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THE UNPARDONABLE SIN.*

BY REV. GIVENS B. STRICKLER, D. D., LL. D.
Union Theological Seminary.

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.

DESPISE NOT THE CHASTENING OF THE LORD.

BY REV. THOMAS CARY JOHNSON, D. D., LL. D.
Union Theological Seminary.

“My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord.”

These words, appropriated from the Proverbs, were addressed by the writer of the letter before us to the people of a far-off land, a remote age and a persecuting era. Around them persisted the influences of an effete heathen civilization. In their hearts still throbbed a love for the venerable, the Divinely-given but now superceded and no longer significant forms of the Mosaic dispensation. Against them, because of their love for Christ, were arrayed the heathen, with contemptuous hate, and the Jews with hostile malignity. Their sufferings, already heavy, were like to be heavier. Persecutions *unto blood and death* were close before them.

Our circumstances are very different from theirs. Ours is another clime and another country. If the present persecutions of a communion which would still bear the name of Cumberland Presbyterian, and similar persecutions during and after the time of the war between the sections, of one party of Christians by another party of Christians in collusion with civil power, suggest the earlier and the dark ages of Church history, we are justified, nevertheless, in asserting that we were born amidst prepossessions in favor of Christianity and of Christian liberty. In our day, and in our country, the world does not attack the Church with fagot, Roman cross and savage beasts. Persecutions unto blood are not likely to be the portion of any of us as long as we remain in our homeland, no matter how valiant Christians we may be.

Nevertheless, the text is a fitting one for our study. Had these words been addressed to us in the first instance, they had not been more applicable. Apart from the lighter persecutions to which Christians among us are liable, they suffer in as dire

a manner as though in martyrdom. Their sufferings are as truly chastenings as were those of the Hebrew Christians, to whom this epistle was addressed. Nay; these ancient Hebrew Christians, in the teeth of persecutions, suffered less of chastisement therefrom, than some godly parents amongst them, or amongst us, have endured over a son who has gone to the bad, or a daughter walking in the way of sin—suffered less than the high and pure amongst them, or amongst us, have suffered from the promulgation of a foul slander against their fair names. Every Christian of any age suffers chastisement. Hence, these words fit us as though they had been addressed to us in the first instance. It is to be noted, too, that, while the writer of our epistle has particularly in mind sufferings from persecutions, he used universal language. Rather, in appropriating this language from the Proverbs, he appropriated a universal statement; and with it comforted Christians just then receiving a particular form of chastisement; accordingly, we may take *in all its breadth*, this inspired teaching: “*My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord.*”

We are here taught that afflictions brought upon the people of God are not to be despised, that is, that they are not to be made light of, or esteemed to be of little account—not to be considered as things to be borne with manly hardihood without reference to God’s purpose to usward in them; but that they are to be regarded honestly, according to their nature and degree, and used as a source and means of good. Even persecutions unto blood and death were to be regarded as profitable unto those who bore them for Christ’s sake.

Despise not thou the “chastening.”

Let us remark the word by which the writer names these afflictions of the people of God. He uses the word *Παιδεία*. *Παις* means child. *Παιδεύω* means to rear, train or educate a child. *Παιδεία* is the word for instruction, training, consisting of teaching, admonition, reward and correction by the rod. Our text calls the suffering of the Christians *Παιδεία*. It regards sufferings as a part of the means which God uses to bring his people up to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. The chastening of the Lord is a part of his training of us. The Apostle’s exhortation is:

My son, Despise not thou the Lord’s chastening as means of

training. The reasons why we should not despise the Lord's chastening are of the strongest:

I. *This Chastening springs from God's parental love for his children.*

This is the point which the Apostle makes in the next verse: "For whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." God brings these sufferings on his erring children out of love for "them." He brings them as remedies against the evils with which the child's moral and spiritual nature is affected. He gives them for the moral and spiritual reformation and growth of the child. He is actuated therein by feelings analogous to those of the loving yet wise earthly parent. The earthly parent chastises his child most severely often times out of the deepest and wisest love. He does not punish him as a judge. He chastises his son on occasion of the son's sinning to build up a better character.

The sufferings of Christians, therefore, though they look materially just like the sufferings of those who are not the friends but the enemies of Christ, are to be set as wide apart from them as sun-set is from sun-rise. The intention of God in inflicting them in the two cases is entirely different. In the one case he brings sufferings on the sinner primarily as a punishment for his sin; in the other case, he brings them on out of love to his erring child. The unregenerate stands before God as a criminal before a just and sovereign legislator and judge. The sufferings which he endurs are the penalties of a broken law. God inflicts them, not out love to him, but from love to justice; not to improve in a moral and spiritual way the unregenerate, but to put upon him his iniquity. When the earthly judge pronounces sentence against a criminal, he does not do so, primarily, that the sentence may operate for the renovation of the wayward disposition of the sinner; what he thinks to do is to mete out justice according to the demands of righteous law.

Some hearer may object at this point, that "all men are God's sons; and that he chastens rather than punishes all—treats them all as a father his children, therefore." You may say: "In Acts xvii. 28, we are all said to be the offspring of God. In Malachi xxv. 10, the question is asked: Have we not all one father? And does not our Lord teach the fatherhood of God, as in Matthew vii. 11: How much more shall your Father which

is in heaven give good gifts unto them that ask him?" The answer is that the term father is used in the Scriptures in a more general and in a more definite sense. There is predicated of God a fatherhood of man founded on His work of creation and providence. This has been called the providential fatherhood of God. In Mal. ii. 10, the question: "Have we not all one father?" is followed by "Hath not our God created us?" The latter question explains the former. "Creation," as Wm. G. T. Shedd declares, "is a kind of paternity." (p. 419 of Vol. II., Theol.) In Job xvii. 28, 29, this kind of paternity is extended to the inanimate creation. Hence God interrogated Job as follows: "Hath the rain a father? Or who hath begotten the drops of the dew? Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?" In Matt. vii. 11. our Lord explains God's fatherhood by his readiness to bestow good things in providence. It is a well-known fact that "this association of paternity with creation and providence is found also in secular literature. Plato says (*Timaeus ix.*) that 'to discover the creator and father of this universe is indeed difficult.' Horace (*Carminum i. 12*) speaks of the father of all, who governs the affairs of men and gods.' Creation, together with providence and government, which are necessarily associated with creation, is a solid basis for this kind of paternity." (Shedd: *Theol. Vol. II. p. 420.*)

This, however, is but an inferior kind of sonship. God, as the universal father, may fill a man's mouth with good things all his days, and yet punish him for his sins; aye, punish him eternally for them. In this sense Dives was the son of God as much as Lazarus or Abraham. He probably thought he was much more God's son than the poor beggar Lazarus that lay at his gate, full of sores and ministered to by the dogs alone. Yet he was punished with sickness, with death and with the torments of the damned in hell.

There is a much higher sort of sonship to God, taught in the Scriptures, than this. It is the sonship of redemption, the sonship of adoption. Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians: "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ" (iii. 25); and again, "God sent forth his son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that are under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." (iv. 4, 5). This is that higher

and special sonship. It is to such sons, while they yet remain more or less sinful, that God's inflictions are not penalties. It is to such, and to such only, that sufferings are not penal. It is to such only that *sufferings* are chastenings, not the results of judicial wrath, but of parental love. These can not suffer in the way of penalty, because Christ has borne the penalty in the sinner's stead. There is no need of that penalty's being twice borne. Justice does not require it.

No; suffering, to the worlding, is the evidence of God's wrath, intended for the worlding's punishment; but the same sort of suffering upon the true believer still struggling with the remains of sin, is not a punishment, but a chastisement, and evidence of God's love. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."

Old John Owen says that we are taught here that God scourgeth especially him whom he receives to be his son in the completest degree, that the more God loves any child of his, the more he scourgeth him. This is, perhaps, reading somewhat into the text.

More legitimate was the view of Dr. B. M. Palmer, who held that he who was without afflictions lacked somewhat of full proof that he was God's child. At one time in his life he is said to have seriously doubted whether he was a child of God. He was so happy in his domestic relations. He was *so happy* in his charge, enjoying vast opportunities of exerting influence and followed by the affectionate and huge admiration of his flock and his community. Things went so well with him that he was disturbed. He wondered whether he was a child of God. But the hand of God began to fall upon him in blows. He lost child after child. Meanwhile he had been driven by war from his pastorate and suffered with the people of his beloved land. Thenceforward, he never doubted, it is said that he was one of God's own. He felt with Eliphaz: "Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth. Therefore, despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty." "For he maketh sore and bindeth up; he woundeth and his hands make whole."

That we are not to despise the chastening of the Lord, we argue in the second place, from the fact that:

II. *Testimony abounds that afflictions, properly received, are sanctifying in their tendency.*

The Psalmist rejoices, saying: "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest out of thy law," (xciv. 12, 13). He says, again, "Before I was afflicted I went astray. But now have I kept thy word" (cxix. 67). And again, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes" (cxix. 71). Such has been the common experience of the saints of God. They have never really learned God's statutes until affliction has come upon them; and this on several accounts.

They were so taken up with secular matters and so well contented with the returns of secular pursuits, that they cared not to ponder God's will, their relations to him and consequent duties. But on occasion of afflictions the world has lost somewhat of its relative importance, and the things of life eternal have loomed larger in the field of vision. Moreover, afflictions open the *heart* to the understanding of God's Word. A man's comprehension of the Divine Word depends, in part, on the experiences he has had. To the young and ardent the saying: "Vanity of vanity! All is vanity" may seem like the ugliest pessimism. To the man full of years and trials there may appear naught in the saying save the most exact truth. He may feel that every merely worldly pursuit results in emptiness. That God should seem to the Psalmist a "rock in a weary land" may appear hardly intelligible to the youthful worldling, or even to the inexperienced Christian; but he who has been buffeted and worn by chastisements on account of his sins, wearied and tempest-tossed by conflicts external and internal, will have in his own experience that which will expound to him these words of God's servant of old.

Isaiah concurs with the Psalmist in estimating the value of afflictions, saying: "For when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness. Lord, in trouble, have they visited thee. They poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them." (Isa. xxvi. 9, 16). We are taught in Hebrews xii. 11, that affliction, chastisement, yieldeth the peaceable fruits of righteousness. This is a natural result of a better experimental knowledge of God's law which afflictions occasions our acquiring. Chastisement is the purging of the branch by which it is fitted to bring forth fruit. It is the pruning by which excrescences are lopped off. Chastisement helps the true Christian. It can be said of more than King Manasseh: "And

when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers." And God could say to his people of our day as well as to his "people of old": "Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."

Some sitting under the sound of my voice may bear little fruit, from lack of pruning. Some may have little understanding of God's Word, from lack of chastisement. Martin Luther once said: "I never knew the meaning of God's word until I was afflicted."

In view of these testimonies as to the value of chastening as a means of sanctification, the exhortation of our text is pertinent: "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord."

That we are not to despise the Lord's chastening, we argue in the third place, because:

III. *Such means is almost necessary in order to the sanctification of a sinful child of God.*

The old nature still lives in the earth-dwelling child of God. He finds that when he would do good, evil is present with him. The love of the world is not dead, perhaps, in any living Christian. In some Christians, thank God for the fact, the love of the world is not strong. In others it is so strong as to make the observers of their lives doubt as to whether love to God is the controlling principle in those lives or not. Now, the afflictions which come to man through the loss of worldly wealth, are most efficient means of lessening his trust in riches. Perhaps, such a blow, straight at Mammon, who would, if let alone, soon be God's successful rival for the affections of some of his saints, is the necessary means, if God will use means at all, of saving such saints' allegiance to himself. Perhaps, few of God's saints could be freed from an anti-Godward pride of person, of individuality, or of possession, so readily as by a blow affecting the objects in which we take this ungodly pride. Pride is the resident, be it remembered, of bosoms too numerous to be counted. Pride, sometimes, in vulgarity, pride in folly, pride in wickedness, pride in physical strength and agility, pride in supposed personal beauty, pride in mental powers, pride in religiousness, pride in some possession or fact, pride of an unjustifiable sort, about something or other, is found in almost every man. Man is never too high for pride. Man is never too low for pride.

Man, Jesus excepted, has never been too good for pride. Who of you compares not yourself with fellows below yourself; and does not, after the fashion of the Pharisee, practically thank God that you are not as other men are? Now, for all this, or for any form of it, what is so fitted to bring us to our senses as a pertinent affliction? The small-pox scars the beautiful complexion. The owner ceases to give to the face the worship which was due to God:

And if, instead of impinging immediately on our own persons, the calamity falls on one of ours, on parents, sisters, brothers, children; you who have had experience, does it not raise your thoughts to God, who has given you the loved one now stricken? Is it not fitted to call the sinner away from his love of the world, and his love of self, as hardly any other instrumentality is? In fact, we see not how an erring child of God would progress into sanctification without the instruction of chastisement.

This method of sanctification could not be employed, indeed, in the case of sinless creatures. Suffering is the consequence of sin. God could not inflict it upon those who had never in any wise merited penalty. It would be unjust. But for such a creature as regenerated man—a being in whom good and bad principles do work up to the hour of death—it seems the only adequate means for the mortification of the principles of evil and the cultivation of the principles of good. It is the plow and hoe of affliction that tear out the weeds from our minds and hearts and allow the good to grow. It is the mattock of chastisement with which the God of all grace uproots the thorns and tares.

Chastisement being such a necessary means of sanctification, the exhortation is certainly in order: "My son, despise not thou the chastisement of the Lord."

That the exhortation of the text should be heeded, we argue, in the fourth place, from the fact that:

IV. Chastisements are *means used by God to prepare his servants for more efficient services.*

When Sir Humphry Davy was a mere boy, his father died and left his estate in disorder and ruin, so that the mother had to become a milliner and the son an apprentice to an apothecary. The boy became serious, and, when his day's work in the shop was over, was found engaged in studies which were the founda-

tions of his future greatness as a scientist and discoverer in chemical research. Just so, adversity often makes a Christian, who would otherwise be a weakling, a strong and helpful Christian.

But for the persecutions by the later Stuarts on the English throne, and by Jeffries, and the Bedford Jail, John Bunyan would perhaps never have been able to give the world his immortal allegories. The persecution which shut him in, afflicting as it was, gave him leisure to read, to reflect and to exercise the high qualities, which a more active life would probably never have allowed him to discover and develop.

But for John Milton's *blindness* and *other* afflictions, he, in like manner, never would have been able to write the *Paradise Lost*; even as another in blindness hath written of himself:

"Nor think it strange, ye kindly ministers (angels),
If to these sightless balls, seeking in vain
The sunlight beam, some slender ray from heaven,
Unseen before amid the garish light,
Shall pierce, in mercy sent, or if the soul,
Left blank of images by sense impressed,
Shall see by faith and vision spiritual
The heavenly city and the golden streets,
Where ye your worship pay."

It was a grievous affliction to Martin Luther to be shut up in the Castle of the Wartburg, after the Diet of Worms. But he had not long been in that confinement, when he was moved to begin the translation of the Scriptures into his masterful and matchless German version. He was thus set agoing on one of the greatest of all his services—indeinitely more important than all the preaching he could have done in the same length of time. For there is no measuring the good to the German people of Luther's version.

Moses was prepared by the long years of afflicting exile, as well as by his early years of prosperity in Egypt, for his great mission as the deliverer of Israel from bondage, and leader through its long wanderings in the wilderness.

Joseph's afflictive treatment by his brethren, who would have killed him, his sale into slavery, the seeming calamity which befell him in the house of Potiphar, his imprisonment, were but a portion of the means used to put him into the position and give

him the character needed in that position wherein he could give the noblest service to God and the world.

It is a significant fact, that during the centuries of imperial persecutions, when at times it looked to some as if Christianity would soon be annihilated, the Church was not only not destroyed, but increased with marvelous rapidity. Those persecutions really enabled the Church to do more efficient work as a witness-bearer, so that it came to be said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

It is significant again, that our own beloved communion manifested a liberality and energy of consecrated effort, after going through our long, bitter and desolating war between the sections, such as her earlier records never showed. Yes, naked, peeled, down-trodden and oppressed, in deep affliction, her poverty abounded unto the riches of liberality.

It thus appears that chastisement often increases power for service in those chastised. It, perhaps, always does this, even though the chastisement end with death.

A rarely endowed rationalist, known widely in all civilized countries, recently passed the portals of death. In the hours of his last illness, calling a few of his friends about his bed, he asked them to pray with him; and when each of them had prayed, he also offered a prayer; and among the sentences of that prayer was this: "And may there be for me a life beyond this life, and in that life may there be works to do, tasks to accomplish." The prayer was thoroughly characteristic of the man. He rioted in work, in accomplishing tasks. But there is a woe-ful pathos in the prayer: May there be a life for me beyond this life, and in that life may there be work to do. Did this tremendously energetic man doubt that there is a life beyond this life, and a life to be filled with joy-bringing work? There is no room for doubt, there is a life beyond death, and in that life God's servants shall serve him. They shall do works for him. And these chastisements—they are a part of God's means of fitting us for this high service in the provinces of glory.

In representing to us the condition of God's redeemed in the life beyond this life, inspired teachers sometimes represent them as constituting Christ's body, he being the head, they being severally members. They thus teach that the heavenly society is to be perfectly organized, each member of it living, active, working,

making his own contribution to the welfare of the whole body. Since the members can not all have the same functions in the service of the whole, they can not but need special fitting each for his work. Must we not think, then, that, in many of our afflictions—peculiar afflictions—God is fitting us for our peculiar work, or works, our life, in the world where God's servants shall everlastingly and gloriously serve him?

Wherefore, shall we not say again, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord."

Another reason for heeding the admonition of our text is found in the fact that:

V. *Chastisements occasion the glorification of God.*

They speak to us of an absolute sovereign, on whom we are absolutely dependent. They speak to us of the absolute holiness of that sovereign. They tell us that amongst all the saints of God on earth, not one is sufficiently free from taint to escape suffering. God *will* express his displeasure against all sin. A sainted couple, much honored in our communion, lost four daughters by consumption. As the youngest of these approached the death passage, the parents prayed that the passing might be easy. The child was so sweet, gentle and Christlike in their eyes, that they felt that death to her should be easy. But death sprang upon their darling and *choked* the life out of its victim. She was literally strangled and smothered to death. The agony to the parents was indescribable; but after a little they saw God's holiness in a new light, and sin in a new light, and by consequence salvation in a new light, and grace in a new light. God came very near to them. He became more precious than ever before.

In a thousand other ways, this glorification of God, through the afflictions of his children, might be illustrated. The passage of time forbids our giving other illustrations now. Wherefore, since God is thus glorified, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord."

By way of further application, let us remark that, *if chastisements are a blessing, then the manner in which we receive them is of the utmost importance.*

A thing good in itself, or fitted to do us good, may be deprived of much of its power for good, or even turned into a curse by our way of receiving it.

(1) Some imagine that all suffering should be borne without wincing, without a sigh, with stoical fortitude. A distinction must be made here: Chastisements are from the hand of God. In some cases they are, at the same time, the immediate results of the enmity, the malice, or at least the inconsiderateness of man. A malignant slanderer perpetrates upon you a calumny. God chastises you. But the wicked calumny is the immediate result of the slanderer's action. Now, you may bear yourself with fortitude unshaken to your back-biter, you should show that you are in no wise to be deterred from the path of duty by him. But you should break up in the presence of God, should acknowledge the ill, the chastisement from his hand at its full and real value. If you underrate it, you can not derive the good from it which it is fitted to bring you.

The Israelites might have stood justly, with all dignity, in the presence of the Babylonish kings, who had carried them into captivity. Those despots had wronged them. They had no right to the people, the princes, the land of Judah, nor to the vessels of their holy house. But when then Israelites thought of their affliction as chastisement from the hand of the Lord, they did well to hang their harps on the willows beside the rivers of Babylon and sing no more. They did right to acknowledge their calamity in all its greatness; for only thus could they recognize the extreme displeasure of the Lord. Persons in affliction are often in danger of leaving God out of them. They treat them as if they were to be charged to chance, mistake or folly, or wholly to the meanness or weakness of ourselves or others. We are to see the hand of God in them, and treat them according to their worth.

(2) My friends, under afflictions, how are you behaving about them? Are you trying to make of them a true *Haudeia* to you?

Are you trying to make of them an interpreter of God's word to you? Are you trying to make of them a means of growth in grace. Do you, like Hezekiah, turn your face to the wall and cry unto the God who heareth? Do you, like Paul, carry your thorn in the flesh to the Saviour? Do you try to learn its uses to you from the Great Teacher. It is intended for your instruction. Do you try to profit by it?

(3) Or, have you failed to regard your afflictions as chastisements? Are you like an idle school boy that wastes his oppor-

tunities for mental advancement? If so, are you not infinitely more foolish than he? You are trifling with the blessings of the Lord. To Israel of old, the Lord said, by the mouth of Amos (iv. 12): "Therefore, thus will I do unto thee, O Israel; and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel," where the implication is that, if thou dost not profit by this chastisement, thou hast cause to fear that at the judgment day thou shalt be found wanting.

(4) Chastisements are grievous to be borne, as the Apostle himself teaches. "All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous, but grievous." But so are many nauseous medicines, which we take at a physician's bidding. When the Great Physician of souls comes to his own with these chastisements, shall we not recognize at once our moral sickness and our need of just the curatives offered. The Lord help us so to do.