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**SERMON CXLVII.**

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**PURIFICATION OF THE SACRED MINISTRY.**

*MALACHI iii. 3, 4.—And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years.*

THE text is one of the many prophecies which have a peculiar reference to New Testament times. It announces what will be one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the Millennium. The Christian ministry will be purified, that they may offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness. The subject will lead us to inquire,

I. What are some of the corruptions from which the sons of Levi will be purified at the commencement of Millennial glory?

1. They will be purified from every species of gross *immoralities*. In some ages and nations, even those who minister in holy things have been the subjects and the promoters of abominations the most gross.

A large portion of the Roman Catholic clergy were, at the era of the Reformation, personally and professionally, in secret and in broad day, the perpetrators of almost every crime. Nor is there any portion of the church, established or dissenting, which has not at times had men officiating at their altars, and sometimes standing high in popular estimation, who were living in the practice of iniquities which cannot be named; and even in our own day, intemperance in eating and drinking has marred the usefulness, and destroyed the lives of many in the ministry who were men of talents and extensive influence. But no such stain will adhere to the character of those who shall be the honored instruments of proclaiming the glad tidings of salvation in the purity and glory of the latter days.

2. The Divine appointment, with respect to the ministry of reconciliation, both under the old and new dispensation, was, that those, who should be thus employed should be at a great distance from all *secular concerns*. But this is

very far from having been the case hitherto. Even a pope of the last century could say to a young priest embarking for America, "May the Lord in his goodness save you from the temptation and the curse of attempting to get rich." There have been and now are in the United States (as well as in other countries less favored with spiritual privileges) many professedly devoted to the ministry in holy things, and yet almost exclusively employed in concerns purely worldly. They own and manage plantations—they have their attention almost wholly engaged from Monday morning to Saturday night—about crops, and various kinds of cattle, and servants and merchandise. Some are deeply engaged in commercial speculations, and in political discussions; and there has been such a thing as a minister of the gospel being a contractor for carrying the mail and for managing the post-office establishment, even on the Sabbath-day. But such things will not be known when the sons of Levi are purified.

3. The ministry, according to the Divine directions, are to give themselves to reading and studying; but their time, and their talents, and their literary acquirements are to be the *Lord's property*, and are all to be devoted to the development and to the application of God's great plan of salvation. And there is ample scope here for the movement of the most exalted and improved intellect. Yet the history of the church, particularly since the era of the Reformation, is full of the accounts of sacred time and talent being employed about almost every thing else, rather than Divine things. Protestant Germany, during the greater part of the last century, and many of the residences of the English clergy during the same period, have furnished a vast quantity of learned lore, which in the furnace of the refiner will be ascertained to have been dross, or base and hurtful metal. An awful waste of talent—a most criminal perversion of the sacred office.

4. The mere *polite* and *fashionable* preacher and pastor shall have no place among the sons of Levi, when Jehovah shall sit as a refiner. The approved guardian of immortal souls and of Christian morals will then have a more effectual way of recommending himself and his Master to the young and to the gay, and to families in easy circumstances, than by being skilled in vocal or instrumental music, (good acquirements!) or by being always prepared to give an opinion on the latest work of fiction, or by being the most expert and entertaining in a party of pleasure. Yet preachers and pastors of this character have been in some places highly esteemed for their works' sake!

5. Ever since the days of the Apostles, there have been, as there were in the Corinthian church, *divisions and schisms* among the professed followers of the Redeemer;—but these could never have been continued, had they not been cherished in some form or other by the ministry. Some Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or Diotrophes has always been the rallying name of a party influence in almost every generation and every district. This is peculiarly so at the present day. Among the six thousand preachers of the gospel in these United States, it is a melancholy fact, that there is so little ministerial confidence; and in many cases this want of confidence is most evident among those of the same denomination, and living in the same neighborhood. Hence slander and evil speaking in all their disgraceful forms exist in some places, even among commissioned servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. This certainly will not be the state of things at the commencement of the Millennium, when God will make his new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah, and put his laws in their minds and write them in their hearts; the great law of love—of love to God and love to man—will be written very legi-

bly upon the hearts of those, whose special business it is to explain and enforce this law.

It is truly melancholy to think of the envies and jealousies which, in family and private and neighborhood intercourse, mark almost every moment and every action of some of those who are set to watch for souls. And it is still more melancholy to cast an eye over the length and breadth of the land, and to witness the amazing waste of ministerial talent and of ministerial effort and even of ministerial piety, in brother opposing brother in their efforts to do good, and to advance the interests of Messiah's kingdom. Such a state of things can never be consistent with Millennial purity and glory. By some means or other, the sons of Levi as a body will, at the commencement of that period, be purified from all that pride, and selfishness, and meanness, and malignity, and folly which at present form a prominent feature in not a few who minister in holy things, and who might otherwise be eminently qualified for the great and good work.

A full review of the corruptions of the Christian ministry would suggest,

1. Proofs almost without number of the depravity of human nature,—of the deceitfulness of the human heart,—and of the absolute necessity of the special influences of the Holy Spirit.

2. That the preservation of the church from age to age is nothing less than a standing miracle,—a special illustration of the promise, "Upon this Rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

3. That while any of these corruptions are cherished to any great extent by those who are invested with the sacred office, the iniquities of the fathers will in some way or other be visited upon their children. See Matt. xxiii. 34.

II. Let us consider, then, the importance and necessity of this purification.

1. Man has always been more or less under the influence of religion. He is by his very nature, in this sense, a religious being. Hence all nations and tribes have had their ministers of religion. And with very few exceptions every individual, in every age, and in every state of society, and among all classes of men, has readily acknowledged its infinite importance.

2. The ministers of religion have always, to a great extent, given character to the community. In the whole history of the Christian ministry particularly, the state of morals, and piety, and literature, has always corresponded with the personal character of the body of the officiating clergy; and from the very nature of things, and from the whole structure of society, the attainments of any considerable portion of the Christian community, in any thing that is valuable, can never exceed the attainments of their spiritual guides. "Like priest, like people," has always been, and always will be a self-evident proposition. Hence it follows, that nothing of that purity and peace, and high intellectual and moral character, which have always been expected to form the distinguishing glory of the Millennium, can ever be realized, till the ministry of reconciliation as a body shall be eminent in every Christian gift and grace.

3. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in its enlightening, regenerating, and sanctifying influence, is the last and the only hope of our ruined world. All the devices of men, under pagan, and Mahomedan, and Christian, and infidel forms, have been fully tried; and they have all failed, and been found inadequate. And the wise and reflecting of almost every land are now fully convinced of this.

4. The institutions of the gospel are all, in their nature, well adapted for

elevating human character, and promoting human happiness. And when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (and not till then), there shall be nothing to hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain; that is, all round the globe.

5. The institutions of the gospel are one great whole; but a living and properly qualified ministry is the great and important institution. The living ministry is that, which is, with God's blessing, to give life and efficiency to the whole.

6. Of the many thousand accusations and objections which have been brought against the preachers of the gospel individually, and as a body, not one has ever been urged against the true Scriptural character of a gospel ministry. All these accusations and objections go upon the supposition that the ministry or the individual is not consistent with the Christian standard. And it must be acknowledged that much occasion has been given for many of these charges. But let the sons of Levi be purified—let them as a body present themselves in their true and proper character, and they will act in the moral world, as the rain, and the dew, and the sun, and the thunder do in the natural world. Their heavenly authority and their value to the world will be no longer even a matter of doubt.

Let us consider,

III. The means by which this purification of the ministry will be accomplished.

1. It is very probable that there will be some visible and awful dispensation of Providence made to bear directly on this point. The language used in the text and context is exceedingly strong. Read the whole passage (1-5). Compare this passage with some other passages, such as Ezekiel viii. 7-18, and ix. 5, 6; Zechariah xi. 15-17, and xiv. 12; Rev. xix. 19-21; the cases of Nadab and Abihu, Numbers x. 1, 2. and of Eli's sons, 1. Sam. ii. and iii., may also be studied in this connection.

It is evident that the period for the full accomplishment of the declaration in the text is at no great distance. Less, perhaps, than one generation from this date. All acknowledge that the judgments of Jehovah are to fall very heavy upon the kingdoms of the world, and upon Antichrist in all his forms, in order to usher in the purity and the glory of the latter days. It is not therefore probable, that the individuals who have been leaders in the corruptions which have debased the Christian ministry, will escape this visitation.

In what particular form this visitation may be made, we cannot even conjecture. Every attentive reader of ecclesiastical history may however find examples of visitations of this kind in almost every Christian land, and in every generation; and the man who has been conversant with the lives and characters of preachers for thirty or forty years, may find from personal observation a considerable number of illustrations of the principle. It is not to be denied, that even in the United States, this goodly heritage of Zion, a large portion of the present preachers and pastors, are lamentably deficient. They have their legal standing among the sons of Levi, but give too little evidence of possessing the real spirit of their office. Let such be warned of their danger. The day of visitation is at hand.

2. But the great and effectual means of this purification will be, a general and powerful effusion of the Holy Ghost on the rising generation. The brethren and fathers now in the sacred office, whether qualified or unqualified, whether they have been faithful or unfaithful, will soon go the way of all the

earth; and their places will be filled by men of another generation and of a superior character. The same Holy Spirit that rested in such rich abundance upon the Head, while he was personally ministering on earth (See Isa. xi. 1-9, and lxi. 1-5), will descend and abide without measure, when compared with any thing we have witnessed, upon all the members. Under such an influence, another and a continued pentecost will be enjoyed. All who shall be employed in the work of the ministry will of course understand and feel the importance of Divine truth in all its fulness and in all its varied applications, to an extent perhaps far beyond what even apostles enjoyed. See Jeremiah xxxi. 31-34; Isa. xxx. 26; Zechariah xii. 8. They will particularly understand and feel the value of immortal souls, and the suitableness of God's plan of salvation, and the suitableness of all the means which God hath appointed for applying this salvation to our fallen race. They will further be men who will be exclusively devoted to their proper work. They will understand fully the epistles to Timothy and Titus, and the other passages of Scripture describing the nature and the importance of the sacred office. Add to all this, they will be men of ardent piety, and will, generally, have every ministerial and Christian gift and grace on all occasions in lively exercise. And one of their distinguishing characteristics, as men of ardent piety, will no doubt be, that while they shall stand high as men of literature and science, they will possess the happy art of making all their attainments subservient to the salvation and edification of immortal souls. All that may be found valuable in the whole range of human investigation will thus be made to bear upon the development and application of Jehovah's great plan.

And though the preachers of the gospel will then be greatly multiplied, and though their field of operation will be greatly extended, far beyond any thing of any former period, yet there will be also a unity and a harmony of thinking and of feeling, and particularly a unity and harmony of action, equally beyond all that has ever yet been witnessed. This unity will be produced by the powerful operation of God's Spirit upon the understanding, and upon the heart and conscience. Isa. lii. 7, 8. Hence it will be of a very different kind from any thing which has been called by that name under any human arrangements. It will be decidedly the work of God, and will carry along with it its own evidence. It will be the keeping of the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace, with all lowliness, and meekness, and long-suffering, and with forbearing one another in love.

There are a great variety of circumstances, as well as some passages of Scripture, which are favorable to the belief, that the movements of Providence in bringing in the glory of the latter day, will be uncommonly rapid, and will far exceed the ordinary march of history. (See Isaiah lxxv. 24, and lxxvi. 8-19, 20, Zechariah xii. 6-8, Malachi iii. 5.)

It is also extremely probable, that our Lord and Master will, by the dispensations of his providence, and by the operations of his Holy Spirit, provide a generation of servants of this elevated character, at the same time, in nearly all the nations of the earth; and having stationed each company and each man in his proper place, the word of command will be given. And then the advance will be made in united and solid columns upon every point in every line of the fortifications of the enemy and usurper. Then will be completely fulfilled that which was spoken—"The Lord gave the word, and great shall be the company of those that publish it." And at that very moment also, the shout of victory will be raised all round the globe, "Alleluia! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

Hence, in conclusion, we may infer that there never was any former period in the history of the world, in which there was such encouragement for young men of piety, and talent, and enterprise, to devote themselves to the work of the ministry, as there is at present; nor was there ever any former period in which there was greater encouragement to good people of every name, and of every land and nation, to contribute liberally for aiding pious young men in a course of preparation for this great and good work. The sound is already heard in nearly every land,—“Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion, put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city, for henceforth there shall no more come unto thee the uncircumcised or the unclean.”

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## SERMON CXLVIII.

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### APOSTOLIC PREACHING.

ACTS xx. 17-21, 25-27.—*And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, with many tears, and temptations which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews:—how I kept back nothing that was profitable, but have showed you and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I know, that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.*

THIS passage of Scripture exhibits an example peculiarly worthy of imitation. The apostle preached in Ephesus three years. His labors were great and constant. *He ceased not to warn every one, night and day, with tears. He declared all the counsel of God.* And his labors were not in vain. While he planted and watered, God gave the increase. Many souls were converted. There was, emphatically, a *revival of religion.*

The present day is, in a most remarkable degree, a day of *salvation.* God is showing the riches of his grace in reviving his work, and enlarging the church. And, as we have reason to hope that he will carry on his work more and more gloriously, till the whole earth shall see his salvation, it becomes a most interesting question, especially to ministers, how they may most successfully co-operate with God in advancing his kingdom. We know it pleases God to save sinners, through the efforts of men devoted to his service. He allows us the high honor of being employed in turning sinners from darkness to light, and training them for the kingdom of heaven. We should, therefore,