

T H E
AMERICAN PREACHER;
O R, A
COLLECTION OF SERMONS
FROM SOME OF THE
MOST EMINENT PREACHERS,
NOW LIVING,
IN THE UNITED STATES,
O F
DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS
IN THE
CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED.

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S E R M O N XLI.

THE DANGER OF ADVERSITY.

B Y

JOHN WITHERSPOON, D. D. L. L. D.

Col. N. C. P.

PROVERBS xxx. 9.

*Lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God
in vain.*

I PROCEED now to consider the argument by which the prophet urges the second branch of his request, which, in connexion, runs thus—*Give me not poverty, lest I be poor and steal.* Having not only explained the general principle that runs through the whole of this subject, but also very particularly pointed out the dangers attending an opulent and wealthy state; I shall endeavor to do the same thing with respect to a state of poverty and straitness. While I attempt this, I am sincerely sorry that there is so much propriety in the subject; and that it is so well suited to the circumstances of the inhabitants of this place. You see the prophet considers the great and general temp-

tation to which the poor are exposed, to be dishonest, by using fraudulent means of relieving their wants, or bettering their condition. You see also, he considers this temptation in its progress, not only inclining them to act unjustly, but sometimes proceeding to the terrible degree of concealing or supporting the fraud by falsehood, and perhaps at last by perjury or false swearing; *lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.*

Let us first consider a little the matter of fact, as it appears in experience, and then a few of its principal causes.

As to the first of these, shall I be afraid to affirm, that extreme poverty often inclines persons to dishonesty and fraud? Will it be thought harsh and severe to those already sufficiently depressed? As I would not seem to stand in this place and flatter the pride of the greatest, and most eminent of my fellow sinners, so neither will I dissemble the truth from a false compassion for the poor. This would indeed be doing them the greatest possible injury; it would be treating them, from mistaken tenderness, as the rich are often treated from the fear or partiality of those who are about them; fostering their self-deceit, and not suffering them to hear the most salutary truths, because they are not pleasing to the flesh.

It is undoubtedly matter of experience, that great poverty makes many take unjust and unwarrantable methods of procuring relief. Not only

fo, but they feem often difpofed to juftify and defend them, as if they had a title to rectify the miftakes of Providence, in the diftribution of worldly poffeffions. This, in the event, receives great encouragement from fome who feem to have imbibed a general falfe principle, and act upon it, both in their own conduct, and in their judgment of others. In the divifion of controverfy, or dividing difputed property, when one party is, or is fupposed to be rich, and in eafy circumftances, and the other poor, and in a mean condition, they think that inftead of acting according to ftrict juftice, the advantage fhould always be made to fall to the poorer fide. This conduct is confidered by fome, not only as lawful, but as laudable. It is however a falfe principle, and is condemned in fcripture, which fays, *Neither fhalt thou countenance a poor man in his caufe.* It may be thought, perhaps, that the other is the more common and dangerous partiality, and probably it is fo; yet this alfo is blame-worthy, and when followed out, as I am afraid it too often is, muft involve numbers unawares in the guilt of ftcaling; for when they have once laid down this rule, that the poor have fome claim upon the rich, they are ready to apply it to their own cafe, and extend it very far. But in all matters of property, or right and wrong, whether a perfon is rich or poor, ought to be utterly out of the queftion; the only thing to be confidered is, what is juft and lawful. The rich are indeed, in point of confcience, bound to affift

the poor ; but this must be their own act ; no person can take the smallest part of their property, without their consent, but he is guilty of an act of injustice, and violation of the law of God. No person has a right to make them generous and charitable against their wills, or to exercise their own generosity and charity at their expence. This must be left to the Supreme Judge at the last day, who will say to them, *I was a stranger and ye took me not in, naked and ye clothed me not, sick and in prison and ye visited me not.* But what will give us the most distinct view of the influence of poverty, as a temptation, is the too frequent conduct of those who are reduced from what was once their state, to poverty or debt, by misfortunes or extravagance, or mismanagement of their affairs. The temptation of poverty is not by far so great to those in the meanest ranks of life, whose income, though small, is not very disproportionate to what hath always been their condition ; as to those who are reduced from a higher to a lower state—The few, who in such a situation preserve their integrity inviolated, and their sincerity of speech unsuspected, deserve the highest honor. Nay, I am persuaded that, bad as the world is, every person in reduced circumstances, would meet with compassion and assistance, if all about him were sensible that he had neither lost his substance by neglect, nor wasted it by riot, nor concealed it by fraud. But though we cannot help ascribing some measure of what is laid to the charge of persons

in this unhappy state, to the rage and resentment of those who have suffered by them; yet alas, there is too great reason to affirm, that they are too often guilty of prevarication and fraud, the sins mentioned in the text.

I will dwell no longer upon the fact, but will consider a little the reasons of it, which will directly serve to promote the design of this discourse, by exciting men to concern and solicitude, as well as pointing out the proper means of avoiding the temptation. The general reason of this, to be sure, is obvious to every body, that persons in poverty, being strongly solicited by the appetites common to all men, and not having of their own wherewith to gratify their desires, are tempted to lay hold of the property of others. They grudge to see that others have the enjoyments from which they are debarred; and since they cannot have them in a lawful, make bold to seize them in an unlawful way. But this I do not insist on, that I may mention one or two particular reasons, which will suggest suitable exhortations to duty.

1. The first I shall mention, is ignorance. This is peculiarly applicable to those in the lowest ranks of life. Through poverty they are not so well instructed as they ought to be, in the principles of religion, and the great rules of duty. An ignorant state is almost always a state of security.— Their consciences are less tender, and they are less sensible of the great evil of prevarication and fraud.

I am obliged, in fidelity, to say, that in the private inspection of my charge, though I have found some instances both of poverty and sickness borne with the most pious resignation, there are also some whose condition might move the hardest heart, living in the most sordid poverty, grossly ignorant, and, at the same time, so dispirited, so slothful, or so proud, that they will do little to obtain knowledge for themselves, or communicate it to their children. Many will not attend upon the public means of instruction, because they cannot appear in such a decent garb as thy could wish; and for the same reason, they keep their children from them, till they contract such habits of idleness and vice, that they come out into the world without principle, obstinate and intractable. Is not the duty here very plain? All such should exert themselves to obtain the knowledge of the things which belong to their peace. They should neither be unwilling nor ashamed to make application for supply; and even the coarsest raiment should not hinder them from appearing in the house of God. Thus they will find acceptance with him, if they worship him in the beauty of holiness, preferable to those who are clothed in purple and fine linen, and their hearts are after their covetousness.

2. Another great reason why poverty becomes a temptation to fraud is, that they are introduced to it insensibly, and led on by degrees. The sin

steals upon them by little and little. People involved in their circumstances; to get rid of importunity and sollicitation, make promises, more of what they hope or wish, than of what they are able to do. Necessity serves as an excuse for their failing to their own minds, and thus they are gradually brought into a breach of sincerity, and proceed from lower to higher degrees of falsehood. Little arts of evasion are first made use of, and doubtful practices are entered upon. One sin seems necessary to strengthen or conceal another, till at last the grossest fraud, and sometimes perjury itself, closes the unhappy scene. I have read an excellent observation, that there is hardly such a thing as a single sin; they are always to be found in clusters. I am sure, this holds in a particular manner as to sins of injustice. They are so interwoven and connected together, that you cannot receive any one without being obliged to admit the rest. This is one great branch of the deceitfulness of sin in general; with a view to which the apostle says; *But exhort one another daily while it is called to-day, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*

3. I only mention one other reason of poverty being a temptation to fraud, viz. that in time it destroys the sense of shame. I am not ignorant, that a sense of shame, which is nothing else but a fear of the censure of others, neither is, nor ought to be the main principle of a good man's actions.

But as there is no other principle at all in many, so it is a good assistant, and corroborative when justly directed: but now, through the corrupt maxims of the world, poverty is so much the object of contempt, and those who are in this state, meet every day with so many marks of neglect from all, that before their condition is known, they will do almost any thing to conceal it, and after it is known, they become in time so destitute of shame, that they are under no further restraint.

From this particular branch of the subject, let me put you in mind,

1. What reason many have to be thankful to the God of life, who hath given them their daily provision, if not in all the abundance of immense riches, yet in fulness and sufficiency. An humble, thankful disposition is not only your duty, in return for the divine bounty, but is itself the richest and sweetest ingredient in all temporal mercies.— It is that, indeed, which makes them mercies.— Envious persons do not taste what they have, their evil eye being fixed on what they cannot obtain. Things in this respect are just what they seem to be. Our comforts are as we are enabled to relish them. The same possessions which are despised by the impatient or ambitious are a treasure and abundance to the humble and grateful.

2. If poverty is a temptation, it ought to be an argument to all to avoid it, or seek deliverance from it by lawful means. Apply yourselves with

steadiness and perseverance to the duties of your calling, that you may provide things honest in the sight of all men. It is a duty of the land, and of the gospel; and it hath this promise, in general, annexed to it, that *the hand of the diligent maketh rich*. Read, I beseech you, that vast treasure of useful instruction, the book of Proverbs; where you will meet with many excellent counsels and wise observations upon this subject. Of these I shall mention, at present, but two passages, selected both for the soundness of the instruction, and the beauty of the illustration. *Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise; which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.* And again; *I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and lo it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone-wall thereof was broken down.*

3. Are any of you poor and reduced in your circumstances, set a double watch upon your conduct, and earnestly pray that God may preserve you from fraud and dissimulation of every kind. Rather suffer yourselves to be stripped of every thing, and apply to the charity of others, which is not sinful, and ought not to be shameful, than take any dis-

honest methods of bettering your state. O melancholy thought, that many, when they become desperate in their circumstances, become also desperate in their courses, and drown the reflection of their consciences in slothfulness and sensuality! Sincerity, integrity, patience and sobriety in a ruined fortune are doubly eminent, at least, whatever they may be in the sight of the world, they are honorable and precious in the sight of God, and of all good men.

Before concluding, suffer me to make one or two reflections on the subject in general; the several parts of which I have now explained. And,

1. On what hath been said on this subject, I would graft this important lesson; that you should not only study to preserve yourselves from sin, but from all such circumstances of temptation as are dangerous to human constancy. This was the very ground of the prayer of the prophet in my text, and is the substance of the reasons he assigns for his request. We are taught the same thing in the strongest manner, by the several instances of human frailty, and the folly of presumptuous confidence, recorded in scripture. *Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.* We are also taught the same thing by him who knew what was in man, as he has given us directions in the form of prayer which he taught his disciples, to say, *Lord, lead us not into temptation.*

Are you really unwilling to do evil, you will be concerned to keep yourselves out of the way of every solicitation to it. This is constantly the effect of a judicious and solid piety, and those who act otherwise shew, that they either have no real goodness, or that they are very weak Christians, and little acquainted either with themselves, or this present evil world.

2. You may learn how necessary it is, that you should look for the divine assistance and direction, to avoid the temptation of every state of life. We are truly of ourselves unequal to the trials with which we are surrounded. Not that there is any thing unjust or oppressive in the measures of Providence; but because it seems good to our maker, to oblige us to a constant dependance upon himself and his promised help. *But God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*

The least temptation may prove too hard for us, if we neglect to apply for supreme aid; but in divine strength, we may bid defiance to the most formidable opposition. This temper is well exemplified and described by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. *And he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches,*

in necessities, in persecution, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak then am I strong.

3. From what hath been said, you may see what an inseparable connexion there is between true religion, and your employments, and state in this present world. They have a mutual, strong, and constant influence upon one another. It is a fatal, though a common error to separate them; entirely to confine religion to the times and places of immediate worship, and suppose that it hath nothing to do with the maxims of trade and commerce, or other worldly callings. On the contrary, your impressions of things spiritual and eternal, will direct and regulate your views as to the present life; and your success or misfortunes in worldly schemes, will have a certain and visible effect upon your Christian conversation, and the state of your souls. Therefore, let them never be separated in your own views, and let them still be kept in their proper order and subordination. Though the light and trivial use, not only of the name of God, but of scripture-language, is both sinful and dangerous; and though a forward ostentatious piety may sometimes look suspicious, yet it were to be wished we had more of a grave and habitual acknowledgement of God in all our ways. This was the language of the Patriarchs of old. In one of the former discourses upon this subject, I took notice of Jacob's prayer, when he set out for Padan-aram. See after the increase of

his family, how he expresses himself in answer to his brother Isaac. *And he lift up his eyes and saw the women and children, and said, who are those with thee? And he said the children which God hath graciously given thy servant.* See also the apostolical direction for the manner of projecting our future purposes. *Go to now, ye that say to-day, or to-morrow, we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.*

4. In the last place, let me beseech, in the tenderest manner, every one of you, rich and poor, to remember an approaching eternity. It will not be long till the honorable, and despised, the wealthy and the needy, the master and the servant, shall lie down in the dust. Lay hold of that covenant of peace which is ordered in all things and sure. Hear a great and constant truth. *What is a man profited, though he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul, or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?* How many a Lazarus is now in Abraham's bosom; and how many a rich man, that once lived delicately on earth, is at this moment tormented in hell-fire! The gospel of peace is now preached in your ears. Believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and ye shall be saved. I cannot promise that you shall be rich, but all things necessary are assured to you by the divine promise; food and raiment, support under trials, strength for duty, and in the world to come, everlasting rest.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.