

THE AMERICAN PULPIT OF THE DAY.

THIRTY-FIVE
SERMONS

BY THE

MOST DISTINGUISHED LIVING AMERICAN PREACHERS.

SECOND SERIES.



London :

R. D. DICKINSON, 27, FARRINGDON STREET.

1876.

THE SIN OF OMISSION.

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"The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up : what lack I yet ?"—MATTHEW xix. 20.

THE narrative from which the text is taken is familiar to all readers of the Bible. A wealthy young man, of unblemished morals and amiable disposition, came to our Lord, to inquire his opinion respecting his own good estate. He asked what good thing he should do, in order to inherit eternal life. The fact that he applied to Christ at all shows that he was not entirely at rest in his own mind. He could truly say that he had kept the ten commandments from his youth up, in an outward manner ; and yet he was ill at ease. He was afraid that when the earthly life was over, he might not be able to endure the judgment of God, and might fail to enter into that happy paradise of which the Old Testament Scriptures so often speak, and of which he had so often read in them. This young man, though a moralist, was not a self-satisfied or a self-conceited one ; for had he been like the Pharisee, a thoroughly blinded and self-righteous person like him he never would have approached Jesus of Nazareth, to obtain his opinion respecting his own religious character and prospects. Like him, he would have scorned to ask our Lord's judgments upon any matters of religion. Like the Pharisees, he would have said, "We see," and the state of his heart and his future prospects would have given him no anxiety. But he was not a conceited and pre-

sumptuous Pharisee. He was a serious and thoughtful person, though not a pious and holy one; for he did not love God more than he loved his worldly possessions. He had not obeyed that first and great command, upon which hang all the law and the prophets, conformity to which alone constitutes righteousness: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind, and all thy strength." He was not right at heart, and was therefore unprepared for death and judgment. This he seems to have had some dim apprehension of. For why, if he had felt that his external morality was a solid rock for his feet to stand upon, why should he have betaken himself to Jesus of Nazareth, to ask, "What lack I yet?"

It was not what he had done, but what he had left undone, that wakened fears and forebodings in this young ruler's mind. The outward observance of the ten commandments was right and well in its own way and place; but the failure to obey from the heart the first and great command was the condemnation that rested upon him. He probably knew this in some measure. He was not confidently certain of eternal life; and therefore he came to the great teacher, hoping to elicit from him an answer that would quiet his conscience, and allow him to repose upon his morality while he continued to love this world supremely. The great teacher pierced him with an arrow. He said to him, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shall have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." This direction showed him what he lacked.

This incident leads us to consider the condemnation that rests upon every man for his failure in duty; the guilt that cleaves to him on account of what he has not done. The Westminster Catechism defines sin to be "any want of conformity unto, or any transgression of, the law of God." Not to be conformed, in the heart, to the law and will of God, is as truly sin, as positively to steal, or positively to commit murder. Failure to come up to the line of rectitude is as punishable as to step over that line. God requires of his creature that he

stand squarely upon the line of righteousness; if, therefore, he is off that line, because he has not come up to it, he is as guilty as when he transgresses, or passes across it, upon the other side. This is the reason that the sin of omission is as punishable as the sin of commission. In either case alike, the man is off the line of rectitude. Hence, in the final day, man will be condemned for what he lacks, for what he comes short of, in moral character. Want of conformity to the Divine law as really conflicts with the Divine law as an overt transgression does, because it carries man off and away from it. One of the Greek words for sin (*ἁμαρτεῖν*) signifies, to miss the mark. When the archer shoots at the target, he as really fails to strike it if his arrow falls short of it, as when he shoots over and beyond it. If he strains upon the bow with such a feeble force that the arrow drops upon the ground long before it comes up to the mark, his shot is as total a failure as when he strains upon the bow-string with all his force, but, owing to an ill-directed aim, sends his weapon into the air. One of the New Testament terms for sin contains this figure and illustration in its etymology. Sin is a want of conformity unto, a failure to come clear up to, the line and mark prescribed by God, as well as a violent and forcible breaking over and beyond the line and the mark. The lack of holy love, the lack of holy fear, the lack of filial trust and confidence in God—the negative absence of these and other qualities in the heart, is as truly sin and guilt, as is the positive and open violation of a particular commandment in the act of theft, or lying, or Sabbath breaking.

We propose, then, to direct attention to that form and aspect of human depravity which consists in coming short of the aim and end presented to man by his Maker,—that form and aspect of sin which is presented in the young ruler's inquiry: "What lack I yet?"

It is a comprehensive answer to this question to say that every natural man lacks *sincere and filial love of God*. This was the sin of the moral but worldly, the amiable but earthly-minded, young man. Endow him, in your fancy, with all the excellence you please, it still lies upon the face of the narrative

that he loved money more than he loved the Lord God Almighty. When the Son of God bade him go and sell his property, and give it to the poor, and then come and follow him as a docile disciple, like Peter, and James, and John, he went away sad in his mind, for he had great possessions. This was a reasonable requirement, though a very trying one. To command a young man of wealth and standing immediately to strip himself of all his property, to leave the circle in which he had been born and brought up, and to follow the Son of Man—who had not where to lay his head—up and down through Palestine, through good report and through evil report : to put such a burden upon such a young man was to lay him under a very heavy load. Looking at it from a merely human and worldly point of view, it is not strange that the young ruler declined to take it upon his shoulders ; though he felt sad in declining, because he had the misgiving that in declining he was sealing his doom. But had he *loved* the Lord God with all his heart ; had he been *conformed unto* the first and great command in his heart and affections ; had he not lacked a spiritual and filial affection towards his Maker, he would have obeyed.

For the circumstances under which this command was given must be borne in mind. It issued directly from the lips of the Son of God himself. It was not an ordinary call of Providence, in the ordinary manner in which God summons man to duty. There is reason to suppose that the young ruler knew and felt that Christ had authority to give such directions. We know not what were precisely his views of the person and office of Jesus of Nazareth, but the fact that he came to him seeking instruction respecting the everlasting kingdom of God and the endless life of the soul, and the yet further fact that he went away in sadness because he did not find it in his heart to obey the instructions that he had received, prove that he was, at least, somewhat impressed with the divine authority of our Lord ; for, had he regarded him as a mere ordinary mortal, knowing no more than any other man concerning the eternal kingdom of God, why should his words have distressed him ? Had this

young ruler taken the view of our Lord which was held by the Scribes and Pharisees, like them he would never have sought instruction from him in a respectful and sincere manner; and, like them, he would have replied to the command to strip himself of all his property, leave the social circles to which he belonged, and follow the despised Nazarene, with the curling lip of scorn. He would not have gone away in sorrow, but in contempt. We must assume, therefore, that this young ruler felt that the person with whom he was conversing, and who had given him this extraordinary command, had authority to give it. We do not gather from the narrative that he doubted upon this point. Had he doubted, it would have relieved the sorrow with which his mind was disturbed. He might have justified his refusal to obey by the consideration that this Jesus of Nazareth had no right to summon him, or any other man, to forsake the world and attach himself to his person and purposes, if any such consideration had entered his mind. No; the sorrow, the deep, deep sorrow and sadness with which he went away to the beggarly elements of his houses and his lands proves that he knew too well that this wonderful Being, who was working miracles, and speaking words of wisdom that never man spake, had, indeed, authority and right to say to him and to every other man: "Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me."

Though the command was, indeed, an extraordinary one, it was given in an extraordinary manner, by an extraordinary Being. That young ruler was not required to do any more than you and I would be obligated to do *in the same circumstances*. It is, indeed, true that, in the *ordinary* providence of God, you and I are not summoned to sell all our possessions and distribute them to the poor, and to go up and down the streets of the city, or up and down the highways and by-ways of the land, as missionaries of Christ. But if the call were *extraordinary*—if the heavens should open above our heads, and a voice from the skies should command us, in a manner not to be doubted or

disputed, to do this particular thing—we ought immediately to do it. And if the love of God were in our hearts; if we were inwardly “conformed unto” the divine law; if there were nothing lacking in our religious character; we should obey with the same directness and alacrity with which Peter and Andrew, and James and John, left their nets and their fishing-boats, their earthly avocations, their fathers and their fathers’ households, and followed Christ to the end of their days. In the present circumstances of the church and the world, Christians must follow the ordinary indications of Divine Providence; and though these do unquestionably call upon them to make far greater sacrifices for the cause of Christ than they now make, yet they do not call upon them to sell all that they have, and give it to the poor. But they ought to be ready and willing to do so, in case God, by any remarkable and direct expression, should indicate that this is his will and pleasure. Should our Lord, for illustration, descend again, and in his own person say to his people, as he did to the young ruler: “Sell all that ye have, and give to the poor, and go up and down the earth preaching the gospel,” it would be the duty of every rich Christian to strip himself of all his riches, and of every poor Christian to make himself yet poorer, and of the whole church to adopt the same course that was taken by the Christians, who “had all things common, and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” The direct and explicit command of the Lord Jesus Christ to do any particular thing must be obeyed at all hazards and at all cost. Should he command any one of his disciples to lay down his life, or to undergo a severe discipline and experience in his service, he must be obeyed. This is what he means when he says, “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Luke xiv. 26, 27).

The young ruler was subjected to this test. It was his privilege—and it was a great privilege—to see the Son of God

face to face; to hear his words of wisdom and authority; to know without any doubt or ambiguity what particular thing God would have him do. And he refused to do it. He was moral, he was amiable; but he refused *point-blank* to obey the direct command of God addressed to him from the very lips of God. It was with him as it would be with us if the sky should open over our heads, and the Son of God should descend, and with his own lips should command us to perform a particular service, and we should be disobedient to the heavenly vision, and should say to the Eternal Son of God, "We will not." Think you that there is nothing *lacking* in such a character as this? Is this religious perfection? Is such a heart as this "conformed unto" the law and will of God?

If, then, we look into the character of the young ruler, we perceive that there was in it no supreme affection for God. On the contrary, he loved *himself* with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. Even his religious anxiety, which led him to our Lord for his opinion concerning his good estate, proved to be a merely selfish feeling. He desired immortal felicity beyond the tomb—and the most irreligious man upon earth desires this—but he did not possess such an affection for God as inclined and enabled him to obey his explicit command to make a sacrifice of his worldly possessions for his glory. And this lack of supreme love to God was *sin*. It was a deviation from the line of eternal rectitude and righteousness, as really and truly as murder, adultery, or theft, or any outward breach of any of those commandments which he affirmed he had kept from his youth up. This coming short of the Divine honour and glory was as much contrary to the Divine law as any overt transgression of it could be.

For love is the fulfilling of the law. The whole law, according to Christ, is summed up and contained in these words: "Thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbour as thyself." To be destitute of this heavenly affection is, therefore, to break the law at the very centre and in the very substance of it. Men tell us, like this young ruler, that they do

not murder, lie, or steal—that they observe all the commandments of the second table pertaining to man and their relations to man—and ask, “What lack we yet?” Alexander Pope, in the most brilliant and polished poetry yet composed by human art, sums up the whole of human duty in the observance of the rules and requirements of civil morality, and affirms that “an honest man is the noblest work of God.” But is this so? Has religion reached its last term and ultimate limit when man respects the rights of property? Is a person who keeps his hands off the goods and chattels of his fellow-creature really qualified for the heavenly state, by reason of this fact and virtue of honesty? Has he attained the chief end of man? Even if we could suppose a perfect obedience of all the statutes of the second table, while those of the first table were disobeyed; even if one could fulfil all his obligations to his neighbour, while failing in all his obligations to his Maker; even if we should concede a perfect morality, without any religion; would it be true that this morality, or obedience of only one of the two tables that cover the whole field of human duty, is sufficient to prepare man for the everlasting future and the immediate presence of God? Who has informed man that the first table of the law is of no consequence, and that if he only loves his neighbour as himself, he need not love his Maker supremely?

No! Affection in the heart towards the great and glorious God is the sum and substance of religion, and whoever is destitute of it is irreligious and sinful in the inmost spirit, and in the highest degree. His fault relates to the most excellent and worthy Being in the universe. He comes short of his duty in reference to that Being who *more than any other one* is entitled to his love and his services. We say, and we say correctly, that if a man fails of fulfilling his obligations towards those who have most claims upon him, he is more culpable than when he fails of his duty towards those who have less claims upon him. If a son comes short of his duty towards an affectionate and self-sacrificing mother, we say it is a greater fault than if he comes short of his duty to a fellow-citizen. The parent is nearer to him than

the citizen, and he owes unto her a warmer affection of his heart, and a more active service of his life, than he owes to his fellow-citizen. What would be thought of that son who should excuse his neglect or ill-treatment of the mother that bore him, upon the ground that he had never cheated a fellow-man, and had been scrupulous in all his mercantile transactions? This but feebly illustrates the relation which every man sustains to God, and the claim which God has upon every man. Our first duty and obligation relate to our Maker. Our fellow-creatures have claims upon us; the dear partners of our blood have claims upon us; our own personality, with its infinite destiny for weal or woe, has claims upon us. But no one of these—not all of them combined have upon us that *first* claim which God challenges for himself. Social life—the state or the nation to which we belong—cannot say to us: “Thou shalt love me with all thy heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.” The family, which is bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, cannot say to us: “Thou shalt love us with all thy soul, mind, heart, and strength.” Even our own deathless and priceless soul cannot say to us: “Thou shalt love me supremely, and before all other beings and things.” But the infinite and adorable God, the Being that made us, and has redeemed us, can of right demand that we love and honour him first of all, and chiefest of all.

There are two thoughts suggested by the subject which we have been considering, to which we now invite candid attention.

1. In the first place, this subject *convicts every man of sin*. Our Lord, by his searching reply to the young ruler's question, “What lack I yet?” sent him away very sorrowful; and what man, in any age and country, can apply the same test to himself, without finding the same unwillingness to sell all that he has and give to the poor, the same indisposition to obey any and every command of God that crosses his natural inclinations? Every natural man, as he subjects his character to such a trial as that to which the young ruler was subjected, will discover, as he did, that he lacks supreme love of God, and like him, if

he has any moral earnestness; if he feels at all the obligation of duty, will go away very sorrowful, because he perceives very plainly the conflict between his will and his conscience. How many a person, in the generations that have already gone to the judgment-seat of Christ, and in the generation that is now on the way thither, has been at times brought face to face with the great and first command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," and by some particular requirement has been made conscious of his utter opposition to that great law! Some special duty was urged upon him, by the providence, or the word, or the Spirit of God, that could not be performed unless his will were subjected to God's will, and unless his love for himself and the world were subordinated to his love of his Maker. If a young man, perhaps he was commanded to consecrate his talents and education to a life of philanthropy and service of God in the Gospel, instead of a life devoted to secular and pecuniary aims. God said to him, by his providence and by conscience, "Go teach my gospel to the perishing; go preach my word to the dying and the lost." But he loved worldly ease, pleasure, and reputation more than he loved God; and he refused, and went away sorrowful, because this poor world looked very bright and alluring, and the path of self-denial and duty looked very forbidding. Or, if he was a man in middle life, perhaps he was commanded to abate his interest in plans for the accumulation of wealth, to contract his enterprises, to give attention to the concerns of his soul and the souls of his children, to make his own peace with God, and to consecrate the remainder of his life to Christ and to human welfare; and when this plain and reasonable course of conduct was dictated to him, he found his whole heart rising up against the proposition. Our Lord, alluding to the fact that there was nothing in common between his spirit and the spirit of Satan, said to his disciples, 'The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me' (John xiv. 30). So, when the command to love God supremely comes to this man of the world, in any particular form, "it hath nothing in him." This first and great law finds no ready

and genial response within his heart, but, on the contrary, a recoil within his soul, as if some great monster had started up in his pathway. He says, in his mind, to the proposition, "Anything but that;" and, with the young ruler, he goes away sorrowful, because he knows that refusal is perdition.

Is there not a wonderful power to *convict* of sin in this test? If you try yourself, as the young man did, by the command, "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," you may succeed, perhaps, in quieting your conscience to some extent, and in possessing yourself of the opinion of your fitness for the kingdom of God. But ask yourself the question, "Do I love God supremely, and am I ready and willing to do any and every particular thing that he shall command me to do, even if it is plucking out a right eye, or cutting off a right hand, or selling all my goods to give to the poor?" Try yourself by *this* test, and see if you lack anything in your moral character. When this thorough and proper touchstone of character is applied, there is not found upon earth a just man that doeth good and sinneth not. Every human creature by this test is concluded under sin. Every man is found lacking in what he ought to possess, when the words of the commandment are sounded in his ear: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind, and all thy strength." This sum and substance of the Divine law, upon which hang all the other laws, convinces every man of sin. For there is no escaping its force. Love of God is a distinct and definite feeling, and every person knows whether he ever experienced it. Every man knows whether it is, or is not, an affection of his heart; and he knows that if it be wanting, the foundation of religion is wanting in his soul, and the sum and substance of sin is there.

2. And this leads to the second and concluding thought, suggested by the subject, namely, that *except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*. If there be any truth in the discussion through which we have passed, it is plain and incontrovertible, that to be destitute of holy love to God is a

departure and deviation from the moral law. It is a coming short of the great requirement that rests upon every accountable creature of God, and this is as truly sin and guilt as any violent and open passing over and beyond the line of rectitude. The sin of omission is as deep and damning as the sin of commission. "Forgive," said the dying archbishop Usher, "forgive all my sins, especially my sins of omission."

But how is this lack to be supplied? How is this hiatus in human character to be filled up? How shall the fountain of holy and filial affection towards God be made to gush up into everlasting life, within your now unloving and hostile heart? There is no answer to this question of questions, but in the person and work of the Holy Ghost. If God shall shed abroad his love in your heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto you, you will know the blessedness of a new affection, and will be able to say with Peter, "Thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." You are shut up to this method and this influence. To generate within yourself this new spiritual emotion which you have never yet felt is utterly impossible. Yet you must get it, or religion is impossible, and immortal life is impossible. Would that you might feel your straits and your helplessness. Would that you might perceive your total lack of supreme love of God, as the young ruler perceived his; and would that, unlike him, instead of going away from the Son of God, you would go to him, crying, "Lord, create within me a clean heart, and renew within me a right spirit." Then the problem would be solved, and having peace with God through the blood of Christ, the love of God would be shed abroad in your hearts, through the Holy Ghost given unto you.