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SERMON XXX.

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PRIDE ABASED BY THE GOSPEL.

I CORINTHIANS, i. 29.—*That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

THE gospel found the citizens of Corinth immersed in vice, and devoted, with an almost idolatrous attachment, to the false philosophy, and artificial eloquence of the Greeks. They had their masters in each of these departments, who attracted crowds of pupils, and who, as rivals, were sustained, and cheered in their competitions for intellectual fame, by the praises of their respective followers. After their professed reception of Christianity, the Corinthians still clung, with fond tenacity, to the wisdom of words; valued to excess miraculous gifts; boasted of their attainments in knowledge; and sought in the preachers of the gospel the same attributes, which they had been accustomed to admire in their heathen teachers. Hence parties arose, and divided the church with unhallowed contentions. Each had his favourite leader, who was applauded, chiefly for his supposed proficiency in the rules of reasoning, or his skill in the artifices of a studied rhetoric; while, in the eyes of his partial friends, it was a crime even to call in question his superiority to all competitors. From the heat and acrimony of their disputes, it seemed as if the Corinthians ascribed the success of the gospel to the decorations with which it was recommended to the world; and it was too plain, that, with all their professions, they had little experimental acquaintance with its transforming power. To correct their errors, and to humble their pride, is evidently a prime object of the apostle, in the context. He reproves their divisions, their party zeal, and their extravagant antipathies and predilections, as hearers of the word; he gives to the gospel the praise of achieving, through a divine influence, the salvation of men; and he pours contempt on those distinctions, by which the hearts of the Corinthians had been inflated.—“We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called,” or *have called you to the knowledge of Christ, and his salvation*; “but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are; **THAT NO FLESH SHOULD GLORY IN HIS PRESENCE.**”

SERMON XXXI.

By JOHN WOODBRIDGE, D.D.

GOD'S RESPECT TO THE LOWLY.

PSALM CXXXVIII. 6.—*Though the Lord, be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly.*

ON a survey of the works of God, as the products of his power and skill, the thought which first impresses us, is that of his unsearchable greatness. All parts of the creation proclaim his glories. The emotions of sublimity, inspired by the wide-spreading forest, the cataract, the mountain rearing its summit to the sky, the blue expanse over our heads, and the mighty wastes and billows of the ocean, can hardly fail to be associated with overwhelming conceptions of his omnipotence and grandeur. These sentiments are heightened in proportion to the extent of our field of vision; and to the most uninstructed mind, a cloudless evening sky presents a scene of wonder, to which all the magnificence of earth is poor. When we contemplate the heavens, by the light of science, as the stupendous array of worlds, and suns, and systems, all moving on, in wondrous harmony, to subserve the will of their Maker,—when, having mused on all that the eye, or the telescope can discover, we still imagine ourselves to be standing at the vestibule of the universe, and conceive of other firmaments, stretching into immensity—to us, insects of an hour, confined to this little planet, the creation itself seems infinite;—how great then is He, who spoke and it was done, who commanded and it stood fast? His resources are neither exhausted, nor diminished; and in a moment he could create a new empire, compared with which, all that now exists should seem as a drop in the bucket, or as dust in the balance. With these views vividly before us, all our conscious importance in the scale of being is lost; man dwindles into a speck, a nothing; and the inquiry will naturally arise, What can be his assurance of the continued care, protection and kindness of his Almighty Creator? By deeper thought, by a more attentive study of his works and word, we learn the consoling truth, that his observation is as minute, as his knowledge is boundless, and his love as tender, as his greatness is incomprehensible. He is the Guardian, the Parent, of the meanest, no less than of the most illustrious of his creatures. The hand, which sustains and moves worlds, supports all, adorns all, blesses all; it paints the tulip and the rose, feeds the ravens, and imparts to the insect that glitters in the sun-beams, its vivacity and gladness. The Mighty God looks from his habitation upon the children of men; “he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust;” but he is peculiarly the Friend, the Protector, the Father of all such, as reverence his name, submit to his authority, and trust in his mercy. “Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly.”

To illustrate, in a number of particulars, the affecting truth taught in this passage, will be my object in the present discourse.

1. God hath respect to the *character* of the lowly.

He knows indeed all that vileness, over which they mourn ; and, as a God of purity, he must hate sin, in whosoever it is found. But he witnesses also their ingenuous relentings, their earnest application to him for mercy through the atonement ; he sees them retracing their steps, bowing at his throne, and sinking into their proper place, as his creatures, and as sinners. These expressions of a filial spirit he loves ; his fatherly heart yearns over the returning prodigals ; his paternal arms are extended to embrace them. He views in them his own image restored ; he beholds them taking part with himself against a revolted world, and joined in the temper of their hearts to his beloved Son ; and he bids them welcome to all the provisions, endearments and joys of his happy family. “ I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus, Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke : turn thou me, and I shall be turned ; for thou art the Lord my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented ; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh : I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth. Is Ephraim my dear son ? is he a pleasant child ? for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still : therefore my bowels are troubled for him ; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord.—Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy ; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” “ But the proud he knoweth afar off ” He sustains them, confers upon them his benefits, requires their obedience and holds them accountable at his bar ; but he abhors them still as rebels, whose aims and pursuits break in upon the order of the universe, and tend to dissolve that beautiful harmony, which connects in one grand system of benevolence all the parts of his moral kingdom. He must frown upon men, who, instead of aiming at his glory, that supreme point of attraction in the holy creation, would exalt themselves, by trampling down his authority, and spurning from them the offered grace of the gospel.

2. The Lord hath respect to the *prayers* of the lowly.

When we contemplate God in his majesty, the immensity of his essence, the infinitude of his knowledge, the boundlessness of his power, dwelling in light inaccessible, the universal Creator, the Director of moving worlds, the Life of heaven, before whom bow myriads of angels, celebrating his praises in everlasting songs,—dare we indulge the thought, that prayers, offered to Him by sinful children of the dust, can be heard and accepted ? These suggestions of unbelief, plausible and imposing as they are, spring from our ignorance of God, our low and unworthy conceptions of his tender mercy. Invested in all the glory of his own perfections, he is also the Refuge, the Hope, of his people. Nor are the wise and the great of this world the only men, invited to the exalted privilege of communion with Him who rules over all. Passing by the proud, he receives from the lowly in heart the worship in which he delights. Be they tenants of the cottage or the prison, be they wanderers in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth ; it is all one ; their sighs of penitence, their confessions, and fervent applications for mercy, are music in his ear. Do they cry to him for knowledge, and lift up their voice for understanding ? He regards their cry. Jehovah is their Instructor. His Spirit dissipates from their minds the mists of prejudice, purifies their moral taste, reveals to them, through the medium of sanctified affections, the glory of his word, inspires them with a reverence of his authority, and thus prepares them,

with the simplicity of children, to understand and embrace his testimony, on every subject connected with their duty, and their immortal interests. "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.—In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight."—Do they ask for the forgiveness of sin? The gracious Father meets with joy, and adorns with his best robe, and entertains with princely magnificence, his long lost, but now penitent son. The simple petition, issuing from a broken heart—"God, be merciful to me a sinner"—ascends to the heaven of heavens, and engages all the energies of infinite love to deliver and bless the most needy and guilty. They are encouraged, in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgivings, to make their requests known to God. He assures them that he is more ready, in answer to their prayers, to bestow upon them the richest spiritual favours, than any human parent can be, to give bread to his hungry children. "I never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye my face in vain." O, it would require volumes, more than the world has yet seen, to tell the exploits of humble and earnest prayer. I might refer you for proofs of its efficacy, to all the saints, whose history is recorded by inspiration. I might speak of Jacob; and Moses, and Joshua, and Samuel, and David, and the prophets, and the apostles of the Lamb. I might show you how a spirit of prayer in the church has ever been the harbinger of her emancipation from bondage, or of the enlargement of her territory, or of the overthrow of her enemies. But I forbear. It is the prayer of the lowly only, which so prevails with God. "He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away. He will regard the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their prayer."

3. God hath respect to the lowly, in that he *strengthens them, in their spiritual conflicts.*

The scriptures represent the Christian life in language expressive of the most strenuous exertions and the severest toils. It is a race, a wrestling, a fight of faith. The foes of the believer are many and strong, now lurking in ambush, now amusing him with false colours of peace, now circumventing him in silence, now rushing upon him with all their combined force, as armies prepared for battle. The world and the legions of hell continually beset him; they are staunch, irreconcilable enemies; and if they flatter, it is but to deceive, and betray, and destroy. More than all, his peace, usefulness and salvation are endangered by his inbred corruptions, those traitors in his own bosom. Against all these foes, both without and within, he must watch and contend every moment, all his way to the celestial city. Were he to meet them in his own strength, he would fall at the first onset. They have overthrown the mighty; they have carried into captivity, and led down to perdition, multitudes of the honourable of the earth. What then can the feeble saint do in such a conflict? He feels his own insufficiency. He knows, by sorrowful experience, that, when he would do good, evil is present with him; and that his strength is weakness. In vain, does he ask help from creatures. Nature supplies no armory, adapted to his defence, in the hour of assault and peril; the arrows from her quiver fall, imbecile and broken, in the dark affray. He looks upward—a vigilant eye marks all his movements, a cheering voice animates him to the contest, the shield of Omnipotence is spread before him, the sword of the Spirit scatters and subdues his enemies. "This is the victory.

that overcometh the world, even our faith." The God that guides the planets, and calls by their names all the hosts of heaven, is on his right hand, and on his left; teaches his hands to war, and his fingers to fight; raises him, when fallen; heals him, when wounded; revives him, when fainting; leads him; carries him forward from conquest to conquest, till his labours are finished, and he triumphs in death. Why should we wonder? Stripped of self-dependence, he rises and prevails in the strength of him who is Almighty. "Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles: they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

4. God hath respect to the *exertions* of the lowly, in the cause of truth and holiness on earth.

Earthly influence, and wisdom, and authority can, of themselves, do nothing, in the high enterprise of enlightening and evangelizing the world. They may be subordinate agents, as are all things else, in fulfilling the designs of heaven towards the church. But the direct means, without which all others would prove ineffectual, or operate against the benevolent counsels of the Redeemer of men, are the prayers, and sacrifices, and faithful labours of the lowly in heart.—Who are they, by whose instrumentality, the gospel, in the days of the apostles, triumphed over the false learning, and boasted eloquence, and deep corruption of the Gentile world? Who raised the standard of the cross in Asia Minor, the cities of Greece, and the remotest regions of the Roman empire, carrying salvation to the cottage and the camp, the haunts of poverty and ignorance, the schools of philosophers, and the palaces of kings? Not the Jewish sanhedrim—not proud Pharisees, trusting to their own righteousness—not the followers of Zeno, or Plato; but a company of humble men, of whom most were unlearned, and all had been taught to count their acquisitions as loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ. Who were the individuals, employed by Providence, to shake mystical Babylon to its foundations, and pour the light of day into the dark cells of papal delusion and imposture? They were learned, they were profound, they were indefatigable; but, beyond all this, they had known the plague of their own hearts, and the value of the gospel; they had seen themselves justly exposed to perdition; they had cordially recognised and loved their dependence; they had been driven from every other refuge to the free grace of the Redeemer. Yes, they were men of humility and prayer; and they well knew that the conversion of sinners was to be effected, not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of God. Much has lately been accomplished, in revivals of religion at home, and the enlargement of Messiah's kingdom among the heathen. But what have been the instruments, by which this moral revolution has commenced, and is now advancing towards its consummation, in the overthrow of all idolatry and error, and the universal establishment of the reign of righteousness and peace? Who are they at whose approach the wilderness and solitary places are glad, and the desert rejoices and blossoms as the rose? They are men imbued with that spirit which drew from the apostle of the Gentiles the humble and grateful acknowledgement, "By the grace of God, I am what I am; I laboured more abundantly than

they all ; yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." They are men, who, like Brainerd, mourn over their imperfections, and throw themselves continually upon the resources of all-sufficient grace, rather than indulge self-complacency, in view of their privations, and toils, and sufferings. They abhor the thought of sharing with their Saviour the minutest portion of the glory of his achievements. They would give him all, and lie at his feet, as penitent and thankful petitioners, and recipients of his bounty. O ! if there were more of this self-abasing spirit in the church—if the visible friends of Jesus would pray, and weep, and labour, as becomes the redeemed servants of such a Master—a new era would speedily begin ; the beauties of holiness would clothe all Christendom, now deformed by ignorance and infidelity, and crime ; and the day-star of mercy, with splendour and gladness in its beams, would rise upon all nations.

5. God hath respect to all the *best interests* of the lowly, for time and eternity.

Jehovah has condescended to speak to the sinful, feeble, and dying children of men ; and the volume, containing the record of his will, abounds with such glorious promises, as none other than himself could give. And to whom are they addressed ? Not one of them is for the proud, however pre-eminent in talents, exalted in station, or illustrious in fame. They are all for men of another character ; and to the humble, though despised, or forgotten, or persecuted on earth, belong the immense blessings of that gracious covenant, which is ordered in all things and sure. " Blessed are the poor in spirit ; for their's is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn ; for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek ; for they shall inherit the earth."

The Providence of God illustrates and establishes his word. For the lowly, he governs the world ; visits it with sunshine and showers ; produces the vicissitudes of the seasons ; gives fruitfulness, and plenty, and peace ; awakes the elements to fury, and composes them in his mercy ; directs in the tempest of insurrection and war ; arrests its violence ; and kindles on the bosom of the stormy cloud the bow of serenity and promise. He restrains the enemies of his children ; and forces the most malignant passions, the darkest designs, and the most untoward events, to contribute to their purification, or more speedy admission to the joys of Paradise.

The Most High ordains, for their greatest good, all the circumstances of their condition in the present world. If they are prosperous, it is that they may be the more grateful ; and, by a due employment of their wealth and influence, reap the rewards of an active liberality, as well as promote the knowledge, virtue, and happiness of their species. If they are poor and afflicted, it is for the trial and improvement of their faith ; that his grace may be honoured by their patience, and steadfast confidence in his paternal care ; that the ties which bind them to earth may be weakened ; and their aspirations after the purity and peace of heaven make welcome the hour of their release from the sins and sorrows of mortality. Their health, their estate, their families, all things connected with their enjoyment in the present life, are peculiarly under his guardianship ; and not a hair can fall from their heads, but by his appointment. He limits the period of their earthly existence ; and mercifully ordains the means and all the circumstances of its termination. " He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust."

For the lowly, he has prepared, beyond "this visible, diurnal sphere," mansions of undecaying beauty, where the fear of death can never enter, and the storms of revolution are unknown; where there is no night, and the glory of God and the Lamb is the light thereof for ever. The grave is the narrow entry to those everlasting abodes. How happy then to die. How happy, to be with Christ, to behold his glory, to fall prostrate in his presence, to exult in his smiles, and join the multitudes of holy beings, from all worlds, in endless ascriptions of praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The very bodies of the saints rest in hope. Their full redemption is secured; and, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, the dead shall be raised incorruptible. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." Would we describe?—we cannot even conceive the fulness, the purity, the duration of that bliss, to which the redeemed family will be exalted in the new heavens and the new earth they are destined to inhabit. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

Since all the blessings of eternity are for the lowly, and for them only, suffer me, my hearers, to ask you, what is your character? Do you trust, for acceptance with God, to the decencies and moralities of your life, or the homage paid to your virtue and usefulness, by the world? "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." Do you rely for justification, on any regularity in your devotions, on any assumed sanctity and austerity of manners? The proud and ostentatious Pharisees, whom the merciful Saviour condemned as hypocrites, could boast of greater strictness. Have you seen and lamented the evil of your hearts? In the light of the glory of God, has sin assumed a deformity before unsuspected; all your comeliness within you been turned into corruption; and every plea from the infirmity of your nature, the violence of temptation, and the sincerity of your endeavours been for ever silenced? Have you bowed to his authority with reverence, and awe, and delight? Has the controversy you maintained with his law and government, while his terrors were upon you, been succeeded by a calm acquiescence in his will, and the acceptance of the punishment of your iniquity? Have you felt, do you still feel happy in the thought, that God reigns, that he reigns over you, and that he will so dispose of you, and of all his creatures for ever, as to ensure, in the highest degree, the honour of his own great name?

If you have fallen thus low in your own esteem, you have seen, with new eyes, the wonders and the glories of redemption by the cross; you have clung to it as your last and only security; you have cried for more mercy; you have consecrated yourselves, body and soul, to the service of your divine Deliverer. You pant after perfect conformity to Christ. You live at the throne of grace. All your comforts die, if you neglect prayer. Your self-abasement before God discovers itself in your whole demeanour. There is a *lowliness* in your intercourse with men, an amiable self-distrust, an honouring of others, a readiness to do the most humiliating offices of love; in place of the arrogance, and contempt of others, and odious selfishness, which, however you might have studied to conceal them under the forms of a hollow-hearted civility and gentleness, once marked your character. You have learned to feel for others' woes,—to forgive and to bless even your enemies. There is in true humility, an unaffected sweetness, an angel kindness, of which the boasted politeness of the world is but a heartless imitation.

Whoever you may be to whom this character belongs, the blessings annexed to it are yours. Receive them with gratitude, and employ to purposes worthy of your exalted privileges, the consolations which your Maker gives.

Christian friends, let humility be the beginning and the crown of all your virtues. Let it regulate your zeal, purify your devotions, and give elevation, and dignity, and the hope of success, to all your enterprises. It is this, which renders you amiable in the sight of Heaven, ensures your peace and usefulness, and engages all the perfections of God for your protection, guidance, and ultimate victory over your spiritual enemies. And what inducements to growth in humility are set before you? With all your attainments in holiness, how must you sink into nothing before Him, in whose sight the heavens are not clean? How few and faint the lineaments of your resemblance to the meek and lowly Jesus, your Lord and Saviour? He was all diligence, all love, all zeal, all fidelity. What have you done to prove your title to the character of his disciples? Turn your eyes to inferior examples; to mere men like yourselves,—to Paul, and John, and Brainerd, and a multitude of others, whose whole life was a sacrifice to the glory of their Master, and the interests of his kingdom. What have been your efforts, your toils, your sufferings, your achievements? O that you would feel your deficiencies, and mourn and pray over them, till a new vigour, imparted by almighty grace, should diffuse itself through all your faculties, and impel you to memorable deeds, which should tell on the interests of a world lying in wickedness, and on the destinies of other generations.

Let the worldly, the self-righteous, the proud of every name, learn the littleness, vanity and guilt of all their aspiring pretensions. I might tell you of the unreasonableness of your self-estimation, the obligations you have violated, your moral ruin, your dependence, your frailty, the grave, the worm, the last trumpet, the dread tribunal, the eternal pit of woe; and in view of all these realities, I might surely urge, with appalling emphasis, the doctrine of humility.

Would you be truly *great*? Humility is the true greatness of man, as self-exaltation is his deepest disgrace. It is the greatness of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs; allying the child of sinfulness and dust to the ransomed of the Lord in a brighter world; attaching his interests to the honours and kingdom of the great Redeemer; opening to his weeping, ardent eye, the way of access to God the Father. What spectacle so grand as that of the lowly penitent summoning to his succour eternal strength, and, cheered with beams from the Sun of Righteousness, triumphing over all the powers of darkness?

It is a greatness, which no worldly vicissitudes can impair. Fortune, and fame, and all that the ambitious covet, may flee away; he, who exults in prosperity to-day, may be a wretch to-morrow; the heavens, all brightness now, may, anon, be blackened with storms; the fairest hopes may be wrecked in a moment; and despair sit brooding over the ruins of all that the fond heart of man had cherished and idolized. But humility dissolves the charm of earthly attractions; it makes us independent of all below the skies; it fixes our hopes on the undecaying glories of heaven. It never forsakes us. It attends the peasant to his cottage, his frugal table, his homely toils; inspires him with a serenity, which conquerors may sigh after in vain; and raises him to a moral elevation, above the utmost flight of their ambition. It follows to his cell the victim of persecution, and invests him with a grandeur, to which even the imperial purple is beggarly defilement. All other greatness is momentary. But this is durable. It smiles at death; it walks with angels through the dark valley; it reposes on the bosom of Jesus; it will burst the prison of the grave; it will triumph in immortal beauty; it will shine with celestial radiance, when stars and suns are extinguished for ever.