

THE

PRINCETON PULPIT.

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NEW YORK :

CHARLES SCRIBNER, 145 NASSAU STREET.

1852.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1852, by

CHARLES SCRIBNER,

In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District
of New York.

Printed by

C. W. BENEDICT,

201 William Street.

POWER AND PERPETUITY OF LAW.*

BY

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

IF you have read the Pentateuch and especially the books of Exodus and Leviticus with care, you have perhaps wondered why a system of laws, so complicated, so careful of little things, so rigidly exact in its directions about them, should ever have been enacted. Viewing it in certain aspects, it may be that a sort of half suspicion has crossed your minds that legislation of this kind is really unworthy of such a being as God. But when the purpose of its Divine Author is seen, when the relation of the Law of Moses to the Jews as a separated people, and to the Gospel dispensation is fully understood, the whole system appears in quite a new light. The marks of divine wisdom and goodness are clearly discernible in all its parts, even in its minutest details. Every law has a reason, every ceremony has a meaning, every rite becomes instinct with the most precious truth.

* Preached in the Chapel of the College of New Jersey.

This Mosaic code is "the Law" spoken of in the text. It embodied many precepts of universal application, and eternal authority,—it included, indeed, the whole moral law, but as a code, it was enacted for a specific end, and was to continue in force for a specific period. Until this end was gained, and this period completed, not a jot or tittle of it could be annulled. When the Son of God exclaimed with his expiring breath, from that cross to which he had been nailed as the sacrifice for human guilt, "it is finished," and as if in sympathy with him the "veil of the temple rent in twain," then the reign of this Law terminated. But until that very moment had come, it could and did claim the reverent homage and exact obedience of every Jew. The system possessed all the mighty power of Law—nothing could set it aside. To regard or to treat any one of its provisions as an effete, or antiquated or useless thing, was in effect to charge the Divine Lawgiver with folly. Hence the strong language in which our Lord asserts its power, and its perpetuity until the fulness of the time had come. "*Heaven and earth may pass away, but one jot or tittle of the Law cannot fail.*"

These words announce a great truth; what is here affirmed of the Law in a distinctive sense is true of Law universally.

God, who called the universe into existence by the word of his power, governs it according to the counsel of his own will. The creatures animate and inanimate which make up the universe have been placed by Him under laws suited to their

several natures, and to the respective ends which they are intended to subserve. We know that this is so from our own observation of those parts of creation which come under our notice; and whether we reason from the properties of the creature or the perfections of the Creator, we are entitled to infer that the same thing holds good of the universe at large; in other words, wherever a creature exists there is a law that reaches and governs it.

Now the great truth which the text asserts is this, viz., that the laws which govern the universe are of infinitely more consequence than the universe itself,—that it is of unspeakably more importance that the former should be maintained than that the latter should exist,—that all the creatures of God, rational and irrational, should obey the laws to which He has been pleased to subject them, that they should work in harmony with these enactments, than that any or all of them should be kept in being. Glorious as are all the works of God, yet if you should take any one of them, consider it apart from all others, or view it as a mere isolated thing, you would perceive little if any excellence in it. It would indeed bespeak the creative energy of Him who made it, but you could not discover from it alone whether He is wise and good, or the reverse. It is only when you regard it in its relations to other things, and ascertain *why* it was made, and see its exact fitness to an end, that its real glory and greatness as a work of God shine forth. How beautiful to *us* is the spectacle of a field of waving corn? Its very

verdure is refreshing to the eye, because adapted to the structure of our organ of vision, while its yellow ripeness gives the promise of an abundant supply of the food we need. But—if we may imagine such a thing—transfer it to a world of creatures with a constitution totally unlike ours, its beauty would vanish because its fitness to an end would be lost. The glory of creation, then, arises mainly from the benign ends and perfect adaptations of its countless parts. And hence it is that the universe must be, as we have already said, “under law to God, and that the maintenance of the laws which govern it is vastly more important than the existence of the universe itself.

Let me illustrate this position by an example taken from the worlds above us. There are the heavenly bodies, which, under the dominion of law, revolve through their immense and seemingly complex circuits in perfect harmony and order, while with their mild radiance they relieve the darkness which, from night to night, gathers round us. Moving as they do with a majestic, a never-ceasing steadiness, the astronomer is enabled to measure their distances, their magnitudes, their orbits, to predict their places, and to calculate the reciprocal influence of planet upon planet; while the mariner, relying upon the lessons which astronomy has taught him, with an undoubting confidence that these starry guides never can mislead him, boldly pushes out his bark upon the trackless deep. In all this there is something *moral*. Though the objects themselves consist simply of unorganised

matter, yet the laws which govern them are most intimately connected with the convenience and the comfort of the dwellers upon earth, and thus the moral attributes of Him whose fiat gave being to the worlds that fill immensity,—His goodness, His wisdom, as well as His mightiness, are revealed. “The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament showeth his handy work; day unto day uttereth speech, night unto night showeth knowledge of Him.”

In the working of the stupendous mechanism of the heavens, all is orderly and harmonious so long as the law which governs its movements is obeyed. But suppose the reverse of this to be the case—that the law of gravitation was liable to incessant interruptions, that the forces which produce the beautiful steadiness we now observe, operated according to no fixed rule, either as to direction or degree, so that satellites should rush off into boundless space, or dash furiously against each other, and the planets, starting from their orbits, should wander at their will through immensity, or should be suddenly deluged with the fogs or the flames (as the case may be) of a comet, while this fair earth of ours, according as chance drove her near to or distant from the sun, were converted into a fiery furnace, or a globe of ice. We may try to fancy the state of things under such a reign of anarchy, though the boldest imagination must come far short of the reality. But the main question is, can we suppose that God would suffer, even for a moment, such a lawless universe to exist? No. He is a “God of

order," and it were far better to remand creation to its original nothingness, than to permit disorder and confusion thus to gain the mastery over it; better annihilate it at once, than not maintain its laws in full supremacy and force. "Heaven and earth may pass away, but one jot or tittle of the laws shall not fail."

Let us, if you please, take another illustration from *the earth on which we dwell*. Here, too, we observe a grand and complicated system of physical operations incessantly going on, of physical laws perpetually at work. There is the refreshing alternation of day and night, the succession of the seasons, the rising and falling tides; seeds planted at the right time, and in proper soil, give back their kind with an increase of "some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred fold;" fire burns, food nourishes, poisons kill. But it is needless to enumerate, for it would take volumes to describe the countless and varied processes ever going forward in the vast laboratory of nature. Now, each and all of these have their laws, and when we have learned, by observation or experiment, what the law is in any given case, we know how to act for the present not only, but what to do through all coming time. Nature, or rather the God of nature, governs by fixed laws, and we rely with an undoubting confidence on their unvarying uniformity. While the earth endures, there will be seed-time and harvest, summer and winter, day and night; men lie down at evening confident that if they wake in the morning at all, they will see the sun come forth from the

east, prepared like the strong man to run his daily circuit ; the farmer plants his seed, and then waits in hope of reaping an abundant harvest ; the mariner can tell the exact moment when the tides will be high or low at any given point. But suppose that the whole of this wonderful economy of nature were mysteriously disturbed—that her processes, apparently so complicated, yet never confused, were suddenly left to chance, and were subject to no laws, so that men sowed fields and reaped nothing, and then again where they planted nothing, they reaped abundance ; so that their food one day ministered nourishment, and the next deadly poison ; nor could they tell whether the water they drank would quench or increase their thirst ; that the darkness of night, the light of day, the heat of summer, the frost of winter lasted through periods so indefinite, and were liable to changes so great and sudden, that none could predict what a moment would bring forth ; I ask, again, could God permit this goodly earth of ours to fall into a condition so utterly lawless and so destructive to all the creatures that dwell upon its surface ? No indeed. Better a thousand fold that it were blotted from existence than that it should become such a prey of anarchy, such a plaything of chance, without law, without life—a world as dishonouring to its Maker, as it would be intolerable for man.

But let us come nearer home and take an illustration from *man* himself. In whatever aspect we view him, whether as a physical, social, intellectual, or moral being, we find him the subject of laws,—

of laws unchangeable as the eternal Lawgiver himself; and, harsh as the announcement may sound, it is nevertheless true that not to maintain these laws would be a far greater evil than the destruction of the human race; better that men should perish than that these laws should be set aside. Alas! the ruin of human beings is not merely a contingent necessity, but a perpetually recurring fact. Myriads upon myriads of our race have already perished in consequence of violating those unchanging laws which God has enacted for their government. Every day beholds thousands perishing—destroyed in body, or in soul, or both, for time and for eternity. Let us see how the case stands with us. Our bodies “are under law to God;” they are subject to laws suited to the materials of which they are constructed, and to the purposes they are intended to subserve in the economy of life. They need food for their sustenance and growth, shelter from the inclemencies of the seasons, medicine when affected by disease. We may not trifle with any one of these laws, to which He who “formed us of clay and made us men,” hath subjected our physical nature. If we do, it is at our peril; for, although these laws are not enforced by precisely the same penalty, yet we should ever remember that each has a penalty of its own; and whether it be more or less severe, we must endure the punishment if we venture to violate the law. Let the motive which prompts a man to disregard the laws of health, or the manner in which the thing is done, be what it may, let him, for ex-

ample, turn night into day, whether he be a student, whose intense zeal for knowledge keeps him at his books, when he should be in his bed, or a miserable sensualist, who gives his midnight hours to revelry and banqueting, the inevitable result to him will be a ruined constitution. Be assured that if you will persist in drinking or in eating that which disorders your stomach, or shatters your nerves, you must pay the penalty which the law appoints to all who thus act. God will not modify the order He has established so as to suit the convenience of your depraved appetites; He will not change His laws to accommodate either the unwise student, or the miserable sensualist. "Heaven and earth shall pass, but not one jot or tittle of His law."

So it is with men considered as *social* beings. There are laws of social life ordained of God, and though we cannot always trace their operation so distinctly as we can the working of those which govern the material creation, we may still be certain that the former are just as uniform and immutable as the latter. We only need to open our eyes and look at what is going on around us, to be convinced of this truth. Economy, diligence, prudence, truthfulness, unswerving probity, on the one hand, and extravagance, self-indulgence, falsehood, deceit, trickery, on the other, do not yield their respective fruits at random, or by chance. No. There is a law which renders these results invariable. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, nor a corrupt tree good fruit." What is the common proverb, "honesty is the best policy," but just the embodiment,

in words, of the conviction forced into the general mind, (if I may use the term,) by events of which men are daily the spectators or the subjects, "that verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth," and that within certain limits, even in this world, "He renders to every man according to his works." Men who oppress and defraud others sometimes grow rich, "panting after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor;" they may scrape together a great heap of gold, but wealth, in its highest and noblest sense, they neither do nor can possess. The trickster, the time-server, the two-faced flatterer, may secure the position or the office on which his heart is set, but real honour, and lasting power, he never wins. God's law forbids it. And the experience of all ages embodied in the proverbs of all nations, as well as the Word of Eternal Truth, proves that in the long run such men always reap their proper reward, and go at last to their own place. If the temporal penalty they have incurred does not invariably come down upon the offender's own head, it is an heir-loom for those who come after them; it descends as an entailed curse to their children. If then, my hearers, you are spared to enter the arena of public social life, remember that there are certain laws, immutable as their Author, by which you will be bound, while taking your part in those scenes in which you hope to share; and that it is only in the way of unswerving obedience to them, that any of you can expect to gain, what I am sure all of you desire, wealth, influence, comfort, the respect, the confidence, the admiring gratitude of

your fellow-men, honour in life, and a grave watered by the tears of the good. These are objects which cannot fail to awaken the warm aspirations of every generous soul; multitudes are perpetually and eagerly asking how can we obtain them, but though God has furnished a clear and certain answer to their inquiry, few succeed, because unwilling to pay the price which He demands, to comply with the conditions He has imposed, to obey the laws He has enacted.

Thus far we have viewed the teaching of our text mainly as it bears upon men's present interests and their earthly life. It contains lessons of still higher moment. We know that this world is the prelude of another, and even here below, we have, in the relation of youth to age, a striking image of the relation which subsists between this world and the next, between our present life and the everlasting life to come. Youth is the season of preparation for mature manhood, and this circumstance, which might well impart a sober seriousness even to hopeful and joyous childhood, never fails to fill the heart of the thoughtful parent with profound anxiety. Ordinarily what the youth is, is the man; and hence that exhortation and promise of Holy Writ—"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." There are, no doubt, occasional exceptions to the rule, for He whose grace alone can renovate any soul, is a Sovereign, working all things according to the counsel of His own will; He can change the lion into the lamb, and at any period of life can convert the

most abandoned of sinners into the noblest of saints, "raising him from the dunghill to a seat among the princes of his people." Still universal experience proves that the law before stated, and implied in the Scripture already quoted, holds good—that "the child is the father of the man;" that the impressions we receive during our early years are most enduring, and give shape and complexion to our future character. And hence, even a Pagan satirist could utter those noble lines, which might well be engraven on the memory of the Christian parent—

*Maxima debetur puero reverentia. Si quid
Turpe paras, nec tu pueri contempseris annos,
Sed peccaturo obstat tibi filius infans.*

He who wastes the period which God has allotted to make a man of him—a period short indeed, as it consists of only a few years, but sufficient for the purpose if rightly improved—wastes what he never can replace. He may deeply regret his folly—he certainly will regret, whether he dies in early manhood or lives to old age; he may weep bitter tears, but, like Esau, he shall "find no place for repentance;" he may labour hard, rising early and eating the bread of carefulness, in order to make up for lost time, but his success, at the best, will be only partial; he has madly thrown away jewels of priceless value, and now their entire recovery is impossible.

Such is the law of our present earthly existence, and in it we see shadowed forth the law of our future and eternal life. Now is the time to prepare

for eternity, and we are urged by every kind of motive that may be supposed to tell upon creatures such as we are, by motives the most animating and alarming, to engage in the work on which hang everlasting things. The season allowed to us for this momentous end, "the day of salvation," is indeed very brief, *so* brief as to be fitly compared to "a hand breadth"—"a watch in the night,"—it is nevertheless amply sufficient for the purpose of making "our calling and election sure." All the means requisite to success have been freely provided and are placed within our reach by Him who commands us to "work out our salvation." The law of life, in the most comprehensive sense of the term, to which man was subjected, when God made him "of the dust of the ground," and stamped upon him His own holy image, has been broken by every child of Adam times without number, and now its awful voice may be heard proclaiming, "cursed is every one who continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them"—"death is the wages of sin"—perish the sinner, perish the whole guilty race of man, rather than that the law they have violated, a law so holy, just, and good, should be dishonoured or annulled. Sooner shall heaven and earth pass away than one jot or tittle of it be changed. But, blessed be God, there is another and still louder voice, its tones sweeter than the sweetest melodies of angels, echoing and re-echoing perpetually even in this world into which sin entered and where death reigns, publishing to all nations, yea offering to every creature, eternal

life as the free gift of God. It is the voice of Him, who though the "brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of his person," came down from heaven, appeared on earth in the likeness of sinful flesh, was made under the law, that he might "magnify it and make it honourable" by his own perfect obedience, and by the shedding of his own precious blood. Now, the preparation which we are required to make, consists in the exercise "of repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ." The first and great command of the Gospel is—"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."—"He bore our sins in His own body."—"He died the just for the unjust." The curse which the law denounces against all who break it, He has endured in our room. This atoning work of Jesus in the place of the sinner forms the grand theme of revelation, and hence the very Gospel which unfolds the infinitude of God's love and mercy, at the same time furnishes the universe with a proof the most convincing and appalling, that "He can by no means clear the guilty," in the way of arbitrarily setting aside, or of modifying in any manner the demands of His own righteous law. The very Gospel, which brings life and immortality to light, emphatically proclaims that sin and suffering are conjoined by a law immutable as the eternal throne. My dear hearer, it is surely needless for me to bring arguments to substantiate the charge that you are a sinner against God. Your own conscience confesses it, "your own heart condemns" you. Well,

this word of Him who cannot lie tells you, in terms too plain to be misunderstood, that perish you must, forever, unless saved through the righteousness and atonement of the Son of God. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but one jot or tittle of the law cannot fail."

Let me, in conclusion, add as a word of warning, that the instrument with which the devil most successfully assails the young and the old, is scepticism in regard to the momentous truth taught in the text. This is his grand temptation and was the weapon with which he gained his dismal triumph over the common mother of our race. "Why not eat of the tree of knowledge," he asked, "that stands in the midst of the garden—its form so beautiful to the sight, its fruit so sweet to the taste?" "I am under a law," replied Eve, "that forbids me to touch it, and it is enforced by the awful penalty of death." "But surely," rejoined the tempter, "you must have misapprehended the meaning of your Maker; it is not to be supposed that He will ever inflict upon you a punishment so dreadful for an offence so trifling." Alas! "She took, she ate, earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat sighing, gave signs of woe that all was lost."

Precisely so does the same "father of lies" deceive the youth with reference to the connection that subsists between the spring tide and the summer and autumn of our present life. He who is old enough to understand any thing, however inconsiderate of the personal bearing of the truth,

knows perfectly well that he must sow the seed if he would reap the harvest. Reason teaches him the lesson; the revolving seasons ever and anon remind him of it; while the blessed Bible, as often as he reads or listens to it, proclaims it with the majesty and earnestness of a messenger from heaven, yet he is perpetually forgetting it, and living as if the present had not the slightest influence upon the future. I will venture to aver that, among the youth now before me, hardly one could be found who at its entrance into college did not firmly resolve to win for himself the highest honours of the institution; who as he for the first time came in sight of these academic halls did not feel the stirrings of ambition, and whisper, at least to his own heart, the purpose to gain a standing in the highest ranks of scholarship. For a while the resolution tells with excellent effect upon the habits of the student; but ere long something occurs to discourage or divert him from his aim. He yields to the temptation; he loses a little ground; unless he be a young man of rare energy and resolute will he goes more and more behind, though still unwilling perhaps to abandon his early and fond hope. "It is a long time yet before I reach the end of the course," he may say to himself, "something may yet turn up and enable me to make good what I have lost." He knows not, and possibly never learns until it be too late, that he is listening to a syren voice which has lured myriads to ruin, or lulled them into the sleep of death. What, let me ask, would be the use of college life, what the

benefit of college culture, if the habitually indolent and the dissipated, by the spasmodic efforts of a few days or weeks, could reach the same lofty position for which the studious and the good have toiled for years? if, in a word, there was no law that connected success with diligence, thorough scholarship with painstaking study, the complete command of one's powers with elaborate culture, and moral influence with well tried virtue!

And thus it is that Satan misleads and ruins the old and the young for eternity as well as for time. There is a law demanding their obedience; a commandment which "is exceeding broad," reaching to the "thoughts and intents of the heart," as well as the words and actions of the outward man, and regulating all the manifold relations of life. It is enforced by the most fearful penalty, for it declares that the wages of sin is death. Eternal life is suspended upon a full compliance with its demands. And yet there are multitudes who, though they cannot but know from the teachings of God's word, and the working of their own consciences, that they are "condemned already," and are every moment liable to fall into the hands of the living and sin-avenging God, allow themselves to be beguiled into the belief that they shall somehow escape. Eternity, they imagine, is a great way off; there is a long future before them, and though they live in sin, something may turn up to save them from hell. Thus a deceived heart leads them astray, inducing them to act as if they had made a covenant with death; and thus they go on through

life, never dreaming that they are treasuring up unto themselves wrath against the day of judgment, because they will not listen to the warning voice which is perpetually sounding in their ears, "Heaven and earth may pass away, but one jot or tittle of the law shall not fail."