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SERMON CLXXIII.

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THE MAN THAT GATHERED STICKS ON THE SABBATH.

NUMBERS xv. 32—36.—*And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the Sabbath, day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall surely be put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses.*

THIS is truly, says the profane man and the infidel, *a case of oppression.* A man publicly put to death, and that too under divine authority, for so small an offence as gathering a few sticks upon the Sabbath day. And it would be well for the church and the world, if a similar sentiment of irreverence for God were not cherished, and in many cases extensively acted upon, even among the professed disciples of the Lord Jesus.

1. It is freely acknowledged that public opinion even in Christian lands will support the sentiment of the profane man and the infidel in this case, rather than the sentiment of the man of piety and devotion. But public opinion, though never to be despised, is very far from being always a safe rule of action. Public opinion, however correct, or however accurately ascertained, is only the aggregate opinion of the multi-

tude which composes the community. The wisest and the best of men have been often very confident that they were in the right, yet have afterwards found and acknowledged that they had been in the wrong. Paganism, and Mohammedanism, and all the errors and fooleries of the Romish church, have been extensively and for ages supported by public opinion. The slave-trade has been at no great distance of time and place supported by Christian Protestant public opinion. Public opinion as to the sanctification of the Sabbath, even among those who make no pretensions to religion, is very different in Boston or New-York from what it is in Paris or New-Orleans.

The gospel is preached to the world lying in wickedness—to a community of men which has for ages upon ages been in open rebellion against God. And the carnal mind, even in Christian lands, and in Christian families, and in a Christian man, is enmity against God, and is not subject to his law, neither indeed can be. Nor has there ever been a more destructive principle acted upon in the Christian church, than the belief that in some cases, at least, men are to fall in with public opinion, though that opinion should be in direct opposition to the plain and express declarations of the law of God.

2. A law without a penalty is good for nothing, and a penalty annexed to the violation of a law, and yet not inflicted when the law is violated, is worse than useless. It is true that men are most effectually governed by persuasion; but it is equally true that punishment must also be inflicted, and is inflicted in the administration of every good government.

In all governments, and in every situation, from the government of a family to that of an empire, the maxim will hold good, that that government is the best, even the mildest and the best, where the penalty of the law is inflicted in every case of violation, without fear, or favor, or partiality.

Nearly the whole of British wealth, and prosperity, and power, at home and abroad, rests upon commercial credit. Hence a pardon for a person who has been convicted for forgery, whatever may have been his rank or character, or whatever may have been the circumstances under which the deed was done, is not known in British history. Every man knows that the strength of an army depends almost solely upon the principle of implicit obedience. Hence disobedience to orders, even though success has attended the act, is punished with death. No man can read the case of Major Andre, in the war of the American Revolution, without feeling deeply for the unhappy victim of the law of nations. And

yet no man will pronounce Gen. Washington to have been a tyrant for his firmness and decision of character on that occasion.

3. God has a perfect right to enact any law which he may please, and to annex to the violation of that law any penalty which his infinite wisdom may suggest. The God of the Bible and of the Christian is the God of the heavens and of the earth, and of all who dwell therein. He made and he preserves them all; and he, and he only knows them all; and he only is familiar with the infinite variety of relations which they sustain to one another, and to him as the Creator and Governor of all.

It is a fundamental and an invariable maxim in criminal jurisprudence, that the mere act by which the law is violated is no criterion by which you are to judge of the magnitude of the offence. It is a very little thing for a man to write his name on a small slip of paper. A forgery for a check of ten dollars is small when compared with a check of as many thousands; and a forgery upon a man of wealth, without any design of ultimately defrauding him, and that man your friend, who if he had known your needy situation would have cheerfully advanced you the money, rather than that you should have been exposed to the temptation, is a small matter when compared with an extensive arrangement to counterfeit the currency of a nation. But the law of forgery in England knows no such distinctions. Forgery is in every case forgery, and the punishment is death.

Every man is by his very nature a social being, and his every movement has an extensive influence upon the moral character and the destiny of a vast number of his fellow men. Nor are the consequences of a very small transaction confined to the circle of friends and acquaintances, or the neighborhood, or even to the men of the generation to which we belong. The God of the heavens and of the earth, and the Governor of all intelligences, alone knows the extent of the consequences of any particular act of any particular individual. Nor, till the consummation of all things, will even the higher orders of created intelligences have any adequate conception of the manner and the extent in which the character of millions upon millions of the human family were formed and fixed by the sentiments, and the conduct, and the character of those who lived and acted at a great distance of time and place from one another, and from those upon whom they exerted an influence. Hence in every case, where the plain and direct authority of a divine appointment is put in competition with the policies and conduct of the world in a state of rebellion, and darkness, and disorder, and moral degradation, there ought to be very little doubt, among Christian men at least, which side is the side of wisdom and safety.

4. Though the penalty (particularly in the divine government) should not be immediately inflicted, we have no reason to suppose that the law is abrogated or that the penalty is remitted. See Ecclesiastes viii. 11, 12, 13. Compare this passage with the reasoning of the apostle, 2 Pet. iii. 1—10.

Noah preached to the old world, and warned them of the approaching deluge one hundred and twenty years. The flood came at last. Men's mocking, and doubting the sanity of the preacher, did not invalidate his message. The Jewish nation was warned for generations, before they were carried away captives by the Assyrians and Babylonians, and before Jerusalem was finally destroyed by the Romans. In like manner every sinner, and every nation to whom the gospel is preached, is put for a long period under a dispensation of mercy. Time and space are given for repentance. But if repentance is not exercised, destruction sooner or later is inevitable. Hence, while the law is announced day after day, and generation after generation, thought wickedness of various kinds may abound, and though many transgressors may go down to the grave without having their iniquities visited upon them, yet we have no reason from this forbearance and long suffering of Jehovah to suppose, that the sanctions of the law are less heavy now than they were in former ages.

The divine government has in this respect, as well as in all other matters, greatly the advantage over the best code of laws and the best form of government as administered by men. The range of human authority is in cases very limited. The most atrocious criminal may in many cases elude the grasp of the most vigilant police; and death in every case releases the subject of human government from its authority. But in the divine government there is no evading the eye of Omniscience, no escaping the arm of Omnipotence; and under whatever circumstances the soul quits the mortal tenement, it passes immediately into the presence of its Judge to receive according to the deeds done in the body. The pains and penalties of the divine government will in every case be most severely felt, when the transgressor is beyond the reach of law as administered by men.

5. The mode of punishment may be greatly varied, and yet no remission or relaxation of the penalty. The resources of the divine government are infinite. What is said of the third commandment will apply also to the fourth and every other commandment. Though the transgressor may escape punishment from men, yet "the Lord our God will not hold him guiltless who taketh his name in vain." In some form or other, sooner or later, and frequently even in this life, the soul who

transgressors shall bear his iniquity. Nor will it ever be known, till it shall be revealed in the review of the government of Jehovah, in the great and general settlement, how many of the disappointments and sufferings, in body and mind, in loss of property and character and life, which have marked the history of individuals and of families and of nations, have been inflicted and suffered as the punishment of the violation of the Sabbath. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," and it must be doubly fearful, when the long suffering-mercy, which is calculated to produce repentance, only produces impenitence and false security.

6. The same God governs the world now who governed it from the beginning. This God is from everlasting to everlasting, and has been the dwelling-place of his people in all generations. It is freely granted that there have been great and various modifications of the divine administration; but the general principles of his government have been and always will be the same.

In human governments there are, from the very nature of man, great and radical changes. Every generation and every new set of men are supposed to introduce some new and important improvements. But we cannot, without blasphemy, think thus of the divine government. No radical change, either in the principles or in the mode of administration, can ever take place here. Hence, whether we can explain the fact or not, we must admit, that every act of the divine government has been and will be rigidly just, and at the same time infinitely benevolent. Oppression or cruelty, or even mistake or misapplication of a correct general principle, can never occur in the administration of an infinitely wise and good Being.

7. The particular case immediately under consideration is an illustration of a general principle, extending further than to the law of the Sabbath. It is to be considered as a specimen of the punishment due to the sin of presumption, whatever may be the particular act or the particular occasion. Read the context, *vv.* 27—31.

Every mother and every child knows the aggravated nature of the sin of presumption, however trifling the act may be, and however unimportant the immediate consequences may be. The guilt of a direct insult offered to lawful authority is in fact aggravated, not diminished, by the smallness and insignificance of the action.

The Sabbath was to be a sign betwixt Jehovah and his people forever; nor were the cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, which hovered over the children of Israel in all their journey through the wilderness, a more distinguishing characteristic. Besides being incorpo-

rated in full in the summary of the moral law, written upon the two tables of stone by the finger of God, the law of the Sabbath is again and again stated in connection with the institutions and history of the church of God. It was noticed in connection with the giving of the manna. And while the giving of the manna continued, God gave them every seventh day the bread of two days, that every man and every family might rest on the Lord's day. It was particularly mentioned when directions were given for the building of the tabernacle, Exod. xxxi. 12—17. And if ever there could have been a plausible reason for employing holy time in manual labor, it would have been when all hands were more or less to be employed in building the tabernacle. In the busy and important seasons of the year, seed time and harvest, the Sabbath was to be religiously observed, Exod. xxxiv. 20. In Old Testament prophecy the Sabbath is also again and again referred to as a something which should be a distinguishing characteristic of the church and of God's people to the end of time. See Is. lvi. 3—8, and lxvi. 23.

Now apply all these and similar statements and references, and it will be hard to find a case of more heaven-daring and aggravated presumption than the case of the man who gathered the sticks upon the Sabbath day.

We close with a single inference, viz. The guilt of every Christian land, and of every Christian church, and of every Christian family and probably of every Christian man, must be uncommonly great with respect to the law of the Sabbath. "If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquity, O Lord, who shall stand?" Truly, it is of the Lord's mercy that we and our people are not consumed. Let all those who profess to regard the divine authority consider and examine their ways. And when the Lord shall return again the captivity of Zion, evangelical repentance with respect to this matter will, without doubt, be deep, and general, and universal.