

THE LIVING PULPIT,

OR

EIGHTEEN SERMONS

BY EMINENT LIVING DIVINES

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

WITH

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE EDITOR,

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SUPREMACY OF THE MORAL LAW.

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It is easier for heaven and earth to pass than one tittle of the law to fail.—LUKE xvi. 17.

WHEN the Saviour was derided by covetous Pharisees, for teaching that men could not serve God and mammon, he reminds them of an universal and unchangeable law, by which the actions and characters of all moral creatures were to be tried. He warns them that, easily as they might justify themselves before men, there was yet a tribunal where not actions only, but hearts would be judged; and the verdict of the degenerate sentiment around them could be no safe criterion to prove their manners blameless, and their prospects fair. Many things highly esteemed among men are abomination in the sight of God; and the judgment of God is the decision of a last appeal. It decides by a rule which is, by eminence, "THE LAW." And, however men may evade an honest and fair conformity, by glossing or wresting the letter, they cannot change or annul the law itself. That law underlies the scheme of the universe. It came out into clear

view in the decalogue. It inspirited the ceremonials of the ancient church. It breathed in all the prophets until John. And now that the kingdom of God is preached, and every man rusheth into it, that same immutable law remains and pervades the whole system. "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass than one tittle of the law to fail."

The rank thus given to "the law," above other laws of the universe, may be traced by infallible signs in the course of divine dispensations. Indeed, it is the fair presumption, that if the principle of this supremacy of the law belongs to the system of created things, it will reveal itself in the operation of the system, and, most of all, at those points where the finger of God most immediately appears.

It is common to speak of moral law as most properly the law of God, in distinction from the laws of nature. But all the laws of the creation are both laws of God and laws of nature—laws of God, because God is their author—laws of nature, because conceived to reside in the nature of created things. By *law*, in the widest sense, we mean the principle conceived as determining the states and actions of persons and things. In this broad use it is applied alike to matter and spirit, even to God himself; in matter, regulating force and motion; in spirit, controlling thought and feeling, reason and conscience. It is in connection with reason and conscience that this principle takes the name of moral law. Expressed in words, it becomes, as in the Scriptures, a body of precepts, defining and enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong; and is received as the written will of God, to be the

guide of our life. This moral law is the kind of law which can never fail; and the signs which God has given of his supreme regard for moral law, are to be the subject of our consideration in this discourse. "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail."

1. Of all possible signs of the supremacy of moral law, one of the most comprehensive and impressive, is the dominion given to man over the rest of the earthly creation. God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness, and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. Thus to man, a moral creature, and the only moral inhabitant of the earth, is given dominion over all the earth. And this donation is made to his rational and moral nature; to the image and likeness of God in him. All things else on the earth are put under him. He may use them all for his benefit. Whatever has the capacity of serving him he may employ in his service. He is not required to prefer the life or the enjoyment of any other earthly creatures to his own; but when their labour or suffering may be useful to him, he may exact it. When their death will promote his well being, he is at liberty to take their life.

This gift of dominion over all the earth shows the high esteem of the Creator for the moral principle in the creation, and the rank he has given to moral law. A creature who, without these divine endowments of reason and conscience, would be no way superior to the other living creatures of the earth,

is invested with an authority claimed solely for his moral nature. The living tribes present themselves before him to receive their names, as if to offer their obeisance and their service. All take their places at his feet. And while he keeps his purity, which is really the condition of his power, he holds an easy and honourable sway. This exaltation over other creatures comes not from an arbitrary decree, to be enforced by outward power, against the nature of things. It rises from the nature of man; from the moral image of God within him; from the essential supremacy of the moral principle in the universe. It signifies, that in the realm of God morality is not to be subservient, but supreme; that the natural must serve the moral; that no power can arrest or change the course of moral law; that every valley shall be raised, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and that the way shall be every where prepared for fulfilling the moral purposes of God.

2. It is another impressive proof of the supremacy of moral law, that the other laws of earth and heaven are so evidently used for moral ends.

In that portion of the history of the world which is contained in the Holy Scriptures, we find the pleasure and displeasure of God with the righteousness and unrighteousness of men very commonly expressed through the changes in the material world. Sunshine and rain, cold and heat, all the various properties and motions of the elements, are so freely used to convey the blessing or the curse of God to men, as to suggest the thought that they were made for nothing else. Hence that natural expectation

which so widely prevails among men, that a people with whom God is well pleased will have fruitful seasons, health, success in their labours, and order and peace in their society; and that a people with whom God is displeased will suffer from famine, or pestilence, or the failure of their favourite enterprises, or the distraction and ruin of their social state. And as of communities, so of individuals. However the course of providence may seem, at times, to depart from this rule, we still find that this subserviency of physical laws to moral ends is one of the most common matters of national expectation among men.

We cannot know how far these laws are thus applied in fact, except by intelligent and constant observation, with the eye of religious faith. Do you believe in a particular providence? Do you see the hand of a moral ruler at all in the changes of nature around you? Then do you hear the earth, with her fields of barrenness and fertility; the ocean, with its calms and its storms; the seasons, with their riches and their poverty; the living tribes, with their services and their depredations; the very hearts of men, with their friendships and their enmities, all uttering, with a majestic and overwhelming elocution, the moral sentiments of God. The moral events of the kingdom of God are brought to their issue by the natural operation of physical laws. Is there a famine in Egypt and Canaan? It occasions the promotion of Joseph in the government of Egypt, the preservation of his father's family, their removal into Egypt, the long and grievous bondage of the Hebrews there, their deliverance by a mighty hand,

their wonderful pilgrimage through the wilderness, their establishment in the land of promise; together with all the moral effects which followed those events, and which will follow them to the end of time. When we consider the event, which issued in all these consequences, as a result of the natural operation of the laws of matter, we can hardly resist the conviction that those laws had these effects for their object, and were an important link in the chain of causes for filling the earth with the moral glory of the Lord.

This instance of natural laws resulting in moral effects, is rendered unquestionable and illustrious by having been recorded and explained in the book of inspiration. The history of the events is written by the infallible pen, and the events are placed in their true relation to each other. But suppose all history to be written by inspiration of God; what but that same infallible discernment would be needed to trace all physical changes to moral effects? Would not all nature then seem instinct with the moral designs of her Maker? Who could then doubt that the unconscious, as well as the conscious, being of the world, is geared into the spiritual kingdom, and forms one system with it, and is moving always, under the guidance of God, towards his moral ends? Thus all the changes of the world become illustrations and supports of moral character and moral law. Each contributes to its appropriate moral effect, as each ray of converging light contributes to form the bright and burning focus. Not that each separate event must have, by itself, a moral significance, any more than each letter in a volume of history must

have a distinct historical signification; but the series, as a whole, is an inscription of the moral law, and the moral character of God on the material tables of the universe.

Now it is not at all essential to the authority and power of moral law, that it should always have this form of expression. It may, for the present, be convenient; it may suit the circumstances of the subjects who dwell on the earth, and who, like ourselves, are interwoven with a material and temporary system; but for subjects under other circumstances, these same spiritual laws may be better expressed in other characters. It is convenient for English people that their laws should be written in the English tongue; but for people of other languages, the English law books would be useless, an incumbrance, fit only for burning, while the laws themselves, in their spirit, might suit other people, and remain to be expressed in other forms. Thus will the time come when the heavens and the earth, as books of moral law, will have no further use; when these forms of moral expression will become obsolete, superfluous, fit only for the fire; when the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll, and, being on fire, shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also, and all the works that are therein shall be burned up; while the laws of truth and righteousness, which the heavens and the earth have so long been used to explain and enforce, shall remain in their authority and glory for ever. "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass than one tittle of the law to fail."

3. Yet more shall we feel the force of this truth

when we observe, how often and signally God has, for moral purposes, actually interrupted the order of nature.

Aiming at a moral impression on the world, he does mighty works in Egypt; and, beginning with Moses, he shows a bush burning with fire, but not consumed; he changes a rod into a serpent, and the serpent again into a rod; he makes the hand of Moses, at one moment, leprous—at another, whole; then, turning upon Egypt, he changes the waters into blood, covers the land with darkness, with flies, and with frogs—afflicts the people with a storm of hail, with murrain upon their cattle, with boils and blains upon themselves, and, finally, with the death of the first born of every family; and all this by a professed departure from the ordinary course of nature. Thus awfully were earth and heaven confounded, to give Egypt and the world an impression of the true God; and, as the Hebrews went forth from bondage, *they* also must be confirmed in the knowledge and fear of the Lord; and, for this purpose, a path for them is made through the sea, and their pursuers are destroyed in the returning waters. Forty years long was nature turned out of her ordinary course, six days of every seven, to supply that people with their daily bread; and every day of the seven to form a cloud for their guidance by day and their defence by night. Water flows from the rock for their thirst; quails flock to their camp as a supply of meat; the Jordan parts its overflowing waters, as of its own accord, to give them a dry passage. At their entrance on the land of promise the walls of Jericho,

as of themselves, fall down to give them possession. The Lord thus led that people through a wilderness of miracle, to teach them and the world his name and will; to establish with them the practical supremacy of moral law; to show that people that the natural is made for the spiritual; that the world, in all its other departments of law and of life, must yield to disruption, dislocation, nay, to utter confusion and destruction, to exalt the laws of the Spirit. Behold how the Creator will prepare the way of his moral authority and power, through the solid mountains of his physical dominions, wherever they cross his path, and may help forward his moral work. The sun and moon stop in their courses, at the word of one of his servants; those great lights leave their apparent place in the firmament to convince men that the God of Israel is Jehovah. The heavens might be deranged, but the world must not be without the knowledge of the living and true God. It was easier for the heavens to be thrown into disorder, than for an impression in favour of moral law to be lost. It was "easier for heaven and earth to pass than one tittle of the law to fail."

But, of all the illustrations of this branch of our subject, the most commanding is given in the incarnation of the Son of God. In the person of the Mediator between God and man, there was an amazing departure from the established course of nature. And what lifts this case immeasurably above all others, which either have been or can be, is the fact, that it involves, not only deviation from the established laws of human nature, but also a mysterious and astonishing departure from the mode of the

divine existence itself, as previously known. In other cases, God has taken creatures out of the course which he had established for them; in this case, he himself steps out of the previous mode of his existence and action. He gives what may be called, in a peculiar sense, a miraculous manifestation of himself, and takes a relation to humanity altogether extraordinary—the only case of the kind in the history of his self-revelations. He takes humanity to himself as a personal constituent, with even an earthly body. The nature of God becomes joined to the nature of man, not as God is joined to other beings, who live, and move, and have their being in him, but as a constitutional part of a person, as the body is the part of the man.

Although man had fallen from the law of the Spirit of life, yet must he not be allowed wholly to fail of this glorious property and end of his being. It must be restored to him; and, to accomplish this, the Creator produces a new creation, and sets himself before the world in a person and a relation which we know not how to describe. The very sight of this wonder, with the eye of an enlightened faith, is overwhelming. Man had the laws of his formation established from the first, and uniformly observed, by the Author of human generations, till the appearance of the Son of God in the flesh. God had his modes of existence and of revelation, which had appeared to be established from the time that man existed to behold them, and which had never before, in the whole course of divine manifestations, presented such a form as this. But an interest of the spiritual kingdom is to be secured. Now the

way of God in saving men is no longer to be pursued invisibly, but is to be fully declared, that its impression may be fixed in the hearts of angels and of men, and that it may bear its part in the constitution and advancement of the church. And what were the laws of the human nature now? What were now the laws (for so we may here call them) which had controlled before the modes of the Divine existence, and determined the previous relations of God to created things? To make men believe his word, and accept his favour, he takes away both the human nature and the divine from the course of their previous and accustomed manifestations, and presents them in an extraordinary, a miraculous, relation to each other. It was easier for the established law of human generations to be given up, than for the violated law of spiritual life in man to be suffered utterly to fail; it was easier for a man to be conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, and to be born of a virgin, than for one tittle of that law of spiritual life to fail; it was easier for God to be born of a woman, to be made under the law of humanity, to become properly and truly a man, to grow up in body and in mind like a human child, to think, feel, and act as a man, to labor, suffer, and die as a man, than for one tittle of that law to fail. When we behold God clothed in the form, and subject to the conditions, of humanity, and a man pervaded by the nature of God; when we see the hand of that mysterious person parting the net work of nature wherever he would have a passage through it to his moral ends; when we see him walking on the sea, stilling the tempest, causing the blind to

see, the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak, and the dead to live; when we see Him, who only hath immortality, sinking under mortal pains, and giving up the ghost like a dying man, and continuing under the power of death for a time, while the sun is darkened, the rocks are rent, graves are opened, and the earth quakes to its centre; we then behold what confusion may come to the material laws of earth and heaven, rather than that one tittle of the spiritual law should fail.

This wonder, wrought for the introduction of the gospel, is but the beginning of wonders. The whole work of redemption, as carried on in the church, and in the souls of individual believers, is, as it were, a propagation of this miracle. The natural powers of heaven and earth are wrought into the system, and made subservient to redemption at the pleasure of the Redeemer; while the efficient power which works through them, to the perfection of the new creation, is the Holy Ghost. Thus the law of life is restored. God may condescend, in all the forms of his manifestation, as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to dwell in his people. The entire fashion of the old creation may pass away. God, the Eternal, the Infinite, may bring earth and heaven together to form for himself an abode among men, but not a tittle of the law can fail.

4. We may finally observe, how this supremacy of moral law in the universe finds acceptance with the reason and conscience of man. We feel a natural agreement with it, and act in conformity with it, when we follow the higher dictates of our nature.

If the moral sentiments of men vary with their

different degrees of cultivation, this fact is strongly to our point; for it shows that the more a man is cultivated, according to the laws of his nature, the more does he exalt the moral above the physical. Among savages, where physical power is law, the strongest man is the greatest man. The progress of culture elevates reason and intelligence, in the estimation of men, and assigns to mere bodily strength a lower place. And when the moral sentiments of a community begin to share in the judgments of reason, the moral qualities rise, at once, above all others; and the maxim is established, that the good alone are truly great. Hence every man, of the true moral culture, makes no account of bodily comfort, of property, or of intellectual reputation and influence, when his moral character is at stake. Hence all people, sufficiently enlightened to distinguish the physical, the intellectual, and the moral in man, instinctively regard the moral as the crown of human nature; the part of man for which the other parts were made; the foundation of all the real improvement and happiness of the race. This preference for moral excellence rises from the constitution of man. It appears wherever man has any just development; and wherever it thus appears, it exemplifies and illustrates the supremacy of moral law in the universe.

Suppose, now, this order of things in the world reversed. Let the moral kingdom be made for the physical; let it be once proclaimed that man was made for the horse, the sparrow the worm; for the cedar, the thorn and the thistle; that men are to be reared as food for the lion, or as nourishment for the

oak; that their reason must be trained to secure that end; that the conscience must be employed only to prevent, or to detect and punish all deviations from that course; let it once be enjoined on men to obey their bodily appetites alone, subjecting reason and conscience wholly to their sway, and holding the spirit in bondage to the flesh in all things; could such an order of things be received by man? What a war would it raise between the world without and the world within! Without, the natural claiming supremacy—within, the moral; the facts of observation without at constant strife with reason and conscience within. To make such a world, and put such a creature as man upon it, would show such want of natural adaptation in the parts of the creation, it would be so unlike God as we now know him, that we could not believe its possibility. To us it must ever seem a thing impossible with God, so imperiously does the moral sense of mankind demand the supremacy of moral law. And such a decision is worthy of our moral nature. Those high powers which make us the kindred of angels and of God, however we degrade them in practice, we cannot disparage in theory. Men challenge honour for reason and conscience, though they may not follow their counsel. We are the natural and necessary advocates of the supremacy of moral law, and whenever the principle is asserted in the hearing of our higher nature, we say, Amen; let it be “easier for heaven and earth to pass than one tittle of the law to fail.”

Of the practical suggestions which arise from this view of the supremacy of moral law, I mention,

1. The natural necessity of ruin as a consequence of sin. We are familiar with the consequences of breaking the physical laws of our being. If a man will not sow, he cannot reap; if a man will not consider, he must fall into trouble; if he walks among pits, with his eyes shut, he must fall; the sluggard must see his poverty come as one that travelleth, and his wants as an armed man; the drunkard must abide his poverty, his broken health, his shattered intellect, his premature death. From such penalties of physical transgression how shall he escape; but sooner, far sooner, may the sluggard grow rich, the careless and imprudent prosper, the drunkard drink health, wealth, long life, and mental power and splendor from his cups, than the breaker of the least commandment of the moral law escape the threatened punishment. Not a tittle of the law can fail.

2. In the light of this inviolable law, how precious is the gospel. Jesus Christ came to seek and to save them that are lost; but how hopelessly lost are the transgressors of such a law. Think of those bonds of nature which hold the rivers in their course to the ocean; which hold the ocean in its bed, and the mountain on its base, and preserve the harmony of the celestial world. The planet, falling by an inward infirmity from its orbit, what power of nature can restore it? What can save it from being a wandering star, to which is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever? But all the stars of heaven, once fallen, might easier rise again, by a self-restoring power, than a man, fallen from the guidance of his moral nature, by an inward infirmity, restore him-

self to righteousness and happiness. How mighty and merciful the hand which redeems from such a fall! Let every sinner lay hold upon it; for how shall he escape if he neglect so great salvation?

3. In the light of this subject, the value of our spiritual interests appears altogether inestimable. What is the brief welfare of the present life in the comparison? Even the lawful pursuits of this life, and those most important to our earthly happiness, have only a superficial and transient worth. The true basis of our prosperity, for time and eternity, is the law of our moral nature. Seek first the kingdom of God. Lay up your treasures in heaven. Build on the rock which forms the basis of the universe. The loose and dissoluble masses which have been collected on that rock, and which the weight of temporal interests seems almost to have petrified upon it, will not continue. A catastrophe is coming. The imperishable foundations of the moral world will rise, heaving from their surface the dissolving rubbish of a temporal economy, and thenceforth remaining only the glorious support of perfect righteousness for ever.