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SERMON CCCLXIV.

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THE GREAT TIME-KEEPER.

“And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days, and years.”—Gen. i. 14

THE system of the universe has two great features or elements of contrariety, which are made to subsist together in beautiful order and harmony. It is, on the one hand, a system of the most perfect stability, in which all the parts stand firm from age to age, accomplishing their daily revolutions with such undeviating exactness, that science will foretell their places for millions of years. On the other hand, it is a system of ever-circling changes, in which the days and nights, the seasons and the years, are flying round and round us, in quick succession.

Now God might have made a universe, so as to exhibit nothing but permanence and stability; a motionless universe, in which all the parts should stand still on their centre of rest, without any variety of times or seasons. Or, adopting our present solar system, if he had introduced only two very slight modifications in the position and motions of our planet, which I will not stay to describe, the system would have been, as regards us, a system without times and seasons, and probably we should never have been aware of any motion in it. Summer, autumn, winter, spring, completing what we call a year, would be unknown—we should have no notion of a year. One side of the earth would be a perpetual day, the other a perpetual night, and uninhabitable. We should have, in fact, no distinctions of time whatever, and no measure of time, except in the successions of our thoughts and experiences. Life would stretch on, as it were, in one straight continuous road, under the same never-setting noonday sun, from the cradle to the grave. The universe would be a clock, without either hands or bell, and the wheels would roll away under their unlettered dial-plate as rapidly as now, measuring off to man the times they conceal from his knowledge.

There was, doubtless, some reason, why God did not thus constitute our system, and my text discloses that reason. It tells us that God

SERMON CCCLXV.

BY THE REV. ALBERT BARNES.

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ON DANCING.

“But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”—1 Cor. viii. 12, 13.

THIS was the resolution of a great and generous mind. It was such a determination as only noble minds and hearts can make. It evinces a superiority to self-indulgence, a disposition to consult the feelings and views of others, a readiness to sacrifice that which might conduce to one's own comfort, in order to save others from falling into sin, such as only large-hearted and liberal souls possess. The case was this. It was a question among the early converts to Christianity whether it was lawful to eat the meat which had been offered in sacrifice to idols. Many held that as idolatry was unlawful, to buy and participate of the meat which had been so offered, and which was exposed for sale in the market, would be in fact lending countenance to idolatry, and would be unlawful. On this subject the mind of Paul was made up. He had no doubt that it was in itself lawful. But if his indulgence in a thing of the lawfulness of which he had no doubt, should offend another member of the Church, or lead him into sin, he would wholly abstain ever afterward. The purity, peace and welfare of the Church; the preservation of a good conscience in all its members, was of more importance than it was for him to gratify his appetite even in a matter that seemed to him to be entirely lawful, and he was willing to abstain for ever. I doubt whether such a determination was ever formed except under the influence of true religion; I am certain it never was but by a large-hearted and liberal man.

It is worthy of remark, also, that the persons whose consciences were to be consulted in this matter, were confessedly among the “weaker” of the brethren. “And through thy knowledge shall thy *weak* brother perish.” “Ye sin against the brethren and wound their *weak* conscience.” It was not the rich, the learned, the great, or the gay who were concerned, and whose delicate and refined feelings it might be naturally supposed any one would be likely to consult. It was confessedly the less learned, the less stable, the less influential—

the class of persons who would be usually thought to be "not worth minding." 'Of what consequence,' some might have asked, 'is *their* opinion in the case? Their apprehensions are the effect of mere ignorance and prejudice—resulting from their obscure training, and want of refined education—and whether they approve or disapprove of our conduct, whether they are edified or not, can make little difference. If we follow our own views, and if we secure the good opinion of those more elevated in life, we need not be concerned about their pleasure or displeasure.' Not thus reasoned Paul. It *was* of importance what they thought, and how they felt;—and the bearing of a certain course of conduct, even if it was lawful, on the weakest member of the Church, *was to be* regarded. It was of so much consequence in his view, that he was prepared to sacrifice his own comfort and convenience during all his life, rather than be the occasion of offence to the weakest member of the flock. Again I say, that it is doubtful whether such a principle was ever acted on except under the influence of religion; it is certain that it never was but by a large-hearted and liberal man. The bearing of this principle on the subject which I propose to discuss at this time you will see presently.

I propose to apply this principle to the subject of dancing, and particularly to the question whether it is consistent and proper for professing Christians to engage in the dance, and to train up their children for it. It is often said of a certain class of Christians and Christian ministers, that they are bigoted, narrow-minded, and Puritanical in this matter; that there is a remarkable ignorance of the world and of what is necessary to enjoyment in refined life in such views as I shall now submit to you; and that we make war on innocent amusements, and are disposed rudely "to trample down the flowers that grow by the way-side, and to strew the eternal path with brimstone." Whether it has been the general character of my preaching to make war on that which goes to promote our real happiness here and hereafter, those who are accustomed to hear me are well able to judge. I may remark, also, that I am much less concerned with the observation that these views are narrow-minded and Puritanical, than I am with the inquiry whether the practice under consideration is consistent with the Christian profession, and in accordance with the spirit of the New Testament. My impression may differ from that of some of you, but it has not seemed to me that the charge of greatest force which can be brought against Christians of the present time is, that they are in danger of not being sufficiently liberal and accommodating in worldly matters; that they are likely to draw the reins too close about worldly indulgences and amusements; or that they are likely to debar themselves and their children too much from whatever pleasures the world may have to confer.

I propose to arrange my observations under two general heads.

I. I shall make some preliminary and explanatory remarks, that we may have the question fairly before us; and

II. I shall consider the question whether it is expedient and proper for Christians to unite with others in the dance, and to train their children for it.

I. Under the first general head, I would observe,

(1.) The question before us is not whether it is proper to train up a family to appear well in life ; to be characterized by urbanity, courtesy, and true refinement of heart and manners. It is not whether it is desirable that children should be so reared as to demean themselves well in any situation where they may be placed ; so as to avoid painful awkwardness and embarrassment, and so as to appear with ease and propriety in any social circle. No question will be raised on that point, in this house ; and as to the importance of the thing itself, there will be no difference of opinion. We have not so read the Bible, or studied the nature of Christianity, as to suppose that it has *any* precepts that countenance roughness and boorishness of manners ; that it is the patron of bluntness, incivility, or sourness of temper ; or that there is any holiness in disregarding the courtesies of life, or in awkwardness of mien or gesture. We do not believe that roughness of exterior can be made to demonstrate that the heart is peculiarly intent on spiritual things, or that neglect of the ordinary usages of refined society can be regarded as among the means of grace, or a passport to the Divine favor. The precept "be courteous," cannot be forgotten. The example of Paul may be referred to as of one of singular urbanity of manners ; and the whole life and the precepts of the Lord Jesus may be mentioned also, as illustrating the importance of true courtesy and refinement. We might also observe, that it is by the precepts and influence of Christianity, far more than by the rules of men like Chesterfield, that true refinement will be, and is kept up in the world. A man under the full influence of the Gospel from his early years, will be a truly refined and courteous man. If there are exceptions to the laws of true courtesy among Christians, they occur in cases where conversion takes place at a period of life too far advanced to have the manners moulded by the new system, or where by perverted vision, some special merit seems to be attached to coarseness of manners, as if this were a means of grace. But of the importance of all that is meant by true courtesy, ease, refinement of mind and manners, no question will be raised here. The only question is, whether that is to be gained *only* in the dancing school ; or whether it may not be obtained elsewhere, without the dangers incident to an attempt to seek it there.

(2.) The question is not whether "balls" are or are not as proper as large and expensive fashionable parties ; whether it may not be as consistent for a professing Christian to join in the dance, as to give such a party, or to mingle in such scenes of frivolity. On that question, which is often raised, it is not necessary to go into a discussion, or even to express an opinion in order to elucidate the subject before us. As "two wrongs do not make a right," so it does not prove that one thing is right to show that it is no worse than another, or prove

that one custom is consistent or proper for a professing Christian because another is freely indulged in of a similar character. For myself, I freely confess I see no great difference; and as a Christian man, I would as soon accept of an invitation to the one as to the other. Entertaining the opinion myself, that large and fashionable parties, involving much expense, and having the predominating influence there worldly, and being such in conversation and manner of amusement as the world approves, are wholly inconsistent with the Christian profession, I might be prepared to concede all that is implied in the remark, that dancing is no worse than such parties. The question still would be, however, whether either was consistent and proper for a professor of the religion of Christ.

(3.) Nor is the question whether the practice of dancing is consistent for the votaries of the world. I admit that it is *entirely consistent* for them; whether it is *right* or *wise*, is quite another question. It is entirely consistent for them, however, because they profess to be governed by no principles which would come in conflict with it, or which are in any way violated by it. The practice is not in violation of any sentiments which they profess to entertain; of any views or obligations which they have taken upon themselves; of any of the objects of life at which they aim; of any opinions which they profess to cherish of the real value of things; of any anticipation which they have of a future state of being; and in general is not inconsistent with any lessons in which they have been educated. The aim of the people of the world is *to make the most of the present life*, and chiefly in the way of enjoyment or pleasure. This object is prominent in youth, and lives on often when we should suppose that years would give more sedateness, and graver views of the purposes of living. But with this purpose in view, it is just a question with them how they can make the most of this world—of the seasons, months, and years, as they flee away. Whether that which they seek can be best found in the ball-room, the splendid party, the theatre, or even in the low haunt of dissipation and revelry, is just a matter of calculation and probabilities, but does not infringe on any principles which they hold, or any views which they profess to entertain of the objects of living. When, therefore, in imagination, I look in upon a ball-room, and see a large and brilliant assembly with all that can fascinate in lights, and dresses, and music, and graceful movements, sad as the spectacle is, according to the views which I entertain of the object of living, still I see nothing *inconsistent* with any views which they entertain. They profess to act with no reference to the grave, or to the judgment-bar, or to eternity. They do not profess to have any reference to the glory of God, or the love of Christ, or the worth of the soul, or the obligations of prayer. They do not profess to place their happiness in God and in the hope of heaven. When looking on such a scene, though I may weep over what seems to me obvious folly, yet I see no professed principle violated; no disregarded vows; no violated pledges; and I can have a *sort of* respect for them—as I always must have for consistency with

avowed principles—though I may mourn that they have no better. I will weep that they have no better views of life, of the dignity and worth of the soul, of what they might enjoy, of that eternal crown which they might obtain; but with the views which they cherish, I do not know why we should not say to them, ‘Thoughtless triflers! dance on. Make the most of life. It will soon be ended; and as the insect tribes that flutter in the beams of the evening sun will soon reach the close of their ephemeral being, and terminate their life and their dances together, so it will be with you. If most enjoyment can be crowded into a ball-room, why seek it there, and let the experiment be fairly made: and since you have no higher aims of living, and no higher view of the dignity of your nature; since you have no aspirations for heaven, and since you *will* go down to hell, why you may as well go through a ball-room as in a path less strewn with flowers—victims not inappropriately decked with garlands as a sacrifice to the god of this world.’ So Solomon addressed the youth of his time. “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the light of thine eyes;—but know thou that for all these things, God will bring thee into judgment.” Eccl. xi. 9. Such a course is *consistent* for the people of the world; whether it is for the professor of the religion of Jesus, is quite a different inquiry.

We are now prepared to state the question before us in few words. It is, whether it is consistent and proper for professing Christians to engage in amusements like these; and whether it is consistent and proper for Christian parents to train up their children for them. To consider this question was my

II. Second object. In doing this, I shall submit a few considerations, in the briefest manner possible.

(1.) The practice in question is an offence and source of pain to a large portion of the Church. In illustrating this, I recall to your recollection the magnanimous determination of the Apostle Paul in my text. The thing referred to in his case, was in itself perfectly allowable according to his own views; a thing about whose propriety and even necessity for his comfort, much might be said; a thing in which he could have been in little danger of losing his spirituality, or his love of prayer, or of disregarding any of the claims of religion on his *time* if he had indulged in it, and yet there was a portion of the Church that would be liable to be led into sin if he gave indulgence to what he felt assured was in itself perfectly proper, and he therefore resolved that if *that* was to be the result, he would eat no meat while the world stood. Now, in reference to the specific matter under consideration, there is always a portion of a Church, and usually a very large portion, who have decided convictions of its impropriety. They regard it as inconsistent with the Gospel, with the sacred nature of Christian vows, and with the proper spirit of Christianity. They are seeking to convince their children of the same thing, and to show them that there are graces desirable for youth, which cannot be obtained in a dancing-

school ; that there is an ornament of the soul which will not be imparted in the ball-room. They are pained by the conduct of their brethren who indulge in such amusements, and who train their children for them. They have sorrow of heart when they know that they who profess the same religion, and sit down at the same communion table, open their parlors for the dance, but come not themselves to the prayer-meeting ; that they are known in circles where the worldly find their consistent and appropriate amusements, but have no communion of heart with their Christian brethren. They regret, too, the influence which it may have on their own children. A ball given by a professing Christian, or the fact that a professing Christian trains his children in a dancing-school, is a "thing not done in a corner." If anything is likely to be *known* in a community, and especially among the youth of a congregation, it is such a fact ; and being known, it is very likely to counteract the efforts of others, and especially of a pastor, to impress the young with the importance of other things than trifles.

Now, in such a matter, it is not difficult to understand how Paul would have acted. Even with your own views—if we may be allowed for the sake of the argument to suppose that Paul could have ever had your views on this subject—his conduct would have been prompt and decisive. That noble-minded man would have said, 'This consideration determines the matter. Whatever may be *my* private views about the lawfulness of this thing in the abstract, yet the fact that large numbers of those for whom Christ died are grieved at heart ; that they may be in danger of being drawn astray by my example ; and especially that they may have more difficulty in training up their children for heaven, will settle my conduct while the world stands—if I should live so long.' Would not such a resolution have been *consistent*, at least, for Paul ? Would it not be right now ?

You may say, perhaps, that they from whom you differ are wrong in their views, and perchance narrow-minded and unenlightened. I beg you to consider whether Paul might not have said the same thing of those who differed from *him*. Paul *knew* that they were in error. He had no doubt of it. He reasoned the case with them—showed them that they were wrong—and with ten thousand times as much truth and force of argument as you can use in defending your position—and still that great man said, 'If this thing makes my brother to offend, I have no more to do with it. That settles the matter to my mind ; that determines my conduct for ever.'

You may say, perhaps, that those who doubt the propriety of training up children for dancing, are among the poorer and less informed members of the church ; that they are of somewhat more humble rank than yourselves, and would have scarcely the means, in most instances, of indulging in this amusement, and of educating their children in this manner ; and perhaps should an intimation of their views reach your ear, you might find the thought making its way across your mind, that "they and their opinions are not worth regarding." You will not have

forgotten, however, that this was just the case in the instance referred to in the text. It was the "*weak* conscience" that Paul regarded; it was the "*weak* brother" "for whom Christ died," who was in danger of perishing by the conduct of others. But not to insist on this, there are two thoughts which I will submit in this connection. The *first* is, that the views entertained of the impropriety of the practice which I am considering, are *not* the views of the weaker members of the Church only. They are the views of the body of the Christian Church; why should I be restrained from saying, what I believe is true, of all who contribute anything to its real spiritual strength and efficiency? They are the views of the most serious, consistent, devout and intelligent Christians—and no one dare deny this. The *second* thing which I would observe is, that, on the supposition that they are the views of the more obscure and humble of the members of the Church, it is not safe for a professing Christian, or any other man to disregard or despise them. I will refer you here to two or three declarations of the Saviour which seem to have been uttered for just such an occasion as this. "Wo unto the world because of offences." Matt. xviii. 7. "It is impossible but that offences will come! but wo unto him through whom they come! It were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend *one of these little ones*." Luke xvii. 1, 2. "Take heed that ye offend not *one of these little ones*; for I say unto you that in Heaven the angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in Heaven." Matt. xviii. 10.

(2.) A second consideration which I suggest is, that the practice in question is a worldly affair altogether—part and parcel of a system having reference only to this life, and confessedly affording no facilities for securing the blessings of the life to come. As this point would be conceded by every one, the time will not be consumed in a useless argument on it. No one ever has maintained, or can maintain, that it is or can be a means of grace; that it tends to prepare the mind for prayer, for a more thoughtful searching of the Bible, for a closer attention to the preaching of the Gospel, or for a serious contemplation of death and the judgment. It secures none of the influences which promote the salvation of the soul; which promote tenderness of conscience, true repentance, or faith in the Lord Jesus. A ball-room is not a place where revivals of religion commence, and *when* a revival of pure religion exists among a people, the ball-room is of course abandoned. I know it may be said that in a few instances individuals have been awakened and led to see the folly and sin of such a course by reflections occurring there, and I do not deny that such a thing is *possible*. But the same thing has also occurred in a theatre, and in a low haunt of dissipation, and even in celebrating in mockery and profaneness, the Lord's Supper; but a Christian parent would scarcely select such places as having a tendency to bring his son or daughter to Christ. I know that it is said, also, that there is sometimes religious enjoyment in such a place, and professing Christians speak of

having interesting serious reflections there, and even communion with God. There may *possibly* be disgust at such scenes; there may be a sad and sickening recollection of the folly of all this; there may be pensiveness and melancholy—feelings often mistaken for religion; but it is strange that a professing Christian should speak of resorting to a ball-room as a place where to cultivate the graces of deadness to the world, and the meek and humble spirit of the Redeemer. By the great body certainly of professing Christians, it will not be denied that the whole arrangement is worldly. It is for grace of manner; for ease of movement; for a qualification to be introduced into the world, not into the Church; for a preparation to appear well in the social circle; as an accomplishment that is to fit for this world, not for Heaven. No one dreams that an accomplishment of this kind can recommend the soul to God, or prepare a child for entering into his kingdom. Can it be supposed that grace of manners sought under the hand of the dancing-master, is to be a substitute for faith in Christ Jesus and repentance towards God, when we and our children are brought to his bar?

Now I anticipate that this consideration will be felt only by Christians. It has no weight with the people of the world. It may be with them a subject of sneers and of derision. But admitting that the arrangement is a part of a great system of worldliness, the question is, whether it is consistent and proper for professing Christians to patronize and encourage it? With the people of the world, I admit, as I have done already, it *is* consistent. They violate no principle by it on which they profess to act. They disregard no solemn vows. They have never taken any pledge, or made any promise which implies the contrary. But you have. You profess to have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. You have given yourselves to God. You have pledged yourselves to come out from the world. You profess to be animated by the Spirit of Christ; to seek the glory of God; to live for Heaven; to see and feel that this world is a vain show, and that its fashions soon vanish away. Christ shed his blood for no such purpose as that you should become eminent in this species of amusement, nor did he once specify such eminence or *such* a grace as any evidence of being under the influence of his religion. When you professed his religion, and sat down to commemorate his death, it was for no such purpose as that you should shine henceforward in the gay world. You brought yourself voluntarily under the most sacred and solemn of all conceivable obligations to lead a life like that, of Christ—to be dead to the world; to be serious, sober, prayerful, and to live for Heaven. The vow was voluntary. No one compelled you to take it. It was your own purpose. Its nature was well understood. It was supposed by you and others to imply a separation from the world. How can you then disregard that solemn covenant made at the altar of your God, and again mingle with the world in all that constitutes the peculiarity of their amusements? You sit down at the communion table, and your hands handle the bread of life—and then you go and

join in the dance, and teach your children, not to come to the communion table and to be prepared for Heaven, but to be prepared to shine in the gay and thoughtless world. You lead them away from the influences of religion, and into scenes where, if they are ever converted, it will be by the grace of God counteracting the whole tendency of their training. Now the world will see, and say, whether this is, or is not *consistent* for a Christian—and there is no difficulty in determining the question. They feel and know that the object at which a Christian should aim should be to seek first the kingdom of God, and to train up his children for Heaven. The whole process connected with dancing is inconsistent with the aim of life which the Christian professes to seek. He professedly lives for Heaven. The soul, according to his professed views, is of a value which no words can estimate, and for which no amount of gold or diamonds would be an equal exchange. Meanwhile that child which may be cut down in a moment, and fade like the flower, is trained under influences adverse to the salvation of the soul, and is conducted by that parent to scenes which tend to drive all consideration of its worth from his mind. You may tell me that this is the case with a thousand other things, and that this is no more inconsistent than they are. That may be. We will not regard that now. Our specific business now is with *this* species of amusement, and the remark that other things are as bad in their influence as this, or are even worse, does not make *this* consistent and right.

(3.) The third consideration which I submit, kindred to the one just suggested, is that this is a *training for the world*. It is not only worldly in its influence now, and not only tends to exclude religion from the mind at present, but it is *prospectively* worldly, and is adapted to bear in that manner on the future life. My remark here, also, is addressed to Christians, and I anticipate that others will regard what I say here as of little force, and very likely as the ebullition of a narrow mind. But the question is, whether it is *consistent* and *proper* for Christians to train up their children in a course that contemplates an introduction into the gay world, rather than into the kingdom of God; which is a preparation for a life of gaiety, rather than for a life of humble, prayerful piety; and which is an arrangement adapted to the scenes of fashion, rather than for an introduction into the kingdom of Heaven.

Of the *fact* on which I base my remarks under this head, I presume there will be no doubt. The training in the dancing-school, so far as it has any bearing at all, is a training to appear well, or to shine in the gay world. It is not a part of the training for the communion-table, or for the office of Sabbath school teacher, or of a Tract distributor, or of a missionary to the heathen, or to impart Christian consolation to the afflicted, or to qualify to enter into Heaven. Not one of these things enters into the arrangement; not one of them is sought. In fact, the connection between this species of training, and a somewhat formal introduction into the gay world, technically known as

“going into society,” is about as close as the four years’ study in the university is with graduating at commencement, and often the introduction into the world in the one form is made a matter of quite as much magnitude as the other. The system of training here referred to, is that which is preparatory to an introduction into a world of peculiar organization, and an organization diametrically opposed to the kingdom of Christ. For it is a world where immortal beings live for dances and revelry; where art is exhausted; where night becomes more brilliant than day; where music lavishes its powers to give pleasure to the ear and joy to the heart. In such a world we look in vain for prayer; for the serious reading of the Bible; for an humble and penitent sitting at the feet of the Redeemer. It is a world of splendor without enjoyment; of professions without sincerity; of flattery without soul; of smiles where the heart is full of envy and chagrin; where the cup of pleasure has dregs of wormwood, and where momentary bliss is succeeded by long nights of painful reminiscences and by despair. In that world there is “restless pride without gratification; ostentation without motive or reward; ceremony without comfort; laughter without joy; smiles which conceal real rancor, and praise alloyed with envy, and dying away in the whispers of calumny.” There “every step appears light and airy as the radiant footsteps of the morning; every form and feature appears luminous with contentment and hope;” but every heart is yet to be sad; every conscience is to utter the language of rebuke; and the recollection of all this folly is yet to bathe the cheek in tears, or sink the soul in despair—and shall Christian parents train up their children for such a world? No child dances into Heaven, but many a one dances into hell; and if they ever reach Heaven, the gay and light trippings of the dance will be exchanged for a walk sedate and grave like that of the Redeemer.

Perhaps you will tell me that there were dances in olden times—that Miriam and David danced. So they did, as an act of solemn religious worship. Our customs differ from theirs; but if your dances are of that kind, we will argue the question on that ground, and consider the question whether that is the best mode of worship under the Christian dispensation. Perhaps you will tell me that the Saviour, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, mentioned dancing in the father’s house as an expression of joy, without disapprobation. So he did; and he also mentioned the conduct of the prodigal son himself without expressing disapprobation, and in another parable he spoke of the unjust judge, and in another commended the unjust steward, without a distinct expression of his opinion. Did he, therefore, approve of these things? Is it a proper principle of interpretation that everything that the Saviour *mentions* in a parable is therefore right? Were the “thieves” who are mentioned in the parable of the good Samaritan to be regarded as *right* in plundering him and leaving him half dead? Is it not known that there is many a circumstance thrown into a parable for the sake of *keeping* or verisimilitude, without implying any opinion about its being right or wrong? Perhaps it will be remarked that Solomon

said, "there is a time to dance." Eccl. iii. 4. So he did; and so he also remarked that there was "a time to hate," and "a time to make war," and "a time to kill." Time was found, *in fact*, to do all these things when he lived; and, I regret to add, that it is as true now as it was then, that time is found to do them still. Whether they are *right* now, or were then, is quite another question. There are thousands of things *done in fact* in the world about whose propriety there may be reasonable ground of debate.

(4.) I submit one other consideration only. It is the estimate which is formed of this conduct by the people of the world themselves. A minister of the Gospel "must have a good report of them which are without;" and I take it, it is equally important that Christians who are not ministers should have a similar reputation. They are lights in the world; representatives of religion; epistles of Christ; cities set on a hill. Now it is in vain to attempt to conceal from ourselves the estimate which the world forms of us and of our walk and deportment. The people of the world—the gay, the fashionable, the proud, the vain, the sober and sedate—*will* form their opinions of professing Christians; and will, as they have a right to, express freely their sentiments. I blame them not for this. I commend them for it, and consider the fact that they *will* do it as one of the best safeguards of the purity of the Church. I would, therefore, that every professing Christian, indulging in the practice on which I am commenting, could hear the remarks made by the very community of worldliness which he seeks to please, and know the real estimate in which they hold him. It may be well to specify in a word or two the opinions which they form of such a professing Christian. They are such as these:

1. They do not regard you as a *serious* Christian—as one imbued with the importance of eternal realities, and anxious mainly that you and your family should be prepared for Heaven.

2. They do not regard you as a *consistent* Christian. They profess to know what Christianity requires, and they do not often judge much amiss. They see a marked inconsistency between the vows which you took when you became a member of the Church and your present conduct; they cannot reconcile it with their views of consistency to sit down and partake of the body and blood of Christ, and then to go and join in the dance with the thoughtless and the gay. They know that religion demands a different thing; and though they profess to have no love for religion themselves, they have an eye keen to mark the inconsistencies of a professedly Christian life.

3. They never *speak* of you with respect for doing it. They speak of you as disregarding the solemn vows which you have made; as not understanding the nature of religion; as dishonoring the Christian profession; and as having no claim to respect as a professor of Christianity. You never heard a man of the world speaking respectfully of a Christian in a theatre, in a ball-room, or in a gay and splendid party. They have no love for religion, but they know what *consistency* is; and much as they hate religion, they will always speak

more contemptuously of the inconsistencies of its professors than they will of religion itself. There is a way of commanding the respect of even a vain, giddy, frivolous, proud and wicked world. It is by a consistent life; by a serious, meek deportment; by integrity of purpose; by deadness to the world; and by the seriousness, gentleness, tenderness, affection and love to which religion prompts.

4. They do not regard you as a Christian *at all*. On this point I may venture to appeal to the world. There would be no hesitation in expressing their views, and no ambiguity where those views are expressed. They may esteem you and love you on many accounts, but it is not because they regard you as Christians. They may admire you for your wit, or your accomplishments; for the elegance of your dress, or your manners; for your intelligence, or your beauty; but they never so far forget themselves as to regard you as a Christian. They may value your society because it augments their happiness, or because you seem to keep them in countenance in their frivolity, but they never think of you as having any true love for the cross of Christ, or any just views of the nature of religion. Too well they understand the nature of religion to suppose that it will lead its votaries to such scenes of vanity and frivolity: and when they wish to refer to those who are true ornaments of the Christian profession, and who resemble their Saviour, they never think of referring to you; it is to another and a far different class—the meek, the gentle, the spiritually-minded—to those who are at home by the bed-side of the suffering, not to those who mingle in the mazy dance; to those who love the place of prayer, not to those who aim to shine in the brilliant halls of fashion. And if, perchance, these same votaries of the gay world have occasion—as they often do—to refer to those in the Christian ranks who are a scandal and an offence to the Christian name—having the form of godliness but denying its power—it is to those who are willing to forget the solemnity of their own Christian vows and to mingle with those who profess no better things in the scenes of vanity and folly. Make the honest inquiry the world over, and there would be but one opinion on this subject. They never regard you as Christians. They never think of you as such. They never refer to you as such. They may regard you as amiable, accomplished, fascinating, intelligent—but they have but one opinion on the question whether you are Christians; and among all the votaries of vanity the world over, it is to be presumed that not one can be found who will speak of you as having any religion. Living, they regard you as a dishonor to the Christian name, and they will have no other feeling in respect to you when you die. For themselves, they expect if they ever become Christians, for ever to abandon such scenes of vanity; nor does it ever occur to them that true religion and the scenes of the ball-room are compatible with each other.

5. Your example is just what the people of the world refer to as an excuse when we urge them to become Christians. There is a professing Christian, say they, to-day all seriousness, sedateness, demureness,

and sanctimoniousness at the communion table. To-morrow he joins in the dance with as much joyousness as if he had never heard of Gethsemane, of Calvary, or of Heaven. He is a saint at the altar, and a patron of the world when away; a devout worshipper on the Sabbath, and a leader of vanity through the week. To-day, in the Sanctuary, he joins in fervent prayer for the salvation of his children, and marvels that they are not converted. To-morrow, he puts them under the instruction of worldliness and vanity; throws them into influences as far from the cross as the earth is from heaven, and trains them for a world as frivolous as though there were no such thing as a grave, or a judgment seat. We may marvel that his children are not converted; angelic beings see in it no cause of wonder.

It may seem strange that I have felt it my duty to occupy a whole discourse with the consideration of a topic of this kind. If such wonder should be felt, I have two things to say in reply.

One is, that I regard it as sufficiently important to settle, if it can be done, just views of what is right on a subject on which, in practice at least, the professedly Christian world is so much divided. The other is, that it is of infinite moment to impress just views on a subject of this nature on those who are just entering on life—on the minds of youth. Many of the youth whom I address have been solemnly dedicated to God in Christian baptism. Many have been trained in the bosom of pious families, and in Sabbath schools. Some are professors of religion, having, like Mary, chosen that “good part which shall not be taken from them.” All have been the subject of many prayers that they may be saved. All are forming their characters for this life and for that which is to come. For all the Son of God poured out his precious blood that they might be redeemed. With all the Holy Spirit strives, that they may become serious and sober Christians. To all the offers of salvation are made in the Gospel. All will soon stand at the judgment-bar, and all, if life is trifled away, will soon be beyond the reach of hope and mercy. All are now in a world of probation, and all are soon to leave it to re-visit it no more.

Dear Youth! Candidate for heaven! The ball-room is not far from the grave; and from the scenes of hilarity in the one you will soon go to the gloom of the other. The ball-room is not far from the eternal world—but Oh, how unlike are the scenes in the one to those of the other! The one is *not* a place of preparation for the other. It is not the place which God has appointed as that for which youth should prepare for the world of glory. No one by the amusements of a ball-room has been made fit for heaven, nor do any of its pleasures form the mind to enjoy God. Why, then, should the precious season of probation be wasted in such scenes? Why, amidst its amusements, should the hope of everlasting life be endangered? Remember that you dance over the grave; remember that the moments wasted thus will be reviewed when you stand at the bar of God, and far on in that eternal world to which you go. Then, no wasted season can

be recalled, and if the soul is lost you can never, never recover the opportunity of salvation which you once enjoyed.

You may say—I am persuaded that you will say—that all this is proper for me to preach; that I have advanced no sentiments, which, as a Christian minister, I ought not to do; that I am bound to endeavor to promote serious religion, and to introduce the pure principles of the Gospel into all the families committed to my pastoral charge. This you will admit is right for me; but whether you shall comply with my appeals, you may regard as a very different matter. Let us put down the foot here. We have then one point settled. It is, that I am but doing my duty in advocating such views. It becomes then a question of grave bearing, whether it can be *right* for you to disregard them? Professor of religion, Christian parent, hear me. There is nothing right for *you* which is not for *me*; nothing right in *your* family which is not in *mine*; nothing which you may allow which I might not also. If you may have wine, and splendid parties, and balls in your family, I ask you to point me to the place in the New Testament which will show that I may not also. And further. There is nothing which it is right for me to *preach*, which it will be right for you to *disregard*. Let us be consistent; say at once that what I advance is wrong, or else yield to it, and act in accordance with what you admit to be true.

Let me speak one word in conclusion to those who have been yielding to the practice which I have been considering—or to similar practices of worldliness—whether members of the Church or not. We have just passed through another year, and from this point we may look back, and see how it has been spent. You have been in the ball-room, and sought pleasure there, but have you been into your closet to seek the favor of God? You have been put under the training of the dancing school, but have you been seated, like Mary, at the feet of Jesus? You have been at the gay party, and sought to be admired, but have you had any solicitude to be approved of your final Judge, and to be prepared to dwell with Him? The year is gone. It left you nearer the grave, but not nearer heaven; nearer the judgment bar, but not more prepared to appear there. You have lived among the dying and the dead, and are yet unprepared to die. You began the year an unconverted sinner, and you ended it the same. You have lived through another precious period of probation, and have come to its close, as you began it, without repentance, without faith, without love to God, without evidence of pardoned sin, with no shadow of proof that you are prepared for eternity, with no reminiscence but that it has been a year of vanity and gaiety—now departed for ever.

Thoughtless trifler! For what do you live? Is this the way to pass through the only world of probation? This the way to live in that world where the Son of God died for your souls? Shall mortals thus dance gaily on the verge of the grave, and sport in a world full of tombs? Not long will you thus live. There is a limit to all these things—a time when laughter is changed to sadness, and the gay trifler is laid on a bed to rise not again. On the first Sabbath of the

new year, I admonish you to look over the past—to ask yourself how and why you have lived—and how long you can reasonably suppose that God will spare you to abuse his mercies, and to trifle with the concerns of the soul!

You enter now on a new year. What are your plans and purposes as you begin this new period of your existence? Do you purpose to begin, to continue, and to end it amidst songs and dances? Will you still rejoice at the sound of the lute, and regard life as designed only for gaiety and vanity? As you enter on this new season of probation, will you deliberately form the purpose to repeat your former scenes of amusement, and still to live in the neglect of the soul? One year may make sad changes in the prospects of many a youth who now hears me, and these cheerful anticipated songs may be changed to sadder notes. There is One on the way to meet us—somewhere now in the path which *we* are treading—at whose coming the strains of cheerful music die away, and at whose silent touch a strange numbness and chilliness seize on the limbs so full of elasticity and life. Some of you he may—he probably will meet during this year. You will turn pale, will tremble, will be horror-stricken, and will lie down and die. From anticipated gaiety and vanity, you will go to the cold grave. Instead of the joyous scenes of the dance, you will be personally interested in the solemn transactions of the judgment. The last season allotted to you for your probation will be a little portion of this year, and I solemnly entreat you as you enter on it, *not* to suffer that which is to close your probation for ever, to be spent in scenes that never fit for Heaven; in amusements, the remembrance of which will only add ten-fold horror to the world of despair!