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THE UNPARDONABLE SIN.*

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In the immediately preceding context, the apostle is discussing the subject of prayer. "And this is the confidence we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us; and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death." He then adds the text: "There is a sin unto death. I do not say that he shall pray for it." What that sin is, he does not tell us. How those to whom he was writing might know when one had committed it, and so not pray for him, he does not inform us. Perhaps they had information on the subject of which he gives us no account. But, however that may be, what it concerns us to observe is, that the text plainly teaches that there is a sin that is unpardonable; a sin in regard to which no prayer is to be offered; a sin that crosses the "mysterious boundary that separates between God's patience and his wrath," and irretrievably dooms the soul to eternal death.

This solemn truth is taught in many other passages in these pages. It is taught in the Old Testament, as, for instance, by the Prophet Isaiah. When that prophet was commissioned to preach to his countrymen, he was informed beforehand that they would hear, indeed, but that they would not understand; that they would see, but that they would not perceive; that the only effect of his preaching on them would be that their eyes would grow dull, and their ears grow heavy, and their hearts wax fat;

*A sermon preached in the Seminary Chapel December, 1906.

THE ROD OF AARON.*

(Num. 17: 1-13.)

BY REV. RUSSELL CECIL, D. D.

I am here to-day, brethren, by the invitation of your president, to address you at the opening of the ninety-fifth session of this Seminary, a task which he himself, of course, is far better fitted, both by nature and experience, to perform than I am, and which I undertake with some hesitation. I deem it, however, a privilege to speak to you on such an occasion, and I hope, by the aid of the Spirit, to say something which shall at least be wholesome and profitable.

More than twenty-five years of active service in the pastorate, perhaps, entitles me to speak with some degree of assurance to younger brethren upon those subjects in which all ministers of the Gospel are concerned. Some of you are just entering upon your course of study, in preparation for the ministry; some of you are returning, to continue the work already begun, and some are hoping this year to complete it; but all of you, whatever may be your stage of preparation, are doubtless in a state of mind to listen with patience and appreciation to words of counsel from those who have been in the ministry before you. I have the deepest sympathy for you in your work, and envy you the privilege of three years of quiet study in this pleasant retreat, and under such able and experienced instructors as you have in this institution.

In casting about in my mind for a subject, I thought of that interesting incident in the history of the Jews, when the authority of Moses and Aaron having been questioned by certain sons of Kohath and Reuben, a question of both civil and religious interest, Moses, in obedience to the command of God, took twelve rods, representing the twelve tribes, and laid them up in the tabernacle of the congregation before the Lord over night, and the next morning, when they were taken out, it was dis-

*An address delivered at the opening of Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va., September 12, 1906, 4 P. M.

covered that the rod for the tribe of Levi, with Aaron's name upon it, "was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds." (Num. xvii. 8.) This was given to the people as a sign that the priesthood belonged to the tribe of Levi and the house of Aaron. This singular incident is highly significant to all who enter upon the work of the holy ministry.

It is suggestive of several useful thoughts, to which I wish now to ask your earnest attention.

I. The true minister is *chosen of God*. This was the point in question. Korah and his company contended that "all the congregation were holy, every one of them," and that Moses and Aaron were taking "too much upon themselves," and "lifting themselves up above the congregation of the Lord." (Num. xvi. 3.)

Moses had not assumed any authority whatever which had not been divinely thrust upon him, and he proposed, according to his usual custom, to refer the matter to the Lord. "Even to-morrow the Lord will shew who are his, and who is holy." (v. 5). The controversy, so far as the civil and religious authority of Moses and Aaron was concerned, was settled the next day by the miraculous destruction of the insurgents. The earth opened and swallowed up Korah and his company, and fire from God consumed the two hundred and fifty men who offered incense. (Num. xvi. 32-35.) But then the people murmured against Moses and Aaron, saying, "Ye have killed the people of the Lord." Then a plague broke out among them, and fourteen thousand seven hundred died before the plague was stayed by the intercession of Aaron, who stood between the living and the dead with a burning censer in his hand, and made atonement for them. (Num. xvi. 46-49). After this Moses, by the divine direction, proposed the test of the twelve rods laid up before the Lord in the Tabernacle of Witness, and God said to him, "And it shall come to pass that the man's rod whom I shall choose, shall blossom, and I will make to cease from me the murmuring of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you. (xvii. 5.) When it was discovered on the morrow that the rod which bore the name of Aaron upon it had blossomed and yielded almonds, the question of the divine call of Aaron to the priestly office was finally disposed of.

We cannot make too much, brethren, of the divine call to the ministry. Two parties should be convinced that every man who assumes this office has been called of God, the one the man himself, and the other the people. The apostle says: "No man taketh this honor to himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron." (Heb. v. 4.) I pity the man who suffers himself to enter the ministry unless he is satisfied in his own mind that God has designed him for it, and has indicated clearly His will in the matter. It is dangerous for any one to presume to perform a sacred service who has not been divinely designated for it. He who dares to do so imperils his own soul, and also the interests of the kingdom. He has no message, he hears not the voice of the Spirit in the Word, and hence his work must be purely lifeless and mechanical. What can he hope for himself? What power of good has he with the people? What is there to sustain him in the long years of labor and sorrow and disappointment which stretch away in the distant future before him? But if a man is thoroughly satisfied of his case, then nothing in the way of earthly trial can break his spirit or deter him from the discharge of his duty. I trust, my friends, that in the depth of your own souls you can respond to that sentiment of Tennyson—

"Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me."

It is almost as important also that the people should be convinced of your call. Many are eager to hear the message to their souls from any true ambassador of God, and if they have good reason in believing that you are such, they honor you and hearken to your words. But how sadly disappointed they are when the preacher has nothing for them and they have to listen to a string of words and platitudes, and to discourses more or less secular in character and destitute of the bread of life! They have no sympathy for the man whom they do not believe to be called, who runs when he has not been sent, and who presumes to deliver a message which he has not received from God. It is not an exaggeration to say that during the history of the church the cause of Christ has suffered not a little from the advocacy of men who have not been called of God to this office, as was Aaron.

II. The true minister must be *separated from the world*. The

priests of the tribe of Levi and of the house of Aaron had to be separated from the body of the people and prepared by an elaborate ceremony of purification for the exercise of the functions of their sacred office. I will not pause to speak of this ceremony which is doubtless familiar at least to most of you. It made a distinction between them and their brethren. They were set apart from the others and regarded as holy. This distinction was offensive to the sons of Kohath and Reuben, and furnished occasion for their rebellion against the priestly authority. Their contention was: "All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them." This was, of course, in a sense true; they were all the chosen people of God; but it was also true that out of their number God selected the house of Aaron to be separated from their brethren in order to minister before him in holy things.

Now, of course we do not believe that the ministers of the Gospel of the New Testament are priests in the sense that Aaron and his sons were. They exercise some priestly functions, as authoritatively expounding the revealed will of God to the people, and in making intercession for them at the throne of grace, but the functions of their office are, in the main, rather ministerial than sacerdotal. But while this is true, it is clear from the Gospel narratives that Jesus chose a body of men, whom he called apostles, or messengers, and separated from the world and even from his other disciples, and ordained them to the special work of preaching and ruling in the church. The apostles followed their Master's example in organizing the church, and also chose and ordained men to the ministerial office. Now these men are not only called of God to their work, but they also are to be separated from the world.

Now, there is not a little confusion in the minds of many upon this subject of separation of ministers from the world. In some ages of the church and in some branches of it still, it has led to the error of monasticism, and men who sought for holiness have imagined that it called for seclusion, peculiarities of dress, and ascetic living. But it does not mean separation from the ordinary life and activities of the world. The apostles of our Lord lived among men and mingled with them, and until the church had grown sufficiently strong to provide for their support, and permit them to give themselves wholly to preaching

and other religious exercises, they evidently sustained themselves by engaging in the ordinary work of the world. Ministers in early churches did the same. Ministers, however, when it can be avoided, should not engage in secular pursuits or permit themselves to come under the power of secularizing influences. But it is possible for the minister to live among men, go where they are, share in their daily interests and perplexities, sorrows and trials, and yet not become secularized. It is unfortunate for him to appear distant and unapproachable. It is a mistake for him to act as if he were afraid of becoming contaminated by his association with fellowmen. That kind of separation is not required of him, and neutralizes to a degree his influence for good. But the kind of separation which he should be careful to maintain is separation from evil. Our Lord in his last prayer with the apostles said, "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil." (John xvii. 15.) This world is your arena for action, the sphere in which your work must be done, and you must not attempt to flee from it, but only to separate yourself from evil in whatever form it may appear, whether in error of doctrine or of life. It is not easy, my brethren, to separate yourselves from error which seems to be floating upon every breeze. If you "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints," some will accuse you of narrowness and others of self-righteousness; but error in doctrine is as dangerous as error in life; if not more so; it is of the world, and the servant of God must keep himself unspotted from the world. These are times when our loyalty to truth and righteousness is being put to the test and the problem perpetually before us is: Shall we separate ourselves from evil, or shall we compromise with it in order to retain the sympathy and the support of the world? Of course, there is only one proper solution of it, and that is the settled purpose to seek to know the truth in its simplicity, separated from error, and to devote ourselves to the defense and propagation of it.

III. The true minister must be *consecrated to service*. This expression has become somewhat hackneyed in our day, but it concerns a serious matter, the importance of which can hardly be exaggerated. Why were Aaron and his sons separated from their brethren? In order that they might be devoted or consecrated to religious service. It has been said that we may dedi-

cate ourselves to God, but that He himself must consecrate us. Consecration means set apart to sacred uses, when men may be separated from their brethren for various purposes, for example, for war; but Aaron and his sons were separated from others in order that they might be consecrated by God to the holy priesthood. Aaron's rod, which was of course a symbol of the priesthood, was preserved in the ark of the covenant along with the golden pot of manna and the tables of the law, "as a token against the rebels" (v. 10). It remained there as a permanent sign to the people that God chooses his own servants for the sacred services of the sanctuary; that he separates them from others; and that he consecrates them by methods of his own selection. Its presence in the ark in the Holy of Holies was an indication of the holy character of the priests' office and of the spiritual nature of the work to which they were called. It was a warning to the usurper who might be tempted to take this office to himself; it was an emblem to the people of the divine provision for their spiritual needs; and it was a perpetual reminder to the priests themselves that they owed their elevation to God and to him therefore they would have to render their accounts. Such an office surely demanded of those who filled it deep piety of spirit and holiness of life.

During the progress of the plague, as I have already mentioned, while the people were dying at a frightful rate, Aaron, with a burning censer of incense in his hand, "ran in the midst of the congregation," and, "standing between the dead and the living, "made an atonement for the people," "and the plague was stayed" (Num. xvi. 46-48). This was both a sample and a symbol of the work of the priesthood as it was also of the Christian ministry. The place of the minister is between the dead and the living, preaching the Gospel of Atonement for sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is to this solemn and holy task that he is consecrated by Almighty God. Men who are dying in sin look to him for life. God has made the atonement through his Son; it is the duty of the minister to proclaim it. He is taxed with this and with nothing else. To do this he is called of God, separated from his brethren, and consecrated by the holy ordinances of the church. There is no higher office among men.

IV. The true minister must be *fruitful of good works.*

Aaron's rod of all the twelve was the only one that budded, blossomed and yielded almonds. Of course this indicated that he would be fruitful in the priest's office. He was not chosen and consecrated to this office by the divine grace simply to occupy it as a position of honor and emolument, but he was to use the office in the holy service of God and the people.

This is the end of the ministry, brethren, into which you are called by the Spirit. You are called unto good works, and not only in the general sense, as this is true of all God's people, but you are called to the specific work of serving in word and doctrine in such a way as to lead souls to saving knowledge of Christ.

I remember while a student in the Seminary of paying a visit to the pastor of my youth, under whose preaching I found the Saviour, and who was then rapidly approaching the end of his earthly career, and he made one remark which deeply impressed me at the time, and has remained with me ever since. The remark was this: "My young brother, do not be satisfied with a fruitless ministry. Many pastors console themselves in the barren results of their labors with the thought that they have no evangelistic gifts; and of course," he said, "Men are differently endowed in that respect, but do not, I beseech you, rest content without bringing souls to Christ, and thus giving full proof of the ministry to which God has called you."

The Lord Jesus expects us to bear fruit. He sends us forth with this end in view. You have not failed to observe how impressively he dwells upon this point in his talks with his disciples. "Herein is my Father glorified that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." Thus do we bring glory to God, and thus do we give proof of true discipleship. We should desire to bear fruit in the salvation of souls, and we should pray for grace and strength to do it. Now, the purpose of Christ and our own desire in this matter are both covered by one weighty remark of his to the twelve in the upper room: "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that ye should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, He may give it you." (John xv. 16.) Thus He says the double purpose in their selection and appointment was that they should bear permanent fruit, and that their prayers in his name should be answered. So it appears that in the purpose of the Master fruitfulness and

prayer are co-ordinate and inseparable. To appreciate this great truth, and to act upon it, is without doubt the secret of a fruitful ministry. Preaching and praying are both essential to fruitfulness.

Brethren, let me urge you to be diligent in your study of the Scripture, and in prayer, that you may understand the purport of your holy calling, and you may go out from here at the end of your course prepared to fulfil a fruitful and happy ministry.