrel either with himself or with the faithful minister. It sometimes happens, as in the present instance, that he is first displeased with himself, and afterwards with the preacher; and when this occurs, the resentment in the latter case is often lasting, and sometimes utterly irreconcilable. How precarious, I had almost said, how *hopeless* is the condition of those, who "for a season heard the word gladly, and did many things"—whose consciences were awakened—whose minds were enlightened—whose hearts were impressed—whose feelings were excited—whose suppliant souls were bowed before the mercy-seat—and whose doings towards God and men were reformed; but who have since relapsed into their former state of fancied security, lost their religious interest, become neglecters of the word, haters of those from whom they were once glad to hear it, and are now more closely wedded to the world, if not to vice, than ever before. How fearfully improbable is the recovery of such from the snare of the devil! Beware, ye whom the admonition may concern, beware of this dangerous, perhaps fatal, relapse. The case is nearly assimilated to that of those, who, an apostle declares, "are nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned."

Herod's character, excepting the temporary and partial reform under the ministry of John, appears to have been generally wicked and profligate. John, as the minister of God, and doubtless sincerely desirous of Herod's welfare, and probably encouraged by the attention he had received from him, was faithful and bold enough to "*reprove him for all the evils which he did.*" As there can be no genuine repentance without the knowledge of sin, it surely becomes the minister of religion to endeavor to set every man's iniquity fully before him, and that too with the directness and faithfulness of the prophet to the king of Israel, "*Thou art the man.*" Some may, indeed, be angry; but shall the man of God, in fear of that, be unfaithful?

But there was one thing in the life of Herod, on the sinfulness of which

John appears to have been specially explicit; and here it was that he principally gave offence. It was probably Herod's easily besetting sin, and therefore the most difficult to be abandoned. A man may bear to be reproved for a sin that is only occasional, or somewhat accidental; for a sin, if I may so say, which is not natural to him, or is not characteristic of him; but if you speak of his bosom, beloved, cherished sin—the particular sin of his constitution—the sin to which he is naturally most prone, and which holds dominion over him, he may deem you guilty of an unpardonable misdemeanor. You have touched him where he is most sensitive. Your wounds are as arrows in his most vulnerable part. Thus it was with Herod when John said to him, “It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.” He might perhaps have borne the reproof of all his other sins, and even been willing to break them off. But *this* could not be given up. Nay, it might not be mentioned with impunity, even by the minister of God.

The case was this—Herod, though married to the daughter of Aretas, an Arabian king, had formed an attachment to Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and consequently divorced his own wife, and married her. This connection was contrary to the law of God, both because Philip, the husband of Herodias, was still living, and because Herodias, by marriage with Philip, was so nearly related to Herod.

It is highly important to the peace of families and to the purity of society, that the laws of God regulating marriage, be preserved inviolate. And the observance of these laws, as well as of all divine institutions, is more especially incumbent on those whose office and rank give influence to their example. Herod, therefore, occupying the throne of state, was the more justly obnoxious to reproof for his transgression; and John had the intrepidity, in the discharge of ministerial duty, to tell him so.

The offence, according to the divine law, was two-fold: It consisted of adultery and of incest; of the former, inasmuch as Herodias' husband was living; of the latter, as she was by marriage Herod's sister.

This rare, though commendable instance of fidelity, in telling a chief magistrate his sins, incurred relentless persecution. Not only Herod was displeased, but the wrath of Herodias was enkindled. She appears to have been a woman of more depraved character than even Herod. Possessed of vindictive passions, and lost to all the finer feelings so essential to female loveliness, and considering herself impeached by the reproof ad-

ministered to Herod, and fearing perhaps, that she might lose the man of her criminal attachment, she aimed her resentment at the speedy destruction of John. His imprisonment, however, was all she could at first effect. For Herod, by whom only she could accomplish her purpose, knew that the people revered John as a prophet, and consequently might, if he put him to death, make an insurrection. "When he would have put him to death, (says Matthew,) he *feared the multitude*, because they counted him as a prophet."

But though the king and the queen were restrained from venting their rage at once upon the holy minister; yet Herodias, this second Jezabel, still meditated his destruction. For eighteen long months, while he was suffering in chains and in prison, she cherished the spirit of revenge, in her bosom. We should have thought, that a *woman's* thirst of vengeance might have been sated, in the course of this period, with the protracted sufferings of the object of her displeasure. But what do I say? The spirit of a woman was not in her. The spirit of the devil had usurped its place. Women, though generally more amiable than men, and much less frequently abandoned to vice, yet, when abandoned, sometimes exhibit the deepest and deadliest depravity.

An opportunity at length occurred, for Herodias to gratify her malice. Herod, on his birth-day, had made a sumptuous entertainment, and assembled "his lords, high captains and chief estates of Galilee."

One of the amusements for the entertainment of the king and his courtiers, in this season of festivity, was *dancing*. And Salome, the daughter of Herodias and Philip, "came in and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him." So infatuated was the king with her movements, and probably with wine too, that "he said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he swore unto her, whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom."

His promise and oath were in the highest degree rash and wicked, as the sequel will show. Elated with the magnificence of the offer, and with such a compliment to her worthless accomplishment, Salome withdrew to consult her mother, as to the request she should make. The God of nature has implanted the principle that directs a child to the parent for counsel and guidance; and happy are those whose parents avail themselves of this principle to guide them in the ways of wisdom. But more pitiable than orphanage, is the condition of those whom parents encourage in wickedness. What a dread account will those meet at the tribu-

nal of God, who, by precept or example, destroy the souls of their offspring!

Herodias, it seems, had given her daughter the fashionable accomplishment of dancing. The choice she will now encourage her to make, in reference to the king's promise, will enable us to judge further of her education. Many objects are before them for selection. Any thing may be demanded, even to the half of the kingdom. And, behold, after mutual counsel between the mother and her daughter, the favorite object is selected. "Give me the head of John the Baptist in a charger." Humanity—nay, I had almost said, barbarity itself, is shocked at the horrid request! But of what atrocity is not human nature capable! This exhibition of depravity shocks us the more, because it occurs in a female:—a female too in the bloom of beauty—of youth. With what rapid progress must she have pursued the path of vice to arrive at such a proficiency! But Salome evinced that she was the natural daughter of her profligate mother, born and bred in her likeness.

Herodias was pleased with thus finding an opportunity of accomplishing her malignant purpose on the faithful minister.

The account given of this woman and her daughter is so humiliating to their sex, and so degrading to human nature, that we anxiously look round for something in the case that may soften the dark shades of the picture. But nothing of the kind can be found. There is no alleviating circumstance. Had John, by any undue severity, or indiscretion, given even a pretext for impeachment, there would have been some apology for the persecution. But he had only said, affectionately and honestly, yet clearly and distinctly, what he could not forbear to say, without official connivance at iniquity in high places; and there was not even the form of a charge against him. Had the demand for his murder proceeded from the paroxysm or phrenzy of sudden and momentary rage, it were better. But no; the fiendlike passion for many a long month has brooded in the dark recesses of a guilty bosom, holding its steady and determined inquisition for blood; and now, when the opportunity occurs, can unblushingly come forth and make the demand, on an occasion of social entertainment, even in the presence of all the nobility of the kingdom! Ah! if there was any virtue; if there was any humanity; if there was any sense of propriety, in the court of Herod, we cannot envy him the honor that his ill-gotten wife and her dancing daughter gained him on this occasion. It has often been remarked that unlawful marriages are seldom prosperous; that they are generally followed by the visible frowns of heaven. She,

whom Herod unlawfully married, and unlawfully retained, was the occasion of more serious evil to him than the loss of his crown. But what was the success of Salome's request for the head of the Baptist? And how was Herod affected by it? Ah! we cannot but wonder that the whole palace was not filled with indignation at the monstrous proposal. The bare tolerance for a moment of such a request, and that from a female, in whom we expect to find every thing that is mild, benevolent, and amiable, argues the general depravity of the age and the gross profligacy of the court. "*The king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes who sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought; and he went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother!*"

Such was the closing scene of this brutal tragedy. Of the dreadful end of Herod and some of his associates in crime, we have not time to speak. Before closing this discourse, however, permit me to suggest several practical reflections.

1. Learn from the case of Herod, **THE DANGER OF INDULGING IN ANY KNOWN SIN**, either of omission or commission. We often meet with individuals whose manner of life has been much reformed under the preaching of the word, but to whom we are still constrained to say, as our Lord did to the young man in the gospel, "One thing thou lackest." There is some one beloved sin that they will not forsake, or some one indispensable duty that they will not perform. "The kingdom of God has come nigh unto them;" but there is one barrier in the way; and this may as effectually exclude them as though Alpine obstructions interposed. They are still on the territory of the god of this world. Iniquity still has dominion over them; and "if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Let me ask such, Is it wise—is it not madness—to forego, voluntarily to forego, the ineffable, the everlasting joys of heaven, for the momentary pleasure of a single sin? You have perhaps wondered at the folly of Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. But if you sell your soul for a sordid gratification, or neglect its mighty interests, from that fear of man which springs from pride, where is your superior wisdom?

2. This portion of sacred history admonishes parents and children to check the first rising of bad passion. It not only secretly corrodes the bosom where it dwells, but often leads to deeds of horror. Learn, then,

nobly to suppress at once the least angry or resentful feeling. Subdue the monster in its infancy, or you may be unable to master it in the maturity of its growth. Take lessons from the example of the Savior's meekness; and when you have failed in the imitation, go to his cross for pardon, and strength for time to come.

Finally, let parents learn, from the case of Salome, to *regard the moral and religious education of their children* as infinitely more important than any *vain and fashionable accomplishments*. Let them remember that their children have souls—that they are rational, accountable, and immortal beings; and let them educate them accordingly. Judging from the manner in which many train up their offspring, we might suppose that they had adopted the doctrine of the Sadducees, that “there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit;” that death terminates the existence of man forever; and that, therefore, *he* makes the wisest improvement of life, who devotes it to the pleasures of the world, and says, ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.’”

But, what! some will tartly reply, Would you debar them from every innocent amusement! Would you have them assume the gravity of age, and spend the bloom and buoyancy of youth in mopish melancholy? We wish nothing unreasonable. We would not deprive them of a single gratification which God allows, and which is not inconsistent with a greater good. We would debar them from no amusement which does not interfere with their duty to God, and their highest happiness. Yet we would not consent to their conformity to a “world lying in wickedness.” We would not consent to their going “with a multitude to do evil.” We would not consent to their “walking in the ways of their own hearts, and in the sight of their own eyes;” inasmuch as “for all these things God would bring them into judgment.” We would charge them rather “to seek *first* the kingdom of God and the righteousness thereof,”—to remember that the Savior says, “I love them that love me, and they that seek me *early* shall find me.” If they are the creatures of God, ought they not to serve him? If they may die while young, what duty or interest calls more imperatively, than that they should “remember their Creator in the days of their youth,” and prepare to meet him? What is more reasonable than that they should fly from the fire which shall never be quenched? that they should secure, while it is possible, “an inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away?” Can a parent endure the thought of his children being hurried from their youthful frivolities and worldly pleasures, to the tribunal of God, without having ever seriously thought on the subject? Why then encourage them to go to schools of

mere fashionable accomplishment, or to scenes of gaiety and dissipation? Are not such scenes, at least, a useless waste of time? Do they not banish serious thought? Do they not lead to forgetfulness of God? Do they not nourish feelings and desires unbecoming candidates for eternity? Your children look to you for counsel, they imitate your example, they revere your authority. How solemn, then, your responsibility! O, then, let your counsel, your example, your authority—in a word—your whole influence upon them be such, that when you see them in the dying struggle, they may not upbraid you; and when you meet them at the bar of God, they may not condemn you.—AMEN.

SERMON CLXVI.

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THE NATURE AND EFFICACY OF TRUE PRAYER.

MATTHEW XXI. 22.—*And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.*

PRAYER is a subject of vital importance to the souls of men, and one that is exciting at the present day a deep interest in the church of God. Within a few years past a more than ordinary spirit of inquiry has been awakened in many parts of Christendom, revivals of religion have been greatly increased both in number and power, and a multitude of cases have occurred in which prayer was very manifestly answered. And this subject will doubtless yet gain a much stronger hold on the church, as God shall extend her borders, and begin to throw upon the world the light of millennial day.

I propose to show, IN WHAT TRUE PRAYER TO GOD CONSISTS; and WHY WE MAY EXPECT IT TO BE ANSWERED.