

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.

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S E R M O N XL.

THE DANGER OF PROSPERITY.

B Y

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

Col. N. C. P.

PROVERBS XXX. 9.

*Let I be full and deny thee, and say, who is the Lord?
Or, lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my
God in vain.*

I PROCEED now to consider the arguments by which the prophet enforces his wise and well-conceived prayer. These, in connexion with the two branches of the prayer, stand thus: *Give me not riches, lest I be full and deny thee, and say, who is the Lord? And give me not poverty, lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.* If Agur's prayer is conceived in the most modest and humble terms, the reasons, with which he supports it, are every way becoming a truly wise and good man. You see in them a prevailing concern for the honor and glory of God, and his own preservation in the paths of piety and virtue. You see in them a humble sense of his own weakness, and the danger of temptation; he, therefore, desires to be

placed in such a state of life, as will expose him to the fewest trials. An excellent disposition this, and highly worthy of our imitation. How happy would it be for us all, if a desire to please God and preserve our integrity, lay always nearest our hearts, and had a constant and commanding influence on every step we took in our journey through life.

Neither riches nor poverty are bad in themselves. Neither of them is any recommendation, or hindrance to the favor of God, who is no respecter of persons—there are good and bad in all ranks. Men may be rich and yet pious, or poor yet strictly just and honest. It is, I confess, often done, yet it is highly criminal to look upon all that are rich in this world as profane; and it would be equally so to look upon all that are poor as destitute of integrity. Yet it is undeniable, that, from the corruption of the human heart, these two extremes do often become strong temptations to the particular sins mentioned in the text; which we shall now consider separately, in the order in which they lie in the passage before us.

Give me not riches, lest I be full and deny thee, and say, who is the Lord?

As to the fact, that riches do often lead to profanity and contempt of God, experience, and the state of the world prove it in a manner too plain to be denied. We not only see that those, who are born and educated from their infancy in the higher ranks of life, are most prone to neglect the du-

ties of religion; but those who, from a low or mean condition, are remarkably raised in the course of Providence, do often change their temper with their state, and show the unhappy influence of riches in leading them to a forgetfulness of God. Are there not some, who were regularly in God's house when they but barely subsisted, who have not time for it now, when they are busy and wealthy? Are there not some families, where the worship of God was constant and regular in early life, while they were undistinguished, and now it is no more to be heard in their sumptuous palaces and elegant apartments? Shall I say, that any worm of the earth is become too considerable to fall down before the omnipotent Jehovah?

I may add, as being of great importance in the present subject, that such changes do often take place gradually and insensibly, very much contrary to men's own expectation; so that we really do not know ourselves, nor can we determine before trial, how far we would resist or yield to the force of temptation. The prophet Elisha foretold to Hazael, the cruelties he would be guilty of when raised to an higher station; to which he replied with disdain and abhorrence; *What, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing? And Elisha answered, the Lord hath shewed me that thou shalt be king over Syria.* The conduct of the children of Israel in their prosperity, is but an emblem of the general conduct of the children of men. *But Jerusalem*

waxed fat, and kicked. Thou art waxed fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness: Then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the rock of his salvation.

What hath been said might be sufficient to shew the propriety of the prophet's prayer; for if such hath been often, or generally, the influence of worldly greatness upon other men, why should any be so confident as to presume it would be otherwise with themselves? But perhaps it may afford matter of useful instruction, to enquire a little further into the subject—to trace the causes of this effect, and shew how, and why riches become an inducement to irreligion and profaneness, for this will best enable us to apply the remedy. When I speak of examining the causes of this effect, I confess that no reason can be given for it, but what reflects great dishonor upon human nature in its present state. Were we to judge of the matter by the dictates of sound reason, we should naturally expect to find it directly contrary. God is the author of every blessing which men possess, and his gifts should lead us to gratitude and acknowledgement. It seems natural then to suppose, that those who are most highly favored in the course of Providence, should discover the greatest sense of obligation, and be ready to make every dutiful return. One would think that though the poor should be impatient, surely the rich will be content and thankful. Is not this reasonable? Had any of you

bestowed many favors upon others, would you not expect that their gratitude should bear some proportion to the number and value of benefits received? Had any of them been remarkably distinguished from the rest, would you not expect from them the most inviolable fidelity and attachment? Strange, that our conduct should be so directly opposite in the returns we make for the goodness of our maker! That those who are distinguished from others by the largest possessions, and the greatest fulness of all temporal mercies, should be the most prone to wickedness of all sorts; but especially, that they should be peculiarly inclined to forgetfulness and contempt of God. Yet so it is in truth. But however dishonorable it is to human nature, let us search into it a little, and perhaps we may discover the cause of impiety in persons in affluent circumstances, and the danger the prophet would avoid, by attending to the following observations:

I. An easy and affluent fortune affords the means, not only of pampering our bodies, but of gratifying all our lusts and appetites. They are as strong probably in persons of inferior stations, but Providence has rendered the gratification more difficult, and in some cases impossible. Many work through necessity, who would be as idle and slothful as any, but for the fear of want. These will be the first and readiest to reproach the rich, and call them idle drones, who revel in that abun-

dance for which they never toiled; and to put to their own credit that, which is wholly owing to the restraints under which they are laid. Many are generally sober, because they cannot afford the charges of intemperance, who want nothing but the means, to riot in the most brutal sensuality. But to persons of great wealth, the objects of desire are always placed in full view, and are evidently within their reach; so that the temptation has uncommon force, and few are able entirely to resist it.

2. The indulgence of pleasure insensibly induces a habit, and leads men to place their happiness in such enjoyments. Habit you know is very powerful, and while the habit acquires strength, the power of resistance is gradually weakened. These gratifications consume so much time, that there is little left to reflect upon God, and our relation to him. I reckon it none of the least temptations to persons of high rank, that not only their self-indulgence, but the attendance and obsequiousness of others so engrosses their attention, and wastes their time, that they have few opportunities of calm and sober reflection; or at least, can easily escape from it, and take refuge in company and amusement. Add to this, that a great variety of sensible objects and enjoyments render the mind, not only less attentive to things of a spiritual nature, but indeed, less able to understand them.

3. Observe further, that when the better part is thus neglected, and no care taken of the cultiva-

tion of the mind, every vice will spring and shoot up in the soul, as briars and thorns do upon uncultivated ground. Sin, my brethren, is natural to us; it is the produce of the soil; if it is not destroyed, it will not die; if it is but neglected, it will thrive. Now when ever persons fall under the power of vice, they begin first to excuse, and then to vindicate it. Those who are under the government of lust, soon find it would be their interest that there was no such thing as religion and virtue. Whatever we wish, we are easily led to believe to be true. Loose and atheistical principles then find a ready admittance, and are swallowed down greedily. This is a short sketch of the steps by which people in affluent and easy circumstances, are often led to deny God, and to say: *What is the Almighty that we should serve him, and what profit should we have if we pray unto him?*— Loose principles are, at first, more frequently the effect, than the cause of loose practices; but when once they have taken deep root, and obtained full dominion in the heart, they have a dreadful and fatal influence on the devoted victim.

But, my brethren, I find a strong inclination to make another remark, though perhaps it may be thought of too refined and abstract a nature. It is, that the danger of affluence in leading to contempt of God, arises from the nature of all sin as such. The original and first sin of man was plainly affecting independence. They desired and

expected to be as Gods knowing good and evil. And still sin properly consists in withdrawing our allegiance from, and throwing off our dependance upon God, and giving, as it were, that esteem, love and service to ourselves, in one shape or another, that is due only to him. Now observe, that affluence nourishes this mistake, and suffering kills it. The more every thing abounds with us, the more our will is submitted to, and our inclinations gratified on every subject; the more we look upon ourselves as independent, and forget our obligations to God. Whereas, on the other hand, disappointments and calamities open our blind eyes, and make us remember what we are. Was not the proud monarch of Babylon inspired with this delusive sense of independence, when he expressed himself thus: *At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spake and said, is not this great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty? But mark the more powerful word of the King of Kings. While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken, the kingdom is departed from thee!* That this is the proper source of worldly greatness, may be seen in the temper, such persons usually acquire and settle in, which is pride, insolence and contempt of others. Nay, it appears still more clearly in some few instances, in which the intoxication comes to its height, and the poor de-

luded mortal literally aspired to be considered and treated as God. It may seem incredible, but we have the most authentic evidence that history can afford, that some men have demanded and received divine worship. This was the case, not only with Alexander the Great, who was really an illustrious prince, but with some of the later Roman emperors, who were the meanest and basest of all men. No wonder then, that prosperity makes men neglect God, when it prompts them to sit down upon his throne, and rob him of the service of his other subjects.

Before I proceed to the other part of the prophet's argument, suffer me to make a few remarks for the improvement of what has been already said. And,

1. See hence the great malignity and deceitfulness of sin. It hardly appears more strongly from any circumstance, than that which has been the subject of this discourse, viz. that the gifts of God, in the course of his Providence, are so far from exciting our gratitude, in proportion to their number and value, that, on the contrary, those who *receive most* are usually *most profane*. They make his favors instruments of rebellion against him, and return contempt for his indulgence, and hatred for his love.

Let us not take occasion from this to gratify our own envy, by particular or personal reproach

against those who are great, or have become rich amongst themselves; but let us act a far wiser and juster part, and be humbled for the sinfulness of our nature, and warned of the deceitfulness of sin. We may feel the seeds of this disposition in us all. You find the wise man charging a similar ingratitude upon man in general. *Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.* And do you not observe every day, nay, has it not turned into a proverb, that we think light of our mercies, spiritual and temporal, when they are common and abundant? And what is the true and proper interpretation of this, but that the greater God's goodness is to us, commonly the less is our gratitude to him?

2. Let me beseech you to make a wise improvement of the advantages you enjoy over one another. Let them excite in you a holy emulation to testify your sense of superior blessings, by superior piety and usefulness. Do you excel others in any respect? Are you successful in trade? Have you risen to reputation? Are you exalted to offices of dignity? Are you endowed with capacity of mind? Can you remember the time when those were your equals who are now your inferiors? Do not look with insolence upon others, making odious, and perhaps unjust comparisons. Do not swell in pride and self-complacence, as if by your own power you had made yourselves to differ, but rather look the

other way to God, who is the maker both of rich and poor, and pray that your thankfulness and duty to him may exceed that of the poor man, as much as his liberality to you exceeds what he has thought proper to bestow upon him. This affords me an opportunity of relating a little piece of private history, that happened in Great Britain, and appears to me very worthy of remembrance, and very conducive to the ends of edification.

A gentleman of very considerable fortune, but a stranger to either personal or family religion, one evening took a solitary walk through a part of his own grounds. He happened to come near to a mean hut, where a poor man with a numerous family lived, who earned their bread by daily labor. He heard a voice pretty loud and continued. Not knowing what it was, curiosity prompted him to listen. The man, who was piously disposed, happened to be at prayer with his family. So soon as he could distinguish the words, he heard him giving thanks with great affection to God, for the goodness of his providence, in giving them food to eat, and raiment to put on, and in supplying them with what was necessary and comfortable in the present life. He was immediately, no doubt, by divine power, struck with astonishment and confusion, and said to himself, does this poor man, who has nothing but the meanest fare, and that purchased by severe labor, give thanks to God for his goodness to himself and family, and I, who en-

joy ease and honor, and every thing that is grateful and desirable, have hardly ever bent my knee, or made any acknowledgement to my maker and preserver. It pleased God that this providential occurrence proved the mean of bringing him to a real and lasting sense of God and religion.

Let all persons in health, quiet and plentiful circumstances, learn from the preceding discourse, what it is they ought clearly to guard against.—Pride, security, forgetfulness of God, are peculiarly incident to that state. *Lo this, saith the Lord to Jerusalem, was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her, and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.* A serious reflection on the obligation such lie under to God for what they have received in their continued dependence upon him, and the instability of all earthly things, would save them from the hurtful influence of worldly prosperity. To enforce this, I shall only read the apostolic charge to Timothy. *Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us all things richly to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*