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S E R M O N

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF

MRS. ALEXANDER MARVIN.

J. A. McAllister Esq,
with the writer's grateful remembrance.

A

SERMON

ADDRESSED TO THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION, ALBANY,

SABBATH MORNING, MARCH 14, 1858,

ON OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF

MRS. ALEXANDER MARVIN.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.,

MINISTER OF THE SAID CONGREGATION.

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S E R M O N .

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PROVERBS XXXI, 31.

LET HER OWN WORKS PRAISE HER IN THE GATES.

This is the finishing touch to that inimitable portrait of the virtuous woman, which King Lemuel sketched under the direction of his own mother. It is not my design, at this time, to attempt any thing like an analysis of the picture, but to present, in the most simple manner I can, the great truth embodied in the words I have now read to you. Here is a distinct intimation that the life of the model woman is an active life; for the "works" which are attributed to her could not otherwise be performed. Her activity will witness to its own excellence, and thus to her "praise;" even if no other approving voice should be heard. It will praise her in "the gates;" that is, in the most public places, where the multitude are wont to pass, or to assemble. Not that she will seek notoriety, or make either a

show or a merit of her own doings; for her step will be noiseless, and the right hand will not reveal its good deeds even to the left. But there is that in an active Christian life that does not admit of being covered: with all the effort she can use to keep herself in the background, she must be, in a greater or less degree, an epistle known and read of the world around her. I shall consider the text, then, as containing this general thought—that *a life of active Christian usefulness is the highest glory of a woman.*

I say, of *Christian* usefulness; for it is here taken for granted that the activity which she displays is the legitimate working of religious principle, and of truly sanctified affections. Not that a woman lives, of course, a useless life, who has not been the subject of a spiritual renovation—under the influence of a correct judgment, an enlightened conscience, and a naturally amiable and generous temper, she may perform many outward duties with exemplary fidelity, and may be looked upon, and justly, as, in a certain sense, adorning many of the relations of life. But there is nothing like religious principle and feeling to

give stability to a course of virtuous action. And while religion will give far more elevation and efficiency to the same external actions, it will prompt to many other actions, which never could have had their origin in any inferior influence. It will impart to the whole character a life and power, for which the highest mere natural qualities are but a poor substitute. You will bear in mind then that, in speaking of the useful woman in this discourse, I am speaking of the truly Christian woman—of one who may or may not have, in a high degree, the graces of nature, but who certainly has the higher graces which are inwrought in the soul by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I will endeavour to indicate the legitimate sphere of woman's activity, and then show how the proper occupancy of it constitutes her true glory.

It is hardly necessary to say that the provinces of Christian men and Christian women are, by no means, altogether distinct—in many parts of the field of benevolent action they occupy common ground—but there are some departments of usefulness from which woman,

by the very condition of her being, is excluded; while there are others to which Providence has given her an exclusive claim. That she may fulfill her mission aright, it is of vast importance that the boundaries of her own appropriate field should be fairly defined; that she may not decline what really devolves upon her, on the one hand, or assume what God has forbidden to her, on the other.

Let me say, then, first of all, the most important sphere of woman's usefulness is *home*—in the quiet of that little circle in the midst of which she dwells, over which she instinctively watches, and towards which her tenderest affections and sympathies are constantly drawn. Here is a field for Christian activity at once the most promising and the most delightful. Each of the domestic relations is a channel through which she may operate most efficiently upon a group of minds that are in the process of training for immortality.

Is she a *wife*—who can estimate the amount of blessing which her ever watchful and loving spirit, combined with her vigorous and ceaseless exertions, may bring to him,

with whom she has pledged herself to share the cares and burdens of life? What may she not do, by her gentle and encouraging words, to cheer him in despondency; by her wise and judicious counsels, to relieve him from perplexity; by a watchful and considerate regard to his spiritual interests, to keep him steadfast to his convictions of duty; or, as the case may be, by her genial and inspiring countenance, the tenderness of her assiduities, the efficiency of her efforts, to administer comfort and help to him, amidst the infirmities of age. Is she a *mother*—what a field of useful exertion is open to her in the training of her children; for it devolves upon her, far more than upon the other parent, to give the first direction to their thoughts and feelings, and thus to decide the ultimate complexion of both the character and the destiny. What a demand is here for vigilance, energy, perseverance, and prayer! How important that she should note their earliest developments, with a view to the right adaptation of her instructions, counsels, discipline! How much care and thought are necessary to check the growth of wayward tempers, before they have had time to ripen

into habits which are harder to change than the Ethiopian's skin or the leopard's spots! How much is to be done to remedy natural defects, and thus produce a symmetrical character; to imbue the mind and the heart with the knowledge and love of God's truth; to prevent or to counteract evil associations; to make every forbidden path look forbidding, and wisdom's ways pleasant; and finally to bring God's Holy Spirit to perform his new-creating work, changing sin into holiness and death into life! All this calls indeed for the faithful co-operation of both parents; and yet the mother's opportunities are best, and her efforts more likely to be availing. Is she a *daughter*—in how many ways may she not only promote the comfort of her parents, but render herself an efficient auxiliary in carrying out their plans of usefulness, particularly in doing good to their neighbours and friends! Is she a *sister*—how much may she do by her kindly and gentle manner, by her discreet conversation, by her consistent Christian life, to impress her sisters, and especially her brothers, with the loveliness of true piety, and the paramount importance of the interests of the world to

come! And I will add, is she a *servant*—even in that humble relation, she has ample opportunities for doing good; for who shall say that, by faithful attention to her own peculiar duties, by manifesting a cheerful contentment with her lot, by letting the light of a Christian example shine in the humblest apartment of the dwelling, who can say but that she may gather out of the family she serves some gems to her immortal crown? I say again, woman has no sphere of influence to be compared with that of home. Here she holds her throne; here she reaches out through all the departments of society; and it were scarcely too much to say that the very lullaby which she sings beside her infant's cradle, penetrates to the inmost heart of the world.

But the influence of woman, though most intense in the domestic circle, is by no means confined to it—the *school* is another field in which she may legitimately operate. Be it so that in the relation of a teacher, her efforts are directed primarily to the development and culture of the *intellects* of her pupils—this of itself is a matter of vast importance; but if she is faithful to her trust, she will not forget

that her pupils are accountable beings, that they have moral and religious characters to form, and that these higher interests are at least to be indirectly cared for in the discharge of her daily duties. I can point to more than one instance in which the labours of Christian females in this department of usefulness, have told with great and equal power upon the intellects, the consciences, and the hearts of a multitude of their pupils; and the school, without being at all perverted from its legitimate design, has proved the spiritual birth-place of many who have been subsequently distinguished in various walks of Christian activity.

But this field of usefulness can be occupied by comparatively few—there is, however, another, not altogether dissimilar to it, which is open to a much larger number,—I may say to as many as are willing to occupy it—I mean the *Sabbath School*. Here the peculiarities of the female character are drawn out under the most favourable circumstances; and they are just the qualities demanded by the exigencies of the case. Here is the gentleness that attracts and conciliates; here is the patience that

waits and endures; here is the power of ready access to the mind of a child; and, I may add, here is the constancy and the perseverance that treat obstacles as if they were nothing. Let a woman, thoroughly baptized with the Christian spirit, take her place as a teacher in a Sabbath School, and you may rest assured there will be that going on around her, that will attract both the eyes and the hearts of angels. She will be doing the Master's work with silent but mighty efficiency.

Woman has her part also to perform in *the Church*. Without even seeming to invade the prerogative of the other sex, or to sacrifice the delicacy which nature herself dictates, or to infringe upon rules fixed by Apostolic authority, there are various ways in which she may make her influence felt in promoting the best interests of the Church. She may do this by a devout and reverent attendance on all Divine institutions; by inducing others, as she has opportunity, to come within the sound of a preached Gospel; by uniting with Christians of her own sex in devotional exercises; by dropping a word of counsel or warning upon the ear of the ungodly, as she may have access

to them in her daily intercourse; and by endeavouring to carry out, and give effect to, such instrumentalities as are within her reach, for the advancement of the cause of truth and piety. Many a minister of the Gospel has found some of his most efficient helpers among the women of his flock; and when he has seen the love of the world, which is sure to generate spiritual decay, creeping over their husbands, and sons, and brothers, he has thrown himself back upon the fervent prayers and exemplary lives of female saints, as a ground of encouragement to himself not to be weary in well doing.

I will only add—and this is but an extension of the preceding thought—that the presence of woman is not less appropriate than grateful in the walks of *Christian charity*. She may, like Dorcas, make garments for the poor. She may go forth on a ministration of mercy into the hovels of the wretched; she may make the sick old man smile, as he lifts his eye towards her, and raises his withered hand to take the bounty she has brought him. She may go round with her bundle of tracts in her hand, leaving one in every lowly dwell-

ing, and thus turning into a very preacher of the Gospel, without infringing upon the most rigid ecclesiastical rule. She may furnish employment to the poor, thus saving them from the curse of idleness, and enabling them to earn their bread. She may gather little children out of the haunts of ignorance and vice, or meet them half way from their wretched homes, and try to enlighten and direct and save them. She may cast an eye abroad upon those in our own country, or those on the other side of the globe, who are without the Gospel, and contribute either from her abundance or from her daily earnings, to send them that treasure which of all others is dearest to her own heart—in any of these various ways, I say, she may serve the great cause of ignorant and suffering humanity. I say she *may* do this—lift up your eyes, and you shall see thousands who *are* doing it. Wherever Christianity is exercising any thing like her legitimate sway, woman is at work, in not only an individual but an associate capacity, in endeavouring to elevate the character and improve the condition of the race. And in this she is emphatically accomplishing her angel mission—

she is acting in the character of a true disciple ; in the spirit of those good women who loved, and lingered, and watched, around the Saviour's tomb.

Thus I have indicated to you some of the more prominent departments of the field in which the Christian woman may properly be employed. I do not mean that every one is called to labour in all these various ways—what particular mode or modes of doing good are obligatory upon individuals, must depend on their particular relations and circumstances. But in some part or parts of this great field every woman is bound to be active ; and if she takes counsel of an enlightened conscience, and of the Providence of God, she will be in little danger of erring in her selection.

Now that the occupancy of this field, in some or other of its parts, constitutes the true glory of a woman, is manifest from the fact that hereby she becomes assimilated to Him, part of whose errand from Heaven to earth was that he might go about doing good. “Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?”—was the prompt and earnest answer which He gave to his parents, when, having

missed Him on their journey, they returned to Jerusalem, and found Him disputing with the Doctors in the temple. After He entered on his public ministry, we find Him saying "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish his work;" and again, "I must work while it is called to-day." And the spirit of these declarations came out in his whole life. We never hear of his spending an idle hour: his whole course was an unbroken scene of self-denying, generous activity. He was always doing good,—to enemies as well as to friends; enlightening the ignorant; feeding the hungry; healing the most desperate maladies; recovering senses that were lost, or creating them anew; and causing weeping friends to rush joyfully into arms which they had just before seen folded in the sleep of death. You cannot indeed imitate your Lord in all the particular acts of his beneficence; but you may imbibe the spirit which dictated those acts, and under its influence, *your* mission also may be fruitful of blessings. Is it not a glorious thing thus to be imitators of Him, who is the Brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of his person?

Then again, it is a life of Christian activity alone that secures the great end of human existence; and this is as true of woman as of man. Though fashion and a perverted public sentiment may give her leave to waste her life in the haunts of indolence, or the whirl of dissipation, yet not so surely the voice of nature—still less the voice of Revelation—God claims her service just as truly as that of her husband or her brother; and she cannot withhold it, but at the expense of refusing to bow to the Divine authority.

The faculties which woman possesses are the gift of God; and they imply a corresponding obligation to be active; for to suppose the contrary were a gross impeachment of the Divine wisdom. So also she sustains various relations which God himself has constituted; and each of these relations is evidently designed as a channel of good influence to others; but if she sinks into a state of inactivity, regarding life as a scene of mere sensual or selfish indulgence, rather than as furnishing opportunities for Christian beneficence, she sins against the Divine constitution, as well as against her own soul. God made her, designed

her, fitted her, for one end, and she lives for another. But she who uses her faculties for doing good, and her relations as a channel for good, at once accomplishes the service which God requires at her hands, and forms the character that secures his approbation.

And finally: A life of Christian activity is woman's highest glory, because it forms her for a glorious destination. The great principle of retribution, in its application, knows no distinction of sexes—*all* are rewarded according to their works. She who has sacrificed her life to worldly vanity, thus sowing to the wind, must reap the whirlwind; whereas she who has spent her life in labouring, in her appropriate sphere, for the honour of Christ, and the advancement of his cause, shall, through grace, be crowned with a reward so glorious as completely to shame and hide the sincere but feeble services which she has rendered. Is it not then the true glory of a woman to be an active disciple of Christ; to form such a character, and train herself to such habits, as shall be the pledge of her being taken up at last to dwell in that world, where glory progressive and eternal shall be the soul's sure inheritance.

Let me ask you now to contemplate, for a moment, the contrast between the woman, such as I have described, who lives for the great purpose for which life is given, and the fashionable woman of the world. The latter lives for no higher object than self-indulgence. Her wealth, if she possesses it, her standing in society, all her various relations, are made tributary to this one object—to shine in the circles of fashion and gaiety. Her splendid dwelling, her gorgeous attire, the cultivated gracefulness of her movements, and as it may be her brilliancy, or her flippancy, or her irony, are expected each to become a distinct subject of admiration. If she walks the street, she expects to be admired. If she mingles in social life, no matter whether in a private circle or in the crowded drawing-room, she expects to be admired. If she comes to the house of God even, still she expects to be admired. She snuffs up the incense of adulation, and imagines that she is satisfied. If she be a mother, and especially the mother of daughters, she conducts their education with a view to make them mere glittering things; she cares much more for the graceful step than

the well-furnished mind ; and as for the pacified conscience, the clean heart, the right spirit, both her teachings and her example either ignore or pour contempt upon them. But, believe me, with all her splendour and gaiety, and all the homage she receives in the world of fashion, she is an unhappy woman, after all. She has within her a secret consciousness, of which she cannot divest herself, that she was made for a nobler end than she is pursuing ; and sometimes she will feel oppressed and ready to sink under a sense of the wretched inanity of her own pursuits. Some of her moments of solitude will, in spite of herself, become moments of reflection ; and then those secret stings which are lodged in the conscience will make themselves felt ; and dark visions of the future will come and overwhelm her. However she may dream to the contrary, she is held in no enviable estimation even in the circle in which she moves ; for every one sees that selfishness is the controlling principle of her life ; and *that*, however deeply it may be rooted in themselves, all instinctively deprecate in others. And what has she to carry with her, as a source of con-

solation, into the vale of adversity—what into the still darker valley of death? Her children, trained to walk in her footsteps, surely will have no word of comfort to say to her—on the contrary, must not their very presence, by reminding her of what they have become under her guidance, be a ministration of remorse and agony? Must not the ghosts of misspent hours, of neglected privileges, throng about that death-bed, and make it a fearful thing to cross the dark boundary? And what, oh what must it be, to go into the world of retribution to account for a wasted life!

Now, in contrast with this ambitious, selfish, profitless, and unsatisfying life, look, I pray you, for a moment, to that life of active Christian usefulness, which it has been the design of this discourse to trace and to recommend. Such a woman as I here refer to realizes that she is not her own; that she is bound to glorify God in her body and spirit which are his. She is not ostentatious or pharisaical, in her good deeds, while yet she is not afraid or ashamed to show herself an active follower of Christ. She studies her various relations, with a view to turn them to

the best account, in the promotion of her usefulness. The centre of her beneficent labours is her own home ; but she goes abroad also to do good ; and her heart takes in the world. Her life is full of good deeds to her fellow-creatures ; of acceptable offerings to her Saviour ; but in the great concern of her own acceptance, her whole reliance is on the merit of the Crucified. As she passes along through the world, the monuments of her well directed activity rise up around her, not to minister to her pride, but to awaken her gratitude and encourage her perseverance. In the hour of sorrow, her loving, trusting, obedient spirit knows how to repose in God's gracious promises. When she sinks down upon her death-bed, she can recognise in her children who come to minister around her, not only the image of her Saviour, but the evidence of her own maternal fidelity. The news that she is dying sheds a gloom through her neighbourhood ; and when the dark signal at the door is seen, or the announcement otherwise made that she has rested from her labours, there is many a tongue ready to pronounce her eulogy, and many a bosom that heaves forth its silent tri-

bute to her memory. And long, long after the grave has taken her mortal remains into its keeping, and Heaven has given a glorious resting place to her immortal spirit, will her name be reverently pronounced here on earth, as associated with prayers of faith and deeds of mercy, that have left an indelible impress upon many hearts.

It is a circumstance, unprecedented at least in my own pastoral experience, that I should be called, on three successive Sabbath mornings, to refer to deaths that have occurred in the Church during the preceding week—deaths which, either on account of their subjects, or their circumstances, or both, have been unusually impressive and affecting; and especially that the first of these discourses should have been listened to by one, who is herself the subject of the last.* I notice these events, not so much with a view to honour the dead as to benefit the living; for though it is always grateful to pay a deserved tribute to departed worth, it is far more important to gather from

* Mr. DANIEL P. CLARK, for many years a Ruling Elder in the Church, and Miss ADELAIDE JOSEPHINE MINOR, a young lady of eighteen, were the first two whose deaths are here referred to.

the lives or the deaths of those who are gone, lessons of warning, or encouragement, or comfort, that may benefit those who are yet in the course of their pilgrimage.

The excellent woman whose life and death have given complexion to this discourse, originally joined the Church in Hudson; and I perceive, from a reference to our Church Record, that she became a member of this Church in October, 1829—the first communion season after my installation. I might speak of her fine natural qualities—of her good sense, her cheerfulness, her frankness, her cordiality, her generosity. I might speak of her also as the joyous centre of a loved and loving circle of relatives and friends, to whom her presence was always a bright sunshine. But my only object at present is to refer to the variety and the exuberance of her good deeds, as a beautiful illustration of the subject of my discourse; and yet her course was so quiet that it would be in vain to attempt distinctly to trace it. In her own home she was at once a counsellor, a comforter, a helper, in every relation; and her activity was so simple, and graceful, and fitting, that it seemed

almost as if some invisible hand were there, doing all things well. She was a model of patient industry, was a stranger not only to idle hours but idle moments. Her eye, and her heart, and her hand, were ever open to the wants of the poor; and no one was more ready than she to co-operate in all plans and measures designed for their relief. She took an intelligent Christian view of the spiritual wants of the world, always regarding it as a privilege to help forward any object having a bearing on the world's conversion. She placed a high value upon the privileges of God's house, as well as the less public means of grace: and, during this winter especially, when her infirm health might have been an apology for her not venturing out in the evening, her cheerful voice, as I have passed out of the door of the Session Room, has more than once assured me that she has not been unmindful of the weekly lecture. And it is delightful to reflect that this was only one of many circumstances which are now gratefully treasured in the memories of her friends, to indicate a rising tone of religious feeling, and a mature preparation for the change that

awaited her. I have myself remarked, and others have remarked, that the tendency of her thoughts and feelings had become manifestly more spiritual during the past year; and I have heard it said that she was herself impressed with a conviction that she had not long to live. It is sad to see a professor of religion apparently retrograding in the Christian course, as he approaches the grave—it is delightful to see one giving out a clearer and brighter light with advancing years, thus fixing in every mind the conviction that his treasure is in Heaven, and that he is ready to go and take possession of it.

Our friend was signally blessed in the manner and circumstances of her death. Her last illness was brief, and not attended with great suffering. She was walking about in her chamber, and expecting soon to resume her accustomed duties in the family, almost until the ominous lethargy came upon her in which lay hid the valley of death. She had, like her excellent mother* before her, been all her lifetime subject to bondage through fear of

* MRS. ELIZABETH PEPOON, who died in November, 1842.

sudden death ; but, during her last illness, she remarked that she had found complete deliverance from that fear. Death was not permitted to tyrannize over her by holding out his gloomy signals—his whole office consisted, as we have reason to believe, in giving the imprisoned spirit its liberty, so that it could fly off to Heaven. Thanks to the Gracious Saviour that He permits death to harm none of his followers ; that, though He allows him to wear a dark livery, and make a show of terrible power, he is only carrying out one of the Mediator's purposes, and gaining a triumph on which the resurrection day will pour signal contempt.

It is a circumstance which I cannot forbear to mention, as indicating the state of mind in which death found our departed friend, that one principal reason for her desiring a speedy recovery was that she might be able to attend the Union Prayer Meeting, which was then just being established. There was something inspiriting and delightful to her in the idea of Christians of different communions, as well as others who are concerned for their salvation, abandoning their worldly engagements, at the

sound of the twelve o'clock bell, and flocking from all parts of the city to spend an hour in invoking the gracious descent of the Holy Spirit—she longed to make one of that devout company, and to obtain for herself a fresh spiritual baptism, before she should hear the voice saying to her, "Come up hither." And it is an affecting thought that, though this desire was not granted, yet it was actually during the hour in which that meeting was held, and while the hearts of God's people were united as the heart of one man, in rending the Heavens with their supplications, that her spirit ascended, not on the wings of faith, but on the wings of angels, to its final and glorious home. Methinks the Union Prayer Meeting will become more hallowed to some hearts from this double association with the memory of this departed disciple of Christ; and who can tell but that this may be one of the influences that shall vibrate from earth to Heaven, and back again from Heaven to earth, while she in whose death it originated is entranced with the vision of her Redeemer, with the companionship of angels, with the glories of the eternal throne.

My friends, does it not seem as if Heaven and Earth, Providence and Grace, were combining their forces to urge forward the great cause of man's regeneration and salvation? But a few months ago, a storm was sweeping over the land, which even now has but just begun to subside, marking its own progress by ruined fortunes and blasted hopes; and out of it God has spoken, is still speaking, as truly as He spake from amidst the thunders and lightnings of Sinai, calling upon men to seek some portion that shall be out of the reach of worldly vicissitude. And now his Holy Spirit is following on in the track of his Holy Providence; and I doubt not that I may say with truth that, never since the day of Pentecost has been witnessed a more wonderful display of the power of Divine grace, than that of which this whole country is the theatre at this hour. And what is especially noticeable is that the voice of opposition seems hushed, and while whole communities are actually heaving under the mighty and all-pervading influence, it seems as if all the people were saying Amen. And to crown all, in relation to our own congregation especially, death has been giving

out a succession of solemn admonitions in the removal of our friends; and from amidst the glory of their new and celestial home, they are charging us this day to get ready to join them. Who of you all can resist such a tide of influence as is here brought to bear upon you? Who of you can remain unmoved, when the very Heavens seem to be labouring for your salvation? Who of you can consent to look coolly on and see the gate of Heaven thronged, and reflect that you have no part nor lot in the matter? I say again, your riches that have taken to themselves wings, your friends who have gone calmly and gloriously to their rest, unite with the thronging multitude who go up to the house of the Lord, and with God's Holy Spirit which seems to be moving every where, in calling upon you to yield yourselves to God; and yet once more I ask, can you, dare you refuse the claim?

I cannot forget that the dispensation of Providence on which we have been meditating has made a desolate house; and that she who has gone was to those who remain, what no other human being could be. But there is One above who can at once heal the wound, and

supply the vacancy, which death has made; who can cause a light to shine in that dwelling better than the brightness of the sun; who can impart spiritual life and consolation in such measure as to make the burden of bodily infirmity seem light. May the Comforter abide there continually, filling with peace and joy the surviving inmates, until they too, having fulfilled their mission on earth, especially by patient endurance, shall be called to take their upward flight.

