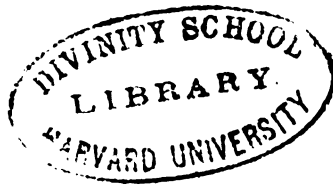


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THE
PULPIT TREASURY.
AN EVANGELICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. II.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY, 1885.

NO. 10.

→*SERMONS*←

THE DIGNITY INHERENT IN MAN'S NATURE.

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How much then is a man better than a sheep!—MATTHEW xii., 12.

NOT a question, although our version marks it so. Exclamation rather. The context requires that, and it is so punctuated in the New Revision.

This feature of the verse needs notice. These are the Lord's words, and exclamation is rare with Him in the extreme. The reason is not far to seek. Our exclamations indicate that we are ourselves overwhelmed with the thing we are attempting to tell, which as a rule the Lord is not. It is one of the tokens of His divineness that He can say great things without Himself becoming perturbed, or His sentences made nervous. We are soon heated when we attempt to tell a great matter, and our phrases creak under the weight we lay upon them. We are less than the load we lift and so are bent under it. Not so the Lord, usually. Which makes it all the more to be remarked that in our verse His mind does seem to be struggling with its own thoughts, and His words restive under the tax put upon them. All of which throws a side-light on the far-reaching fact involved, and only adds more of embarrassment to us in our attempts to approach to it.

"How much then is a man better than a sheep!" Our reading of this exclamation is not appreciative till we realize that in it the Son of Man was not propounding a theory but uncovering an experience. He is hinting here

at what He knew. It is man that is speaking. "He knew what was in man"—was conscious of Himself; we are not. I do not know what we should say if we could understand all that it means to be man. Almost every one probably has times when he stands in awe of himself. Christ utters no word anywhere that cheapens man. He exhorts to humility, but humility is a symptom of dignity—its aroma. The sheep does not kneel. The Lord knelt. Christ prayed—felt upon Him the pressure of the overshadowing. Humility is greatness seen along its nether edge. I am not afraid to eulogize man. Conceit is one thing; sense of worth a distinct thing. The two take cognizance of different matters. My conceit occupies itself with what I *have* that is *different* from others; my sense of worth occupies itself with what I *am* *common* with others. Conceit therefore separates men, while just sense of worth only draws them more closely together. Hence where there is the largest self-respect there will be always the largest and gentlest respect for other people. Once in a while we are a surprise to ourselves; are stirred times by what we seem to get upon the track of when we take deep, quiet counsel with our own hearts. We appear to be upon the edge of something. Every soul has what it calls its grand moments. A sort of refraction appears for an instant to throw above our horizon lights that are not yet risen. The deeper our descent the higher our rise. Here, as in astronomy, "up" and "down" are more a difference of standpoint than of fact. "Commune with your own heart and be still," said David. Thorough entrance into ourselves is at the same time a reverent drawing nigh unto God. The heart is the primitive temple, the first holy of holies. Coming to himself was the prodigal's first step toward coming to his father. At the bottom of the heart man and God meet and mingle. Consciousness of self, deepened and prolonged, slips into consciousness of God as naturally as dawn ripens into day. It was when the storm and the earthquake were by, and Elijah's face was wrapped in his mantle and his heart closeted in still conference with itself that the Lord's voice became evident to him saying, "What doest thou here, Elijah? That one consciousness holds both God and man in a single commingled revelation is a long chapter in the lesson of man's meaning and dignity that you may better be left to think out in detail for yourselves.

We shall suffer more from laying upon ourselves too low an estimate than one that is too high, if indeed overestimation be possible. Man is as much a mystery as God is. Theology and psychology are sisters. To think meanly of ourselves is a long step towards becoming mean. Crushing a man's self-respect is pretty nearly the same thing as crushing the man. I know, the Pharisee is the example of the publican, self-condemnatory, as was meet; smiting upon his breast; would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Yes, only we want to take it for *all* that it means. To me it is one of the most superb exhibits of human magnificence on record. A miserable sinner, and yet addressing God Almighty in the imperative mood. Sunken in crime of some kind and still with such a sense of worth as emboldened him to pray, and as gave him courage to expect that

God still esteemed him enough to notice his prayer, attend to it and give him what he asked. So worthless that he needed to pray; so precious that it was of some use to pray. Men's estimate of God will maintain a certain proportion with their estimate of themselves. Even shadows keep a certain ratio with the objects that cast them. Christianity gives us a deepened sense of human worth, and through that deepened sense of human worth we reach a higher sense of God's worth, and theology is bound to expand along the brightening lines of the human self-consciousness; and the Gospel and humanity play backward and forward upon one another, like the sun which brightens the eye so that it can see the sun; like the stars which wake up the eye so that it can find more of the stars.

Even sin too has about it something that in this matter is pleasantly suggestive. It is better to be a man that sins than a sheep that can't. A man's moral corruption is index of the native moral grandeur of the man; just as the wealth of weeds in a field equally with the wealth of wheat in the same field measures the potency and richness of the soil. The strength of the spring can be calculated as well by the distance which the pendulum swings to the left of the perpendicular as by the distance of its swing to the right. There is the same degree of sinfulness in a sin as there is of personal worth in the man that commits it. Here too the shadow keeps a ratio with the object that casts it, and the blackness of the shadow will vary with the brightness of the sunshine that gets excluded. A man can be only as devilish actually as he is saintly potentially. We should *infer* that Satan was *created* to be an angel of light even if we had not been told it. Only the organic can putrefy, but the inorganic. Tarnish is correlative only with lustre, and stain with whiteness. Hence all that Scripture so emphatically says of man's sinfulness is at the same time a tacit tribute to his native worth; and we can appreciate the import of a saving Gospel only in the degree in which we first appreciate the height *from* which man has fallen as well as the depth *to* which he has fallen. It is important that men should be saved because there is so much *for* them to be saved *to* as well as so much *for* them to be saved *from*.

There is in man also a certain power to transcend limitations that gives him just a flavor of infinitude. The spirit chafes under restraints; has a sense continually of something outside that it has not yet gotten to; makes for itself a larger and larger world; stretches itself back in memory and forward in surmise. We are like the bird in the cage that is kept inside the bars, but it lives in continuous communication with the air and light without, as though animated still with a sense of freedom that has been forgotten. The Samaritans built into the air. The giants piled Ossa on Pelion. Everything is to us small because there is a larger; everything partial because there is a whole. Assurance continually runs ahead of verification. Everything that gets in our way is felt by us almost as an impropriety and an indignity. In one way the earth is larger than we, in others it is a great deal smaller. It is compelled to loan itself to our service. Mind masters matter. We tame and harness the forces of nature and put them to our work. The sea that

separates the continents is made over into a highway to connect them. We play off the energies of nature upon each other and set the mountain torrent to boring a roadway through the very mountain it flows off from. We rub out distance and talk through the air to Chicago, and tie our letters to the lightning and post them under the sea to London, Constantinople and Calcutta. Pent in the body we are, and yet domiciled in all the earth; a sort of adumbration of omnipresence. In the same way thought gets into the sky, slips around upon the ocean of space from star to star as easily as a bird canoe among the islands of any mundane archipelago; finds out what has been transpiring in the heavens for a million years; fixes latitudes and longitudes of suns a thousand years away as the light flies; learns the secrets, weighs them, measures them, exacts from them their biography and their kinships; reads in the star-beams the story of stellar composition; finds the unity that pervades the whole; translates the phenomena of the heavens into terms of terrestrial event; gets at the language in which all the world unconsciously think, the lines along which they instinctively act. It is grander to *think* a world than to *be* a world. To be able to conceive of the universe is fraught with richer sublimity than to *be* a universe. We rejoice in the great created world. It pleased God when He had made it, and it pleases us because our tastes are like His. We can discover the laws which work it. A natural law is a divine thought. In detecting and threading those laws then we are following where God's mind has gone on before. Man can construe only what mind constructs, and only when the mind that construes *matches* the mind that constructs. In this way nature is a mirror that shows both God's face and our own; and scientific truth is only religious truth secularly conceived.

It is rather in the line of this to say besides that we are persuaded how great a thing it is to be man, by observing the ease with which man can receive a divine revelation. If we are to save the idea of revelation in its integrity, it must be either by the dignification of man or the belittlement of God. The two, man and God, will have by some means to be understood as standing to one another within intelligent reach. We shall be obliged either to be guilty of anthropomorphism and conceive of God as only a huge-proportioned man, or we shall be driven to the alternative necessity of conceiving of man under the figure of a little God, what Cicero calls "a mortal God"; if you please, a son of God, with all that that word son can reasonably import. Such belief as we have in a divine revelation is a confession of faith on our part that God's thought can in certain cases be translated into the terms of man's thought without God's thought parting with any of its essential truthfulness. For example, when we are divinely told, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy," if that is revelation, if there is any *revelment* in it, we shall have to understand that the thought which is started in our minds by that expression answers truthfully to the thought in God's mind which occasioned that expression. There is risk in saying that a truth is adapted to our minds—that a divine truth is taken and then adjusted

to our finite powers of apprehension. It is an easy thing to say but a mischievous one, and spoils everything in the revelation-idea that is worth saving. A truth is not a thing that can be adjusted. You cannot adjust a key to a lock without changing the key. Nor can you adjust a truth to the mind without changing the truth, and truth changed ceases to be truth. So that if the truth fits into the wards of my mind as the key does into those of the lock, it is not because the truth has been reshaped or reduced till it fits my mind, but because my mind is so constructed as to receive the truth without any such reshaping or reduction; it is because my mind is so in the image of God's mind and so duplicates it that there is between them an essential identity in operation and appreciation. It is not truth to me except to the degree in which I see it and feel it exactly as God sees it and feels it. There is no more truth in a truth incorrectly apprehended than there is in a lie correctly apprehended. All of which possesses the fact of a real divine revelation with intensest interest. The doctrine of a *bona fide* revelation from God consists with only one or the other of two alternatives: either that Godhood is in that particular a superior order of manhood, or that manhood is in that particular an inferior order of Godhood. That God's mind and my own can to a degree actually appreciate the same truths establishes between Him and myself so far forth relations most immediate and intimate; just as the child to the degree in which he appreciates his father's word is the duplicate of his father, whether you prefer to call manhood a superior order of childhood, or childhood an inferior order of manhood. Now all of this is a matter for reflection during our reading of God's Word. As our minds slide along the lines there drawn for them, we shall need often to recall the fact that precisely these truths God has thought over before us; that our minds are travelling in the path His mind has worn. All of this will give to us a thrilling experience of His nearness to us, and of ours to Him, quicken in us a keen sense of the favors with which He has honored us, the dignity with which we are natively endowed.

Still it is not the fact that there *can* be a divine revelation so much as it is what that divine revelation contains that does most to convince us of the dignity inherent in our nature. The central object of Scripture is the Cross, and that Cross proves two things—God's hatred of sin and God's esteem for the sinner, and God's esteem exactly matches man's worth. Whoever cheapens man belittles the Cross, and makes crucifixion a waste of divine blood. Man's worth explains redemption, not redemption man's worth. Calvary is man's eulogy written by God in characters of his own life-crimson. We could reach a just estimate of man if once we could comprehend what it denotes for God really to be grieved and to suffer on our account. There is a logic in redemption which gets badly strained by man's indiscriminate self-derogation. There are two ways of saving the logic: one is by making Christ less than divine; the other is by making man more than what Watts in his familiar hymn calls a "worm." We can understand how God in His infinitude can take care of us. He takes care as well of the sheep and the spar-

rows. That gives us little basis of inference. No expense is involved. But when we come to the matter of God's enduring pain on our account we are on different ground and beneath a different sky. This matter of God's heart-ache it is next to impossible for us really to get under the power of. If we but could, it would set so many things right with us both in doctrine and life. We are taxed and tortured by the effort to conceive how God ever could lovingly impoverish Himself for the sake of man that He had at one time made out of nothing. It sets us wondering whether that is really a fair account of the matter, whether we are the product of mere manufacture, whether immortality forward of us has not in some way its anterior complement. The Bible is full of genealogy. A man's age cannot be with nice precision stated. The son is in a deep sense his father prolonged. "Who was the son of Seth, who was the son of Adam, who was the Son of God." History is a long thing; so is life. Was there then a time when the human spirit began to be? "Who was the son of Adam, who was the Son of God." Sonship is a profound matter. Mystery lies close about us. "The dust shall return to the earth as it was and the spirit to God who gave it." We must have the courage to glance out sometimes into new avenues of thought, even if we have not the hardihood to tread those avenues to their issue.

" The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home."

Which is not inspired, perhaps, but slips easily into our thought in the wake of that quotation from Ecclesiastes—"And the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."

And the Calvary sorrow of God has a farther reach of effect in this respect when it is contemplated by us as the instant betrayal of a permanent grief. The transaction about and upon the Cross is the coming into history of redemptive suffering that lies both backward and forward of the Man of Nazareth. It is the breaking into view over Jerusalem of a brief patch of the same blue that behind the clouds compasses the whole canopy of the sky from horizon to horizon. It is the temporal display of God's eternal heartache for his children. And to calculate our own meaning we should have to take the compass of such a sorrow and render it into terms of human value, for we are sure that the regard of the heavenly Father never falls out of equipoise with the worth of the heavenly Child. With God is no mistaken affection and no blundering esteem. It is this which gives daily a new interest to the Scriptures of the Old Testament. It is strewn with hints of the way in which God was exercising Himself in ripening His scheme of redemption. It shows how close, all the way along, we have been lying to God's earnest thought and grieved regard. If we will let this side-light fall upon these old parts of the Bible I do not see how our interest in its pages can ever weary or falter.

It is an old record; but it is an old record of to-day's heavenly Father. It is like the uplift of the ancient mountains which still give us fresh hints of the mystic grandeur of the globe from which they protrude. It is like the beaming of the old stars which still flash upon us revelations of the celestial vault in which they cluster. It is all of it a continuous variation upon the theme set down for us in the prophecy of Isaiah: "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bare them and carried them all the days of old." And when we prolong our backward view past Bethlehem not only and the prophets, but past Sinai and Egypt and the Great River, and the Flood and Eden and the first Dawn, the last thing the eye meets down the aisle of the unrecorded ages is still the Cross, and "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." In that sadly sublime suggestion away out at the last end of Scripture we can feel more than we can think. But our heart keeps coming back to it. "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world;" it touches us at a point within where consciousness has hardly reached yet. There is in it a reservoir of meaning that keeps all the lowlands of Scripture in continuous inundation. Before the world was founded we were close to God's thought, and He suffered for us already with anticipative suffering. The Cross was in the air before Zion had been reared or Golgatha fashioned.

What is man! At the impulse of an infinite Suffering and in the fellowship of an eternal Cross we are prepared to allow to thought widest range and to imagination freest flight. "What is man," O God! "that THOU art mindful of him and the son of man that THOU visitest him!"

MAN'S CLAIM TO HONOR (I. PETER ii., 17).—We must all be conscious of a cold apathy and disregard toward the human race. But let us consider: I. The rank from which they are fallen. No earthly creature can stand in comparison with man. II. The circumstances and the relations in which men are placed, so far as they are fitted for this honor. There is a lavish expenditure of goodness in all the adaptations of man's position. III. The capacities with which man is endowed. No other creature of the earth gifted with any degree of intelligence mistakes or fails. By mistake and failure reason enlarges itself, makes sure its conclusions and thus it can advance continually upon those conclusions. IV. The methods by which men are redeemed and restored. The Scriptures never speak of man as discarded. While his face is first soiled with tears because of sin the promise is made the figure conceived "of Him that was to come." The constant effort of the inspired record is to identify Christ with our nature. V. The spiritual amelioration and honor of which man is susceptible. There is none but may be clad with the beauty of holiness. Each may be a king and priest unto God, bear the inscription of the Redeemer's new name—an "heir of God and a joint heir with Christ." VI. The agency and the method which are appointed for man's conversion. "Preach the Gospel to every creature."—*Richard Winter Hamilton, D.D. (Independent), England.*