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A
DISCOURSE
ON
THE NATURE AND DANGER
OF
SMALL FAULTS,
DELIVERED AT THE
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON,
OCTOBER 24, 1790.

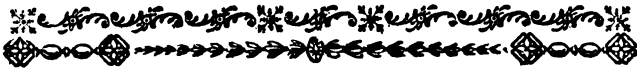


BY THE REVEREND
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A
DISCOURSE
ON
THE NATURE AND DANGER
OF
SMALL FAULTS.



THOU SHALT NOT SURELY DIE.
GENESIS III. 4.

THIS is a suggestion that arose in the breast of the mother of mankind, and encouraged her to the commission of a crime that hath involved the whole race in vice and misery. Plucking the fruit appeared to her to be among those actions which have been left indifferent by nature. And plucking it from a forbidden tree was probably represented, by her curiosity, to be among the small and venial errors, that may be indulged to human weakness.

A like suggestion is continually rising, in the breasts of all her children, on those vices to which they are strongly prompted by inclination and by pleasure. Pleasure invests vice with a charm that deceives the heart. And altho satiety often strips the
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the delusion from indulgence, and gives a momentary force to the sentiments of conscience that condemn it ; yet, nature speedily recovers her tone, The same pleasures grow again to be enjoyed ; and again surround their objects with the delusive appearances of pardonable weakness, or of doubtful innocence. They are forever repeating, like the first temptation, “ thou shalt not surely die.”

The call of pleasure is esteemed the voice of nature, when by nature is meant only a factitious depravity, which hath become ingrafted by habit in the constitution. How often do we hear it contended, that a merciful Creator could not have connected pleasure with guilt ; but that where we find gratification, we may fairly conclude we are within the bounds of innocence?—In reasoning thus, we forget that nature, ever luxuriant, gives birth to superfluities, in the moral, as well as in the natural, world, designed to exercise the industry and virtue of man, in correcting or subduing them. The rich and abundant soil of the human heart produces weeds as well as better herbs ; and it belongs to the husbandman to eradicate the noxious, and to cultivate the useful. But men are forever employing the most false and superficial pretences, to justify their inclinations.

There are, indeed, some high and atrocious crimes, which attack the security of society, and the happiness of mankind, in the most essential points, to which the conscience can seldom give its sanction,

sanction, even after the longest habits of sinning. But there are some vices which every man studies, with success, to excuse—some which he indulges with less caution and restraint—some which he esteems small and venial faults, and on which he is always saying to himself, “thou shalt not surely die.”

These form a numerous and dangerous class of offences. Highly criminal in their own nature, they become the seeds of greater evil. They tend, in the natural progress of habit, to weaken the power of conscience, to render inclination our supreme law, and to change, at length, the whole system of duty and of truth.

These sins will form the subject of the following discourse, in which I propose,

- I. To explain their nature—and,
- II. To point out their dangerous consequences.

I. When I speak of small sins, I do not comprehend, in that denomination, those lamented errors and imperfections that spring from the infirmity of human nature, in the best of men—I do not mean those evils that sometimes surprize a Christian in an unguarded moment, but which are speedily resisted, confessed, and effaced by sincere repentance—I do not mean those over which he is gaining a slow, but progressive victory.—I speak of such as enter into the plan of life—as are excused because they are small—as are not recollected with penitence, but are studied only to be justified.

They may be divided into such as are acknowledged

leged to be sins—such as are of a dubious nature—and such as may be considered chiefly in the light of temptations to other sins.

1. In the first place, acknowledged sins, which are, however, palliated or excused from the minuteness of their objects—from the rarity of their occasions—and from the force and concurrence of passion and opportunity.

Men, if they cannot be charged with those high and daring offences that, by insulting the majesty of God, and disturbing the peace of society, awaken the indignation or the pity of the wise and good, are prone to flatter themselves with the idea of comparative innocence, and to hope that the divine mercy will impute their smaller failings to infirmity, and not to guilt. Let me illustrate the observation by an example. If they abstain from blaspheming their Creator, or from persecuting and reviling those who serve him, they pardon themselves, as a trivial offence, their neglect of his worship, their indifference to the progress of religion, or their want of that inward purity of heart which alone is worthy of his children. If they abstain from open fraud, it does not wound their conscience, perhaps, to make an advantage of their neighbour's ignorance, or to impose on his unsuspecting and credulous simplicity. If they abstain from violence and bloodshed, do they not, however, justify themselves, tho they hate their neighbour in their heart, and rejoice in an opportunity
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to injure his precious reputation, or to disappoint his lawful hopes? If they cannot be accused of that mad ambition that desolates the earth, are they not guilty of the same vice, tho acting in an humbler sphere, by being proud, or insolent, or vain? If they are not chargeable with seducing matrimonial chastity, or virgin innocence, yet, do they not abandon themselves to those loose imaginations, to those soft and effeminate dalliances, which contain all the luxury of sensuality, while they only seem to abstain from the ultimate crime?—Thus, while they do not proceed to the last and highest acts of vice, they plead, with success, an indulgence for themselves, at the tribunal of their own hearts, for all inferior evils. They even claim some merit, perhaps, for the restraints which they impose on their passions.

They derive, in the next place, an extenuation for particular sins from the rarity of their occasions. If they can seldom be charged, and on such occasions only as seem to excuse them by the opinion, or the practice of the world, are they not prone to make their own apology from the general predominancy of a better conduct? Will you bear me, without offence, to produce an example that is perhaps too common?—Have we not known men who, in their habits, were sober, temperate, and industrious; who, notwithstanding, to shew their hilarity with a friend, or to testify the sincere part which they take in seasons of public festivity,

festivity, would transcend those limits of moderation and sobriety which, at other times, they esteem themselves bound to observe? It is, in their view, a sufficient answer to the remonstrances of religion to say, that these excesses are rare; and that, if the general tenor of life be regular and prudent, it is a rigid morality that will not permit us, at certain seasons, to indulge somewhat to the occasion.

Another class of acknowledged sins, which are held to be small, consists of those that are extenuated from the force and concurrence of temptation. Temptation is passion awakened by opportunity. The passions conceal the deformity of vice. Circumstance and opportunity excite them into ardor, and precipitate them into action. Pleasure, therefore, that bribes the conscience, and precipitation that precludes reflexion, both tend to lessen, in our view, the guilt of sin. And instead of penitently confessing and deploring it before God—instead of condemning it in the sentiments of an humble and contrite heart, too frequently, we seek a false peace, by extenuating its evil. The strength of temptation, we say—the attractions of pleasure—the coincidence of opportunity—the combination of events, were too powerful for human nature; and we hope that God will look with indulgence on the weakness of his creatures.—Ah! my brethren, this is not the language of repentance, which never seeks to cover or protect our sins, but is disposed ingenuously to acknowledge, and warmly
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ly to condemn them. It is building our inward peace, and our religious hopes, not on the true foundation of the gospel ; but on the false ground of extenuation and apology.

2. Another class of these sins, that are considered as small, consists of such actions as are of a dubious nature.

The decision of the apostle is founded in the highest reason. He that doubteth is condemned, if, under that doubt, he proceeds to act. Yet such evils usually leave a feeble impression of their guilt on the conscience : and men, who judge thus lightly of duty and of sin, will ever follow inclination, in contradiction to their doubts. Under this principle of action, it is easy to obtain every gratification that the heart solicits. The heart gives its colouring to all moral objects. If it cannot paint them as absolutely innocent, it seldom fails of being able to represent them as dubious, at least ; and under this form, to enjoy their pleasures.

That principle is false, that invites us to act against our doubts ; or that supposes dubiety affords an equal chance for the action being virtuous. On the other hand, it necessarily involves guilt. It is often the result of criminal ignorance—it is more frequently the result of criminal passion—it poisons innocence itself—and it renders vice, if possible, more guilty ; because it is the depravity of the heart that creates the uncertainty.

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As vice consists less in the kind, than in the circumstances and degrees of actions, a wide and diversified field is hereby opened for self-deception. The gradual increments of passion are infinitely minute—the circumstances of actions are infinitely various, and contain in them something peculiar to the character and state of every person. The progressive shades of conduct, if I may speak so, are so delicate—their limits seem to be so blended, as to afford an endless scope for uncertainty, especially to those who do not wish to see. Pious men are afraid to approach this dubious boundary. They deny themselves, therefore, many lawful enjoyments, that they may restrain indulgence clearly within the limit of innocence, which, when attempted to be too nicely traced, is always uncertain. Vice loves to lurk in these obscure confines, that, in their uncertainty, it may find an excuse for transgressing them—that it may enjoy its beloved pleasures without suffering the reproaches of guilt—and that, wrapped in its own shades, and concealed from its own view, it may flatter itself it is also concealed from the view of God. Conscience, indeed, amidst this darkness and doubt, often raises its voice, and shakes the breast with secret terrors. But they are as often calmed by the dangerous opinion, that they are sins of only small or dubious guilt. Thus, all these inward admonitions perish without fruit, and the soul returns to that state of doubt,

doubt, which it makes both the motive, and the protection of vice.

3. A third class consists of such as may be considered chiefly in the light of temptations to other sins.

Temptation, voluntarily indulged, is a lower degree of the vice to which it leads. A good man, who fears sin, and, at the same time, is conscious of his own frailty, will study to shun its dangers, by retiring from them. Those who cherish the temptation, secretly love the vice. Yet, as long as sin rests chiefly in the thoughts and affections, and is not carried into open act—as long as it can be considered rather in the light of temptation than of compliance, men admit, with difficulty, the conviction of its guilt. It is viewed, at the utmost, as a small, and venial fault, and, like the first temptation, is continually repeating—“thou shalt not surely die.”

Under the idea, that temptation indulged, that emotion and desire, when not carried into act, are not criminal, or are only small faults, how often are those places frequented without caution, the contagion of which is dangerous to virtue? How often are those societies courted, whose breath infects the purity of the heart? How often do we deliberately throw ourselves into situations, from which it is almost impossible to escape without sin? Are not malevolent sentiments cherished, under
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the same idea, against our neighbour? Is not the tongue indulged, in an unchristian licence, to depreciate his reputation? Do not envy, repining, and discontent secretly insult the providence of God, or openly attack the peace of mankind? Doth not passion exert itself in a thousand unrestrained ebullitions? Are not the sweets of revenge tasted in imagination? Are not loose and sensual scenes enjoyed in fancy, and pictures of soft and effeminate indulgence created in all their variety, and all their licentiousness?—It is possible, perhaps, to be more sensual in the continual reveries, that occupy and dissipate a vain imagination, than in the most gross and actual vice. Sensuality appears here with a refinement that may tempt even a noble mind; and it is exempted from those disgusts and disappointments, which always succeed and dash those pleasures when they are grossly enjoyed. The heart abandons itself to the delightful delirium; and the conscience, little offended at evils that are not attended with public eclat, easily admits their apology. Small effort is made to overcome or destroy them. They are ranked among the venial errors and infirmities of human nature—and, by degrees, they infect and corrupt the whole soul.

This leads me,

II. In the next place, to point out the danger of this class of sins.

This danger consists in their strengthening, insensibly,

sensibly, the corruption of the heart, and increasing its vicious tendencies—because they alienate from the heart the aids of the Holy Spirit—because they confirm our sinful habits and passions—and because the human mind in executing, always falls below its own purpose in framing its plans of duty and conduct.

1. They alienate from the heart, the aids of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, however it has been abused by weak and enthusiastic sects, seems to be a dictate of nature, as well as of revealed religion. In some secret and ineffable manner, he guards the heart against the power of temptation, he suggests and illustrates our duty, and often sheds a peculiar evidence and persuasion on all its motives. But as his aids are bestowed to render us faithful, so our fidelity is necessary to secure their continuance. The voluntary indulgence of sin tends to extinguish his lights. If he is resisted, he withdraws. And, in his holy word, there are many examples, and many threatenings, of his forsaking those who depart from him. “My Spirit, saith the Lord, shall not always strive with man.” The heart shall cease to feel the emotions and constraints of piety, in proportion as it persists to violate the affections inspired, or the duties imposed, by religion.

The Holy Spirit frequently enables a good man to combat the force of sudden and unexpected temptation,

temptation, by the inward energy of divine grace ; but, more commonly, he secures his virtue by disposing him to shun its first impressions. If, contrary to his faithful admonitions, however, we invite its dangers, and unnecessarily expose ourselves to the influence of situations and of objects unfriendly to piety—if, for example, we enter, too freely, those circles whose high and unguarded gaieties are dubious, at least, in the aspect they have on piety—if we amuse ourselves too often with writers whose principles or manner is unfavourable to purity of morals—if we permit ourselves, thro a display of wit, to sport sentiments which our own hearts do not perfectly approve—if we voluntarily frequent scenes that are calculated to inflame the passions, and corrupt the soul—if, in instances like these, we thwart the tendency of the Divine Spirit, and rush into dangers against which he would mercifully guard us—if, in these small combats, these preludes, as it were, to vice, we resist his movements, and quench his grace, may we not expect, that, in greater trials, he should leave us to ourselves, and withdraw that holy influence which we have abused ? Doth not our own experience, my brethren, verify the threatening of religion ? Are not our hearts growing more callous to the impressions of divine truth ? Is not vice losing its deformity, and becoming more practicable to the heart ? And while, without reserve, we indulge in small sins, is not the guilt of great ones lessening in

in our view ? Are not these the symptoms of the departure of the Holy Spirit ?—This is the first danger.

2. The second is, that they strengthen the passions and the habits of vice.

The human mind is ever in progression. Dispositions and habits increase by indulgence. Moral principles, in this, resemble the growth of the natural powers. Every exercise of the heart strengthens its tendencies. The indulgence of small sins contributes to inflame all the vicious passions. Its pleasures excite the appetite, and, at length, render it too powerful for reason and principle. They weaken the force of conscience, which they have often violated. And they are tending, by degrees, to dissolve the obligations of duty, which they have so often relaxed. Each gradation of vice is so minute and imperceptible, that we are hardly conscious of our progress. And as every indulgence increases the tendency to gratification, it impairs, by degrees, the power of reflexion, and the habit of self-command. What then remains to guard the weakness of the heart ? What is there, of sufficient force, to restrain it from proceeding, at length, to every vice to which passion may prompt, and opportunity invite ? Yes, my brethren, the habits of indulgence, created amidst small or dubious gratifications, cherish those vehement desires which finally arrive to spurn at all controul.

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If, then, you indulge those loose and sensual emotions that agitate the heart, when it is not subjected to habitual restraint—if you use those perpetual flatteries to the sex, or those doubtful affiduities which tend to suspicious attachments, are you not ultimately in danger of taking the most criminal licences? Or, to give an example of a different kind, if you cherish in your breast those emotions of aversion or contempt, which are apt to rise against others who differ from you in interest, in rank, or in manners—if you give yourselves an incautious liberty in ridicule, or in satire, and severe wit—if you indulge your tongue in expressions of disdain towards those who have displeased you, or in those little tales of obloquy and censure that are perpetually creating dissensions in society, will not your affections, by degrees, be alienated from your brethren? Will not that meekness and benevolence, which ought to characterize a Christian, be extinguished? Will not animosities grow to be unforgiving and eternal? In like manner, if an excessive love of interest hath tempted you to little frauds, to be hard and over-reaching in your contracts, and to press with severity on your neighbour's wants, doth not the heart, in time, become unfeeling? Is it not preparing to go to the extremes of dishonesty and cruelty, when any great advantage may be derived from them? If you attend the ordinances of religion with a careless and irreverent mind, is not this the way, at length, presumptuously

sumptuously to profane them? If you treat virtue with derision, or with levity, in your conversation—if you use habitual and indecent profanations of the divine name, are not the strongest obligations of piety thereby dissolved? Are you not in danger of mounting, step by step, to the extreme of vice, which sets at defiance both the fear of God, and the opinion of the world?

Besides the strength and irritation of the passions created by small indulgences, sin itself is gradually diminished in the sense of its guilt, and becomes daily more practicable to the heart. The heart, not yet entirely corrupted, shrinks from great crimes; but decoyed and allured on, from one stage to another, it boldly reaches, at last, a degree of vice, to which it would once have looked up, and trembled. Each minute gradation is familiarized by repetition, and by habit; and the sinner, in his conduct, rests there, perhaps, till, by a thousand apologies of self-love, and a thousand deceptions of the passions, offence begins to wear the face of doubtful innocence. The next superior degrees of vice are then considered as small sins, and on the principle I am combating, we first venture upon them, and, finally, learn to justify, or to excuse them. Thus is the heart insensibly seduced; and it may possibly arrive to commit the highest crimes, under the idea of their being only small offences. Ah! how difficult is it, when once you begin to say of any sin—“thou shalt not
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surely

surely die," not to plead the same encouragement for all? It is easier, perhaps, to forego every unlawful gratification, than, after we begin to yield, to set any bounds to compliance. Appetite, accustomed to few indulgences, claims but few, and can, with less difficulty, resign them all—but, flattered and pampered, it soon becomes impatient of restraint, and, while it has power to enjoy, is still soliciting for new pleasures.

3. In the last place, the voluntary commission of small sins exposes to greater crimes, because, the human mind, in executing, usually falls below its own purpose in resolving. If, therefore, men will take all those criminal, or doubtful freedoms, which they may deem, in any way, compatible with their general duty—if they aim, in practice, just to escape great sins—will they not, probably, be permitted to fall into them? The ball that is too exactly levelled at its mark, sinks below it. To strike it with certainty, we must take a higher aim. In like manner, we must, in morals, aspire to an elevated pitch of virtue; we must aim at perfection, if we would rise even to that imperfect degree of goodness to which the pious sometimes attain, in the present life.

To those who observe the human mind with care, this will appear a natural effect. She forms her resolutions in retirement, when the objects of temptation are withdrawn, the passions are subsided, and the beauty and importance of religion appear in

in their proper glory to the eye of faith and reason. But when she descends into the world, and applies herself to carry her views into operation, the vigor with which she resolved is weakened, the liveliness of faith is obscured amidst the impressions of sense, and the conflicts of passion. A thousand objects oppose her purposes. Indolence, interest, pleasure, ourselves, mankind, the universe, all tend to hinder their execution. It may be received as a sure and general principle, that he who voluntarily indulges himself in small faults, will, in the natural progress of moral habit, become a great sinner. Virtue, indeed, is never secure, that does not guard against dubious, as well as against acknowledged vice ; nay, that does not renounce all appearance of evil, and aspire after perfect holiness.

Having thus, from reason and experience, explained the nature and the danger of small faults, and illustrated these remarks by many appeals to our own feelings and observation, permit me, in the conclusion of this discourse, to urge on every hearer, as an object of the highest importance, to remark, with attention, the insidious progress of vice, and to guard, with diligence, against its beginnings, and its first impressions. Small faults are the dangerous seeds of higher sins. And all the most atrocious crimes, in human society, may ordinarily be traced to these commencements. Vice enjoyed in fancy, allures and corrupts the soul.

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The cherished ideas of sensual pleasure, that offer for themselves a thousand palliations and excuses, betray, or impel it to actual crimes. Places of licence and danger frequented, ensnare and inflame it—render vice, at first, familiar to the view, and at length, practicable to the heart. Temptations, not resisted in time, and banished from the imagination, acquire too firm a hold. Omitting, or precipitating the duties of religion, or suffering their warmth and spirit to be relaxed, weakens the sentiments and affections of piety, and gives to every dangerous and criminal object an opportunity to impress its idea with vivacity and strength. This is the artifice of sin. It betrays insensibly. One gradation opens the way to another. Sin never could tempt us with success, if all its deformities were open to the view at once. But the gradual and imperceptible access of temptation offers no alarm to the heart. Pleasure, which gilds its object, justifies compliance, and throws over it a veil of innocence. And, at each gradation of vice, the next above it appears as a small fault. How many persons come, by these means, freely to indulge in vices on which they would once have looked with aversion, or with horror? How many vices are there, that, once condemned and shunned, as threatening the destruction of the soul, now enter into the plan of life, and are incorporated into the character? For example—how often may habitual intoxication have grown out of

a convivial humour, imprudently indulged ? How often may a profligate impiety have sprung from the apparently innocent ambition of pleasantry and wit ? How often, perhaps, may conjugal infidelity, and the loofest passions, have arisen from the smallest of all vices, an extreme desire to please ? Oh ! what pernicious consequences flow from these apparently inconsiderable sources ? The beginnings of sin are like the letting out of a flood, which wears itself a wider and a wider passage, till, at last, it deluges the whole land.

Finally, therefore, let me urge it on every serious hearer to avoid these sins, as being among the most dangerous, as well as insidious enemies of the soul. Do you not perceive, my brethren, what ruinous consequences they bring in their train ? and how insensibly this ruin steals upon the heart ? While you are saying, peace and safety ! then sudden destruction cometh. While you are repeating—"thou shalt not surely die," the decree of death issues from the sovereign and irresistible justice of God. Beware of small faults—they terminate in great sins, and, eventually, in certain perdition. Whatever pleasures they offer, or by whatever deceptions they beguile the heart, you are called resolutely to sacrifice them to the glory of God, and to your own present peace, and your eternal salvation. Christians ! is this an arduous labour ? Have you not already resisted the greatest temptations ? Have you not already overcome the

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the greatest sins ? Is not the most painful conflict already past ? Nothing remains to you, one would think, but light victories over an inconsiderable enemy. Engage, therefore, in this warfare, with resolution and decision—resolve to destroy every sin, the smallest as well as the greatest. If they are small, do not, for such trivial gratifications, endanger your eternal hopes. And, in this pious and noble labour, cease not till you have rendered the work of virtue and holiness complete. Fer-
 vently implore the aids of the Holy Spirit, without whose grace our own resolutions will be ineffectual. And, may the God of all mercy and love strengthen our virtue, and animate our holy purposes, for Christ's sake ! AMEN !

Now, to Him who is able to keep you from *falling*, and to present you *faultless* before the presence of his glory, with exceeding joy, to the only wife God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever !



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